A black and white photograph of a man in a suit and tie, carrying a baby wrapped in a blanket. He is looking off to the side. In the background, there is a large crowd of people and a person holding a camera, suggesting a public event or protest. The text "Speculative Documentary Photography" is overlaid in the center in a large, white, serif font.

Speculative Documentary Photography

Max Pinckers

Speculative Documentary ~~Photography~~

Max Pinckers

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor in the Arts: Fine Arts.
Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Steven Jacobs (UGent) and Johan Grimonprez
(KASK & Conservatorium).

2021

Dedicated to Victoria and Vigo

Preface

This dissertation is part of a PhD in the arts at the University College Ghent and the School of Arts KASK & Conservatory (2015–2021). The thoughts and ideas brought together here are a reflection on the departure points, interesting difficulties, inspirations, discussions, thinking processes, research sources and theoretical frameworks that I encountered while making the following artistic works:

Mau Mau, History Makers (2015–ongoing)

Exhibition installation, video works and book.

Double Reward (2021, in collaboration with Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras)

Exhibition installation.

Red Ink (2017–2018)

Exhibition installation and book (self-published, edition of 850 copies).

Margins of Excess (2016–2018)

Exhibition installation, video works and book
(self-published, edition of 1500 copies).

Controversy (2017, in collaboration with Sam Weerdmeester)

Exhibition installation and catalog (Lyre Press, edition of 750 copies).

Trophy Camera v0.9 (2017, in collaboration with Dries Depoorter)

Exhibition installation.

Two Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself (2015)

Exhibition installation.

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They say on the banks of the Indus he [Alexander] met a naked ascetic, who he called a gymnosophist. It probably was a Jain Digambar muni. Digambar means the sky-clad, a euphemism for naked. Finding him seated, at peace, on a rock, staring at the sky, Alexander asked him, "What are you doing?" The gymnosophist replied, "Experiencing nothingness. What about you?" Alexander declared, "I am conquering the world." Both laughed. Alexander laughed because he thought the gymnosophist was a fool for not traveling, for not having ambition, for living a life without a destination. The gymnosophist laughed because there are no destinations in the world. Seated or moving, we are always traveling. And when we keep traveling, we end up returning to the place from where we started, hopefully a little wiser.

Devdutt Pattanaik, 2013.

Foreword

This collection of written reflections brings together a myriad of thoughts situated in the context of a six-year PhD research project *in* the arts at UGent, financed by KASK & Conservatory, the school of arts of HOGENT and howest (2015–2021). Embedded within the very premise of a practice-based PhD is the friction between attempting to contribute towards a broader discourse on photography and art without thwarting or obstructing a personal creative practice. No matter how much I attempt to travel through the theoretical fabric and research material that surrounds the creation of an artwork, the artwork will always speak for itself. Nonetheless, the past six years have been tremendously rewarding in establishing a theoretical framework for my artistic expressions and identifying a discourse that makes the essential questions of my work tangible. Hopefully, this text can give insight into more general questions in and around photographic documentary practice to which other practitioners can identify.

Establishing a field of research has, for the most part, been guided by the developments of various artistic projects that deal with photography's conventions and traditionally accepted roles, specifically within documentary photography and photojournalism. Both are photography genres with a societal function that assume a claim to truth and the reality it attempts to represent.

Although my research is confined to the medium photography and the photographic image, many of the references and sources on documentary film as an interdisciplinary genre have come to play an important role in broadening my views on documentary making. It's only by extrapolating critical theory on documentary as an interdisciplinary school of thought that a considerate theoretical framework on documentary photography can be established. I will, however, mostly confine myself to discussing examples of a photographic nature as to maintain a specified field of research. In doing so, I attempt to position my work within a contemporary

practice of documentary art and to contribute both artistically and theoretically towards an expanding dialogue on the contemporary status of photography. It would, however, be inappropriate to consider my artistic works as possible solutions to the theoretical and philosophical problems discussed here. Rather, my work is an attempt at understanding and reflecting on the various complexities of the documentary gesture from the perspective of a critical practitioner.

I have refrained from delving into advanced technological photographic developments, such as artificially intelligent machine learning, algorithmic photography, GAN's, computer vision, neural networks and deep learning because the fundamental ontological questions surrounding photographic representation generally remain the same, regardless of this paradigm shift in contemporary visual culture. I do intend, however, to dedicate an entirely new research project to this field for a potential post-doctorate in the future, and am already developing future artistic projects in the field of computational photography.

I began writing shortly after the birth of my son and continued working throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. A period of incredible uncertainty on all fronts, not only politically but also socially, culturally and personally. In the past couple of years, we have experienced a global financial meltdown, the rise of right-wing populism, Brexit, out of control global warming, wildfires from Australia to California, locust swarms, earthquakes, enormous numbers of refugees and political asylum seekers, random mass shootings in Thailand and the US, the unlawful assassination of high-level politicians such as Qassem Soleimani, presidential impeachment trials, QAnon, 'alternative facts', violent riots and social movements in India and around the world, the murder of George Floyd and many more killings by police of innocent African Americans in the US, Black Lives Matter protests, beheadings, and countless deaths caused by a global health pandemic.

This has been a confronting time for artists, documentarians and photographers, who wonder about their place in all of this madness, and how their work makes a difference. Are we preaching to the choir or are we

engaging with a world beyond the confines of the safe space of contemporary art?

In photography and in life, it's all about how you measure the light and where you decide to focus. Photography is by nature a conceptual and philosophical medium. It poses questions about our relationship to reality. It puts into perspective our own position towards and within it. The dualism of photography – the camera's ability to visually describe reality, yet obtain its true power in the ambiguous and emotional nature of the imagination – is a reflection of the heart and mind: "If the heart could think it would stop beating," as Fernando Pessoa once wrote (Pessoa 1930). This is what makes photography so appealing to me and how I see the world. The camera symbolizes, in a metaphorical way, the relationship I have with reality. Sometimes images rupture into reality and confront us with our subconscious truths.

Photography is a relatively young art form, and there's still so much we don't understand about it. New exciting theories, ways of looking at, and thinking about photographs are being developed continuously. None of which provide definite answers but only create more intriguing questions. This is what keeps this medium so interesting and motivates me to continue making photographic work.

Many of the concepts discussed in this text are by now part of a conventional discourse in art and photography, however, the necessity to digest and write about them comes from my own practice and the discussions that come up time and again with fellow photographers, researchers, students, family and friends. They are questions and problems that quite simply motivate me to put them into practice and drive the creation of new work. By putting these thoughts down on paper, I am somewhat coming to terms with them.

More than making pictures, being a photographer is a state of mind. A way of thinking not only about the representation of life and the life of images but about life itself and our way of dealing with it. Making photographs is just a reflection of that, albeit one that cannot be put into words. There is so much thought, feeling and

intuition that goes into making artwork that one could write about them endlessly, and with every other word, only scratch the surface of the images that come to life.

The thoughts expressed in this book will probably seem ambitious and naive when I read them again decades later. But they are a document of my state of mind at this particular moment in time. With an endless amount of sources, I cannot claim to be fully aware of all the aspects I will be touching upon. I mostly write from a personal insight related to my own artistic practice and experiences, and attempt to think about questions to which there are no straightforward answers.

Leading photographers and visual theorists, such as Alan Sekula, Susie Linfield, Fred Ritchin or Susan Sontag generally claim that photographs on their own don't tell stories. They don't have a beginning, middle or end. They aren't linear but circular. In terms of reception, they function as mirrors of our own feelings, thoughts and beliefs that we project onto them. Yet because of the inherent indexical relationship photographs have to reality, we nonetheless tend to believe in their objectivity.

Philosopher Vilém Flusser wrote that "texts do not signify the world; they signify the images they tear up" (Flusser 1983, 11). The envy between writer and photographer can be expressed as a struggle between historical consciousness and magic; between textolatry and idolatry. Throughout history texts have dominated the way we see the world and the concepts we have in relation to it. Today we live in a reality dominated by images; away from the linear world of history and back to the superficial nature of images and circular time. Images have become conceptual and texts imaginative. Since we don't react the same way to images as we do to text, new forms of literacy of how we understand the world are being created.

Images operate in a magical sense. Images put a magic spell on life. Not like the ancient magic of the frescos found in Etruscan tombs, but a 'post-historic' magic of the technical (photographic) image that follows on after historical consciousness. A ritual created to overcome the crisis of history, or the end of "a progressive transcoding of images into concepts, a progressive elucidation of ideas, a progressive disenchantment

(taking the magic out of things), a progressive process of comprehension" (Flusser 1983, 13). A ritual to understand texts again by putting them under a magic spell.

Introduction

What I am most wary of when taking or making photographs are the established aesthetic codes that I either try to avoid or fully embrace. Ideally, I make photographs that create a space of expression for the depicted subject yet at the same time critically reflect on the limitations of this representation – photographs that seize to lay claim to the factual but emphasize their power of representation. Documentary photography has always found itself in conflict with the inevitable tension between form and content, the subject's agency and the visual qualities of the photograph itself. Constricted by the frame, photographs cannot escape the fundamental aesthetic conventions that govern them, and the subjects depicted within them cannot become unstuck from the frame. An issue arises when photographic conventions become self-referential instead of self-reflexive; when visual formulaic tropes are arbitrarily applied to whichever subject in whichever given situation, simply because of their effective visual rhetoric. When the importance of conformist aesthetics precedes the claim of the subjects depicted in them. My aim with this dissertation is to lay the foundations for critical self-reflexivity as a crucial aspect of documentary practices, with the in-person reenactment as an experimental proposal in my current ongoing documentary project.

Firstly, a distinction is made between photojournalism and critical documentary photography as two distinct practices with rather opposing attitudes and positions within both the industry and the art world. A deeper insight into photojournalism focusses on issues of manipulation and analyzing the authority of tropes and the formal conventions that govern it.

Four artistic works that I have produced deal with the conventions and limitations of photojournalism, each emphasizing a different aspect: *Trophy Camera v0.9* is a camera containing artificial intelligence that has been trained on all previous winning World Press Photos, from which it created an algorithm that signals to the user a percentage of chance a photo has to win the next World Press Photo award. *Controversy*, in turn,

deals with the discussion surrounding the authenticity of iconic photographs. The supposed location where Robert Capa photographed the iconic *The Falling Soldier* in 1936 is contested with scientific evidence of being taken somewhere else, far behind the frontlines, suggesting that it was staged. *Double Reward* is a reinterpretation of the *National Geographic* archive in the optic of the imperialist gaze, in which Kodachrome reds become a symbol for invisible historical violence. And finally, as a temporary member of the renowned Magnum Photos agency during the two first years of my research, my own experience of stepping into the shoes of a photojournalist by being sent on assignment to North Korea for *The New Yorker*. Not being able to move beyond the strict censorship and constrictions of the regime, the photojournalistic approach turns onto itself, revealing its shortcomings and artificial constructions through the excessive documentation of seemingly banal situations.

The next chapter gives an overview of attempts at defining documentary practice both by theoreticians and practitioners (the word ‘documentary’ is printed 330 times in this text). Its ambiguous position towards reality and its inherent uncertainty, in which self-reflexivity arises as one of its central if not crucial attributes. Determined by a number of my own artistic projects, this dissertation seeks to situate my documentary practice in the precarious position somewhere between postmodern constructivism and a renewed humanist sensibility. “The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true,” proclaimed artist Hito Steyerl (Steyerl 2011, 2), yet Ariella Azoulay’s ‘citizenship of photography’ reminds us of the political agency of photographs as spaces of mutual responsibility in which an eternal connection between spectator and photographed is established as part of an equal and collaborative ‘civil contract’. Maybe the uncertainty and friction between compassionate and deconstructive critique are what makes the documentary one of the most innovative forms of contemporary art today; creating new relationships between ethics, aesthetics, responsibility, fact/fiction, undermining power-structures, economic conditions and political entanglement.

This dissertation attempts to deconstruct visual strat-

egies and photographic registers with particular emphasis on dismantling documentary strategies and norms, as well as reflecting on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the engagement and moral responsibility inherent to documentary making, and more specifically how the notions of theatricality and staging in documentary photography have informed my own work. In the chapter *Documentary Theatricality*, photography’s inherent *twofoldness* is expressed through documentary of the imagination – visually representing a shared sense of reality – by applying a participatory and performative approach to documentary photography.

As an artistic answer to the documentary issues discussed, I explore the ‘in-person’ reenactment as an experimental documentary strategy for dealing with complex historical narratives and personal testimony. For this ongoing work, I collaborate with elderly Kenyan Mau Mau veterans who revisit their experiences of fighting against their British colonizers in the 1950s. This chapter is longer than the others because it deals with the work I am currently making, allowing me to expand into several interesting debates in more depth, along with reflecting on the uncertainty of how the project will eventually turn out.

Most photographs stand in for an event that they do not literally represent. They take on an emblematic function, especially when dealing with trauma, in which they represent an experience in a symbolic manner rather than the actual moment depicted within them. They are experienced collectively, and cannot claim a single meaning or truth. Just like Ali Alqaisi appropriates the image of the Hooded Man when he may not be the man in the photo himself; or how Capa’s *The Falling Soldier* has become the martyr icon of the Spanish Civil War, regardless if it actually depicts a soldier at the very moment of being killed; or how elderly Mau Mau veterans demonstrate their tragic but heroic fight against their British oppressors, only decades later, now with the intent of claiming compensation and recognition for their mistreatment.

Finally, I seek to express a new approach to documentary practice by discussing various aspects of ‘speculative documentary’ as proposed by The School of Speculative Documentary – a fictional school formed by

a group of researchers and documentary practitioners, including myself – as a practice based on conjecture rather than knowledge. Together, we invite a way of openly embracing perpetual uncertainty, contamination, contestation, befoggedness and messiness in our engagement with, and our creation of, multiple and mutable realities. In doing so, we hail the paradox at the heart of documentary practices: from the very moment we attempt to capture reality, it escapes, mutates and vanishes into thin air.

The School of Speculative Documentary welcomes a myriad of views in which there seems to be no clear distinction between fact and fiction, artifice and realism, imagination and observation, representation and experience. A documentary *gesture* rather than genre, that endeavors to undermine documentary's authoritative stance and its claim to knowledge and truth.

Scrutinizing the power-structures inherent in documentary making, we keep searching for ways to deal with our own blind spots and power positions, as we maneuver within and around institutional boundaries. How can we shoulder the responsibility for the selection mechanisms that define what can and should be perceived, seen, heard, said, thought, made or done?

A note on the images published along with the text: the conventional practice when writing about artworks is to describe them before they are elaborated on further. However, I see this as redundant when the reproductions of these works, or in this case, the printed photographs themselves, appear alongside the text. I prefer to do without the laborious process of describing what works look like and what they depict and prefer to let the images speak for themselves. Some of the photographs you will come across will not be discussed in the text at all. They serve not as illustrations but as free associations that I think work intriguingly, and I hope that you, as a reader, will make your own connections and revelations.

1 PHOTOJOURNALISM

In the Lion's Den: Magnum Photos, Inc.

On May 23, 2015, I was invited by Martin Parr and Carl De Keyzer to join the international photo agency Magnum Photos in what would mark the beginning of a two-year experience with the institution. Firstly, I would like to clarify how the process of becoming a member of the agency worked at the time. This can be divided into three main phases: Initially, newcomers are accepted into the agency based on a submitted portfolio that is voted on by the member-photographers, in which more than half of the votes are required to pass. The newcomers are then labeled with a 'nominee' status for a period of two years, in which they are evaluated on the work they produce during that time. Graduating to the following phase of 'associate' consists of another round of voting, this time with a two-thirds requirement to pass. This is then again followed by a two-year evaluation period and voting round to eventually become a 'full member' of the agency, which is valid for a lifetime and comes with company shares of the cooperative. I didn't make it to the 'associate' round and was dismissed in July 2017.

As a documentary artist whose practice has always been driven by questioning the conventions and problematics of photojournalism, the invitation from Magnum Photos came as a surprise. I had openly criticized their ideals previously as part of the discourse around my first documentary work *Lotus* (2011), and considered the agency to maintain a relatively naive, conservative and traditional photojournalistic approach in today's rapidly evolving visual landscape. I hesitated for quite some time to accept the invitation, and finally chose to do so because if there would be a context in which my work could influence the realm of photojournalism – a place where my critique and questioning would make a difference – Magnum Photos would be the most significant place for me to be. The most influential, oldest, highly prestigious and far-reaching global photo agency up to date. It placed me in the lion's den.

My work quickly became part of a new context. I was



Office Party at Magnum Photos London, March 16, 2016 © Max Pinckers

now embossed with the Magnum Photos brand. I soon realized that it generated an interesting space for me to experiment with more radical artistic strategies. Most importantly, it occurred to me that people seemed likely to assume that my photographs were not staged, manipulated or constructed. That they were made according to a classic Magnum-like observational ‘fly-on-the-wall’ mode. The asserted veridical representation surrounding my work had shifted dramatically.¹ This became apparent when a journalist interviewed me about *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Jeff Wall and Hokusai), from the series *Two Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself* (2015), in which her first question was about how I came across this scene and managed to capture the moment so perfectly. I had never expected anyone to think that this photograph was not staged, especially this image in which the reference to Jeff Wall and Hokusai seem obvious (less apparent is the content of the papers suspended in the air that contain the score of *La mer* by Debussy, which bears Hokusai’s famous image of a wave on its original record cover). I was astounded. One of my earliest intentions with documentary photography was to make photographs that look real but feel too good to be true.

Having developed a distinctive and critical documentary approach over the years, in which the exploration of the medium’s boundaries, definitions, visual and aesthetic strategies play a central role, I took advantage of this new context in which my work found itself. Its

¹ For more on ‘asserted veridical representation’, see section *Asserted Veridical Representation* (pp. 144 – 148).

limitations motivated me to find new ways of making work that could reflect critically on photojournalism’s shortcomings. Having gained unrestricted access to the Magnum Photos archives, casual relationships with the photographers and the virtues of carrying the agency’s brand, I began to find ways in which my time at the agency could best stimulate my work. I was able to follow heated internal e-mail discussions about controversial incidents, such as the Steve McCurry photoshop scandal, the attempted silencing of a prolific Robert Capa expert and critic, or the internal mechanisms of a ruthless business-driven image production machine during the Paris terror attacks of 2015.

I always had a feeling that my time at the agency wouldn’t be a lasting one, but I now had a photojournalist’s hat (and press card) that needed to find the right place in my practice, which would eventually culminate on assignment in North Korea.



A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Jeff Wall and Hokusai), from the series *Two Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself*, 2015 © Max Pinckers

Photojournalism Versus Documentary

There is no singular ‘photography’, rather a variety of photographic practices, each with their own institutional framework. Before we can dig deeper into attempting to define a documentary tradition, we must first establish a distinction between documentary photography and its cousin photojournalism. These two terms are often interchanged and confused as being one and the same thing, whereas in fact they assume quite opposing attitudes. This confusion is heightened by contemporary documentary photography being somewhere in-between journalism, activism and art. The photojournalist wears a cloak of invisibility, whereas the documentarian works in the nude; both yield wands of truth.

The photojournalist works on paid assignments. They are usually hired based on their expertise, be it geographical or in terms of subject matter, and mostly work alone. Their work is instrumentalized to create news stories generally accompanied by a written report or within the context of an illustrated article. A photojournalist is required to focus on the event itself as it unfolds, work fast and deliver their report instantaneously in order to keep up with the news cycle or weekly magazine programs. The scope of the story is often focussed on a particular aspect of a more complicated situation, but by focussing on a human angle, these simplifications can be diverted towards an emotional response rather than a critical one. Visual tropes of contrast and juxtaposition, such as the ‘survivor among ruins’, the ‘child with a gun’ or the ‘flag burning protestor’ perpetrate simplified narratives as time and space savers. By attempting to maintain an objective and factual approach to photography, there seems little room for complexity, self-reflection and nuance.

Former photojournalist Simon Norfolk described photojournalism as “trying to play Rachmaninoff while wearing boxing gloves” (Ritchin 2015). Every photojournalist must unquestionably comply with a rigid set of ethical and moral codes. An image must reflect a situation as objectively as possible and can in no condition

whatsoever, contain any notion of the presence of the photographers themselves. Although they can still be authorial by answering to a specific style or recognizable visual signature of the photographer. The meaning created with their images is limited to the boundary of the frame, short accompanying captions, and on some occasions the metadata embedded into digital photographs. Their photographs are of transient nature, without having a clearly defined or intended form in mind at the moment they are taken. The photojournalistic image is freely used once it leaves the camera body and the photographer loses control over its terms of reproduction. They are spread globally throughout vast databases in many different adaptations and live on in dismembered forms; cropped to fit template sizes, color-graded differently, accompanied by varying captions, often belonging to a larger set of similar images with slight variations made from different angles, or similar images captured by colleagues covering the same event.

A recent development in the business of producing newsworthy photographs is the herd mentality of photojournalists flocking to where the next hottest news story is up for grabs, hovering like vultures over a corpse (think Kevin Carter’s 1993 Pulitzer Prize photograph of a starving Sudanese child stalked by a vulture: bird and photographer). Photojournalists tend to avoid depicting the presence of other media within their images (along with their own shadows), even though they are as much part of the reality of conflict and its other actors. This is yet another sign of not being able to reflect on one’s presence or creating an illusion in which foreign journalists do not really exist, their cameras invisible, not playing a part in the theater of war and conflict.

Peter Bouckaert, the former emergencies director of Human Rights Watch, asks us to consider the other photographers outside the frame which we cannot see, but are also there making the same images: “When we talk about the impact of photography, we should not only think about the impact of the images on us and the general public. We should also pause to reflect on the impact such a herd mentality has on photographic subjects. Imagine the impact on a rape and massacre survivor of having her portrait taken by dozens of photographers, each spending hours snapping away, or

of repeatedly being asked how her children were murdered or gang-raped in front of her” (Bouckaert, 2019). This mentality leaves behind a ‘coverage vacuum’ where reporting is abandoned but the conflict continues (Syria, Central African Republic, Yemen, ...).



The death of Fabienne Cherisma, from the series Haiti, 2010 © Nathan Weber/NBW Photo

Contrary to the photojournalist, the documentarian chooses his or her subject in relation to the intent of the work and the personal vision and motivations of the author(s). The documentary is not restricted in time and can take place in anticipation of an event or its long-term aftermath. Documentary productions are usually independent and their various sources of funding ethically scrutinized. They are self-aware of the larger economic framework in which they operate. They do not depend on clients to produce their work and function autonomously without necessarily aiming to publish it in a particular market. The work nonetheless becomes part of an economy once it has been produced in a certain form and is disseminated, exhibited, promoted and sold. I will elaborate further on what constitutes a documentary in the chapter *The Documentary Gesture or Attitude* (pp. 134 – 151).

The most important distinction to be made between these two principal approaches is that within the practice of photojournalism there is no room for self-reflexivity or self-referentiality. Since the ‘documentary turn’ in contemporary art (*Documenta 11* under the direction of Okwui Enwezor in 2002), critical independent docu-

mentary practice functions in the sphere of art rather than current events or news production. As curator Mark Nash wrote, “Documentary, however loosely we understand the word, has become almost a privileged form of communication in recent years, providing a meta-discourse that guarantees the truth of our political, social and cultural life” (Nash 2004). Photojournalism, however, “remains bound to newspaper or magazine pages, its photographers necessarily and automatically ‘capture’ the real without any self-reflexivity or critical detachment. Artists [or documentarians], on the other hand, due to the self-sufficiency and distance of their images from the real, can think about the nature of representation and its depiction of reality in a more oblique and, hence, contemplative manner” writes art historian Erina Duganne (Duganne 2007, 59). Documentary and photojournalism do tend to overlap, and on some occasions, photojournalistic projects are considered documentary artworks, especially when they take shape in the form of photo-text books (such as *Vietnam Inc.* (1971) by Philip Jones Griffiths, or Gilles Peres’ 1983 book *Telex Iran: In the Name of Revolution*).

Nonetheless, photojournalism remains a crucial aspect of creating societal awareness and disseminating information, as was demonstrated by the French newspaper *Libération* in a speculative gesture of abolishing photojournalism all together when in 2015, an entire issue was published without photographs. In their place, a series of empty frames.² Despite being at the bottom of the food chain of a highly formatted epistemological industry based on conventions and strict guidelines, we must not undermine the position of the photojournalist and their contribution to society. They play an important role in creating awareness and by extension, knowledge, and their principles must be respected. However, this should not be confused with documentary, which nurtures a culture of meta-critique on the very business of knowledge production. It has a built-in commentary on the conventions and rhetoric of image production and upholds the responsibility to continuously remind the audience of its artificial nature and the power structures that maintain it.

²*Libération*, November 14, 2013.

Which artistic strategies can we propose that question

and challenge the prevailing formats of photojournalism? How can we challenge our preconceptions of how photographs illustrate or accompany the news? Can we define a new language in photojournalism and news reportage, or has this reached an impasse? Is it possible to make images that are aware of their own constructed nature and their function within a global visual enterprise? Images that can communicate the impossibility of representing atrocity, pain, suffering and horror while at the same time attempting to provide some form of human, emotional connection? “Conflict photography is not about the conflict but about people’s lives,” writes Bouckaert. The time and space need to be made available, by everyone, to understand the profound personal stories of the people that experience it and feel the need to share it with the world. “The criticism of photographers as monomaniacal, attracted primarily by the spectacle of death and violence, is in effect a criticism of the media’s overly simplistic use of photography when it is capable of so much more,” argues photography theorist and educator Fred Ritchin (Ritchin 2015). His *Four Corners Project*, for example, is an initiative that provides a single photograph with the ability to be accompanied by other information from the same moment – video fragments, texts, hyperlinks – interconnected and embedded information in which the photograph becomes a departure point for a lot more than a mere illustration.³

Visual Storytelling as the Pest of Our Time: From Photojournalist to ‘Visual Storyteller’ and the Issue of Manipulation

‘Visual storytelling’: a concept recently described by writer and photographer Wilco Versteeg as “an ill-defined and ideological suspicious paradigm,” that “at its most violent shows the neo-liberal, and individualistic tendencies that are taken over the world at large by force” (Versteeg 2020a). Lead by the article *Qu’est-ce que la critique?* in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (2020), Versteeg points

³fourcornersproject.org

out that the visual storytelling paradigm, developed in management and communication studies, is “responsible for the reduction of complex information to easily digestible infographics, of journalism to clickbait, and of photography to pre-set narratives of what we, in the photographic community want to hear and see” (Versteeg 2020a). He concludes that “visual storytelling is a near-synonym for fiction: not the life-giving fiction that has enabled us to think through the uncertainties and unknowability of life itself, but fiction in its most limited sense as overtly constructed entrapment, as a vehicle for the authorial voice” (Versteeg 2020a). In other words, the individual and personal storyteller is nothing more than the prevention and pre-emption of critique because it does not take responsibility for its implications, especially in cases of deceptive manipulation.

Over the past years, photojournalists such as Steve McCurry, Alex Majoli or Luc Delahaye have proclaimed themselves ‘visual storytellers’ and in some cases ‘artists’, in order to relieve themselves from the burden of responsibility of dealing with some form of documentary credibility. The reliability their work once depended on is relayed onto a mere personal level of authority, usually upheld by a personality cultus.

In an extreme case of a photojournalist exonerating himself from this responsibility, Ron Haviv (founder and owner of photo agency VII), sold a photograph from his book *Afghanistan: On the Road to Kabul* (2002) to the arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin to advertise their new precision navigation bombs, and thus profiting from the very same munition whose effects he documents as a photojournalist.⁴ A controversy to which he responded: “I draw a strict line between my photojournalism and commercial campaigns and feature examples of both on my website, where they are clearly labeled for what they are” (Colberg 2012b). Lockheed Martin’s slogan on the poster ironically reads “We never forget who we’re working for.”

What is acceptable as realistic, factual or truthful, is based only on pre-existing validated techniques that are considered to be acceptable within a current ‘frame of realism’. However, all these conventions “depend on their degree of invisibility in producing meaning”

⁴ According to figures in *The Guardian* in 2010 Lockheed Martin was the biggest seller of arms in the world, with sales exceeding \$35 billion. They are the biggest supplier of arms to Israel. Their tanks, missiles and fighter planes were used in Israel’s 2008–09 assault on Gaza, in which more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed. Their weapons are also used extensively by the US army.



Publicity for Lockheed Martin's precision navigation bombs featuring a photograph by Ron Haviv

writes filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, “manipulativeness has to be discreet – that is, acceptable only when not easily perceptible to the ‘real audience’. Although the whole of filmmaking [and photography] is a question of manipulation – whether ‘creative’ or not – those endorsing the law unhesitatingly decree which technique is manipulative and which, supposedly, is not; and this judgement is made according to the degree of visibility of each” (Minh-ha 1990, 85-89). Although this discussion is exhausting and excessively debated within photography circles, I feel it is important to outline a number of issues that still remain unresolved in the general public sphere today.

The established conception is that photojournalism is a practice driven by a moral agenda with the intent of eventually creating an impact on society or leading to some form of change. The moral and ethical codes of photojournalism have come to define its rules and regulations, which must strictly be followed to avoid being dismissed as supposedly deceptive or manipulative. The industry’s history has been closely connected to social reform, with early activist-photographers like Jacob Riis,

Lewis Hine and W. Eugene Smith at its helm. Photojournalism flourished during the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century that have come to define democracy as we know it today, which is now seen as the genre’s golden period. Its potential for emancipatory change and its role in society as one of social and moral conscience, unrestricted by authoritarian censorship, and contributing to public discourse, and in doing so perhaps helping to resolve some of humanity’s problems.

In 2011 AP had erased all the pictures of one contract photographer from their archives for the crime of removing a shadow from a picture of children playing football – the photographer’s shadow (Franklin 2016, 171).

A thorn in the eye of the photojournalism industry is the practice of manipulation. Although the ontological debate on the authenticity of photographs is as old as the medium itself, let us briefly look at what constitutes ‘foul play’ from the perspective of the establishment. Some of the traditional categories are: (1) digitally altering images after they have been made, in editing programs such as photoshop. (2) photographing staged scenes (photo-ops) as if they are real, spontaneous events. (3) staging scenes and deliberately moving objects in order to make better photographs. (4) providing false or misleading caption information. As I will later discuss in the chapter *Tropes, Templates and Conventions* (pp. 82 – 133), I argue that a fifth category should be considered in which the application of common tropes could also count as a form of manipulation – one that is more complicit in limiting photojournalisms’ ability to engage with reality as much as any of the above.

One of the largest and most powerful organizations dedicated to supporting and awarding photojournalism is World Press Photo, which defines two main forms of manipulation according to their strict rules: staging and re-enacting events, with an exception for portraits because “they are made through a relationship between the subject and the photographer in which the subject poses for the photographer. However, for the contest, portraits must not present subjects doing things they would not ordinarily do.” According to the World Press

Photo website, “staging means deliberately arranging something in order to mislead the audience. Deliberately arranging something includes setting up a scene or re-enacting a scene.” Posing means “directing the subject(s) to do things, or asking them to repeat things they were doing prior to the photographer’s arrival.” And photographers “should be aware of the influence their presence can exert on a scene they photograph, and should resist being misled by staged photo opportunities” (World Press Photo, n.d.).

Controversy is no stranger to World Press Photo winners. The influential award is exemplary of the broader problem with the notion of manipulation in photojournalism. The organization goes to great lengths to identify and dismiss any form of manipulation, staging, intervening, or anything else that challenges the industry’s traditionally established codes. Yet it has no way of confronting its own deeply engrained conventions and problems of representation, making the award a reflection of the structural denial of the industry.

To illustrate, Spencer Platt’s 2006 winning image *Young Lebanese drive down a street in Haret Hreik*, originally captioned as “affluent Lebanese drive down the street to look at a destroyed neighborhood 15 August 2006 in southern Beirut, Lebanon” in fact depicted the opposite. The seemingly ‘affluent Lebanese’ were residents of the neighborhood whose block had just been destroyed. They were assessing the destruction of their own homes. Contrary to the stereotypical representation of victims, who usually aren’t driving around in a Mini Cooper Convertible, the photograph was first described by *Der Spiegel* as an image of ‘war tourism’.

In another case of contention, the 2017 main prize was awarded to Burhan Özbilici for his photograph of the Turkish ambassador’s assassination at an Ankara art gallery. A murderous spectacle performed for the cameras, designed for its visual force. Stuart Franklin, who was part of the jury and strongly opposed awarding it the Photo of the Year, deemed the photograph “morally as problematic to publish as a terrorist beheading” reaffirming “the compact between martyrdom and publicity” (Franklin 2017).

Photojournalism deals with a deeply engrained anxiety between transgressing into original artistic strat-



Affluent Lebanese drive down the street to look at a destroyed neighborhood August 15, 2006 in southern Beirut, Lebanon. As the United Nations-brokered cease fire between Israel and Hezbollah enters its first day, thousands of Lebanese returned to their homes and villages © Spencer Platt/Getty Images

egies and the regurgitation of simplistic tropes and visual templates that dominate the genre. Over the past decades, there have been many accounts of photojournalists that have deliberately deceived the public with their work due to a lack of transparency in their practice. Once exposed, these photographers received widespread condemnation that had a serious impact on their professional careers and personal lives. Stuck in the preconceptions, rules, moral codes and ethical guidelines of photojournalism, they kept their manipulative interventions covert, hoping that no one would find out, to make the images they thought would be more pleasing according to the firmly established aesthetic conventions that tyrannize the genre. This of course creates a problem between the conditions in which images are presented, the assertions that come with it and their inherent susceptibility to manipulation.

From the case studies discussed here, we can derive that the motive to manipulate images lies in the desire to either make photographs more ‘beautiful’, or to recreate successful images that will therefore fulfill the

expectations of the market and awards industry. Photojournalism makes an interesting field of study because it must operate within a very confined and limited space of expression in which images need to adhere to strict protocols and conditions of production, which are simply assumed rather than revealed within the images themselves. The main issue here is the necessity for disclosure and transparency when patterns of expectation are broken and new visual strategies arise. Manipulation does not necessarily lead to deception, as long as the manipulation or intervention is made clear in and around the discourse and intent of the author's practice.

Amongst the countless cases that have caused controversy in the photojournalism community, with many of the discussions being tiring and repetitive, the 'Steve McCurry scandal' is a highlight. In April 2016, an exhibition by Steve McCurry in Italy contained a printed photograph made in Cuba in which a photoshop stamp-tool mistake was spotted by photographer Paolo Viglione, who wrote about it on his blog (Viglione 2016). This caused a widespread controversy around McCurry's photojournalistic ethics and the veracity of his work. The photograph in question was immediately removed from his website and the online archives of Magnum Photos, but this did not stop people on the internet finding more images that appeared to have been significantly manipulated.

In a responding statement, McCurry not only blamed the botched print on his studio assistants but also proclaimed himself a 'visual storyteller' and therefore supposedly liberated his work from the established assertions of photojournalism and the responsibility that comes with it (Laurent 2016). The switch from photojournalist to fine art photographer seems to be more difficult to make than a simple press release statement, and he has since been under fire by the National Press Photographers Association Ethics Committee (Raymer 2016), the National Geographic Society, and by extension, his colleagues at Magnum Photos (Van Agtmael 2016).

This manipulation scandal led to a reconsideration of other photographs in McCurry's archive, most concerning, photographs in which individuals have been removed from the images they thought they were part of. An image of two men sitting on the back of a bicy-

cle rickshaw being pulled by a third man is revealed to originally have contained two more men seated in the rickshaw. One of the two removed men directly addresses McCurry with a broad smile as they drive together through the pouring rain. This man, along with a less visible companion behind him, has been removed from time.

In another photograph, a young boy is deleted from a scene in which he was playing football with six other boys. There seems to be no apparent reason for removing the boy or the smiling man from these images, other than a purely formal one. The smiling man breaks the rule of the 'fly on the wall' photographer by directly looking into the lens and therefore addressing the spectator, thus diminishing the supposedly candid quality of an authentic 'stolen moment'. His head and shoulders also create a less elegant silhouette of the two men sitting in front of him. In the edited image, we also see a number of other details that have been cloned out of the background, elements that disturb the outline of the subjects in the foreground. The same can be said for the missing child, who was the only figure in the photograph who's profile overlaps somewhat clumsily with the main figure kicking a ball in the foreground, unbalancing the photograph's composition.

It thus becomes quite clear that the digital interventions here are purely motivated by a desire to create compositions that adhere to formal aesthetic rules, rather than a concern for the people represented in them. They have been denied a place in history. Their 'citizenship' of photography, as photography theorist and artist Ariella Azoulay has defined, has been revoked. I wonder what the missing persons in these images would feel when encountered with these images in which they no longer exist.

Figures don't only disappear in photographs, they also reappear. The gap between reality and representation, and the interrelationship of photographs as an intertextual web, manifested itself literally in the work of Anglo-Indian photographer Souvid Datta, who was also at the center of a manipulation controversy in May 2017. As a recipient of the Getty Images Editorial Grant, an



Two versions of the same photograph, before and after © Steve McCurry

Alexia Foundation award and the Visura Photojournalism Grant, he is an established photojournalist with a professional practice. But in a series documenting the lives of sex workers in Kolkata, Datta copied an entire figure from a Mary Ellen Mark's *Falkland Road* (1978) photograph of sex workers in Mumbai into one of his own photographs. A surprisingly bold intervention for an award-winning photojournalist. He was later accused of also 'appropriating' photos from other photographers into his own series, passing them off as his own (Volpe 2017).

The figure Datta borrowed from Mark was supposedly a creative solution to include Asma, a woman he wanted to bring into his project about sex workers in Mumbai but denied to be photographed. In an exclusive interview with *TIME Lightbox*, he explains his motive: "I

spotted a character in her [Mary Ellen Mark] work that particularly resembled Asma and for my own curiosity, in trying to recreate the picture I couldn't make in reality, I tried placing her into the image next to Radhika, [to] see what it might have looked like had I somehow managed to persuade Asma to participate" (Laurent 2017). This form of digital montage is the opposite of McCurry's removal of people in his photographs. Here, a figure from a photograph made 40 years earlier is resurrected into a similar context that hasn't changed much since Mark's work on Bombay's Falkland Road red-light district.

If Datta and McCurry were not inscribed into the assertions that photojournalism entails, there would not have been any scandals. On the contrary, had they manipulated their images openly instead of secretly,



Two versions of the same photograph, before and after © Steve McCurry

with clear intentions, it may have been an intriguing commentary on the representational politics of photography in a postmodernist gesture. Being stuck in the conventions of the industry and the expectations that come along with it, they now face a difficult road ahead in restoring their reputations. Crucial here is the difference between falsifying with the intent to deceive and manipulating with the intent to reveal the nature of this formatted visual culture in a self-reflexive and critical practice.



Transvestites getting dressed in a courtyard, Falkland Road, Bombay, India, 1978, from the series Falkland Road, 1981 © Mary Ellen Mark



Mary Ellen Mark's transvestite in a photograph by Souvid Datta from the series *In the Shadows of Kolkata*, 2013 © Souvid Datta

Imperialist Worldviews

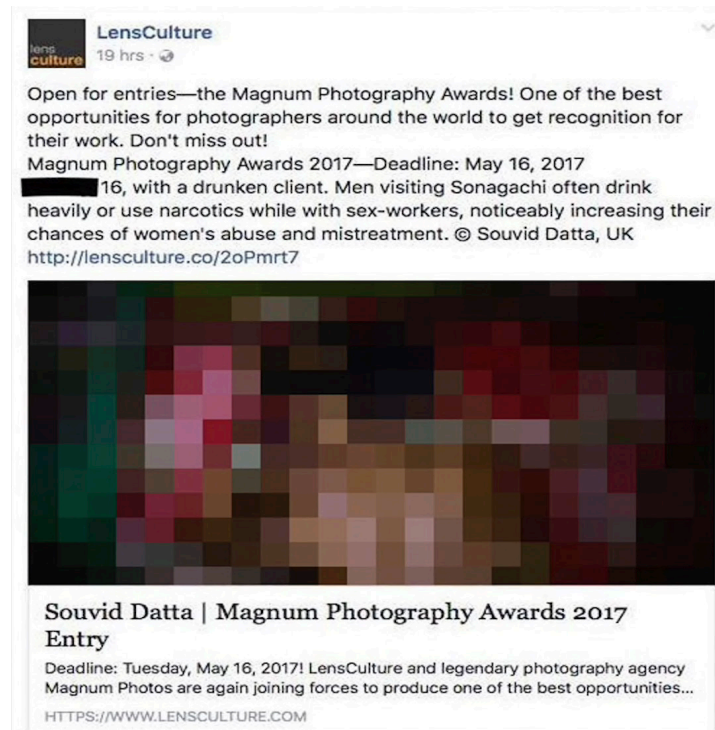
Although the habit of manipulating with the intention to deceive is wrong and should be strictly overseen, the industry is blind towards its own incessant conventions, which have in itself become an inconspicuous trap. This is beyond generalized notions of manipulation; photojournalism itself has become the product of a highly formatted and conventionalized industry. More so than digital manipulation (which is, after all, a powerful tool that will be essential in a future visual culture of computational photography) the problems of the photojournalism industry remain one of representational issues and ethics. How can photographs engage with morally difficult issues? Which forms of realism are acceptable and which aren't? What are its blind spots? What is *not* shown? In which conditions where these photographs produced and under which power relations? Is photojournalism not a product of an imperialist worldview promoted and maintained by an industry rooted in (neo) colonial privilege?⁵

A more serious concern arising from Souvid Datta's work is his portrayal of an underaged Indian girl exploited by the sex industry, and a photo industry that apparently didn't find this to be problematic. One of Datta's images was used to promote the LensCulture/Magnum Photos award across the internet and social media channels, which depicted a sixteen-year-old girl being raped by a drunken client. In the photograph, her face is clearly visible, uncomfortably looking away from the camera. Her name is stated in the caption along with details about her horrific personal history of being trafficked since the age of twelve. Only the rapist is given the privilege of anonymity; the viewer looking down onto his sweaty back.

In an article on *DuckRabbit* titled "LensCulture and the Commodification of Rape," documentarian Benjamin Chesterton expresses serious concerns about using a "photo of a trafficked child sex slave being raped" in order to advertise an award-winning opportunity not to be missed, "reduced to clickbait for a shitty competition

⁵ For more on the imperial protocols embedded in documentary photography, see section *Collaboration as a Way of Unlearning the Imperial Documentary Protocols* (pp. 246 – 253).

in which you can trade your soul for exposure. All for \$60” (Chesterton 2017).



Souvid Datta's photograph (censored here) featured on the Facebook page of LensCulture promoting the Magnum Photography Awards 2017

Another example of the imperialist privileges embedded in photojournalism is McCurry's *Afghan Girl*. The famous image portrays a scared young girl with a striking gaze, clad in a maroon headscarf against an emerald green background, the same color as her eyes. At the time, she was living in Nasir Bagh, a refugee camp in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Appearing on the June 1985 cover of *National Geographic* it became the magazine's most famous cover to date. Steve McCurry Studios prices their open edition 20 x 24 inch print of Sharbat Gula for \$18,000 and larger prints have been sold for as much as \$178,900 at auctions (Strochlic 2017). The identity of the girl was initially not known, and the photo of the eight-year-old was published for decades without mentioning her name or story. After several unsuccessful attempts to find her, she was finally identified in 2002 as Sharbat Gula by a National Geographic

Television & Film team. Her identity was confirmed by computer scientist John Daugman using iris recognition. In Afghanistan, she is known as the 'Afghan Mona Lisa', although she has also been called the 'First World's Third World Mona Lisa' (Hesford and Kozol 2005, 1). The widespread use of the photograph has been criticized as "emblematic of a refugee girl/woman located in some distant camp" (Cain and Howe 2008, 87) deserving of the compassion of the Western viewer.

The tagline on the magazine cover reads: "Haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee's fears." Although recently the popular online vlogger Tony Northrup argued that the fear reflected in Gula's eyes is not one of displacement and war, but rather of McCurry's presence – one of anger and aversion. A White American man had just barged into her all-girls class and made her teacher order her out to pose for a photo she did not want to pose for, alone in a separate room with McCurry. Additionally, she was asked to remove her veil and reveal her face to this man, and by extension, the rest of the world. Something highly unlikely she would have had the initiative to do herself, considering this is a taboo in traditional Pashtun culture (Ribhu 2019). With this new reading, the image becomes appallingly sinister. Her stare is turned around, back at us, the violating Western gaze.

Fifteen years later, Gula was again forced to show her face to that same White man and his White crew from National Geographic; her body objectified and commodified again (Ghumkhor 2020). The magazine now declared, "Time and hardship have erased her youth. Her skin looks like leather. The geometry of her jaw has softened. The eyes still glare; that has not softened." She had never seen her *Afghan Girl* portrait before it was shown to her in January 2002: "I didn't like media and taking photos from childhood," she told *BBC* in an interview (Dawood 2017). She clearly remembers the event since she had only ever been photographed on three occasions, the first time by McCurry and two subsequent times in the process of her identification by National Geographic. She has now become a public figure and is summoned to represent the plight of refugee women at political media events and photo-ops.

The *Afghan Girl* has since given rise to a Western obsession with the victimhood of women and girls in Af-

ghanistan, especially stories about Muslim adolescents doing edgy or artsy things, breaking the gender norms of their society – the idea of ‘Afghan girl empowerment’. After all, the ‘liberation of Afghan women’ was a declared noble cause of the 2001 US-led invasion Operation Enduring Freedom, in which McCurry’s photograph was used as propaganda. Stories and images like the one of Sharbat Gula are thus commodified into what media scholar Gillian Whitlock calls “propaganda ‘soft weapons’ – narratives from the third world which serve the political and military agenda of Western powers, mediated for the purposes of Western intervention” (Ghumkhor 2020).

Writer and photographer Teju Cole has criticized McCurry’s work as an imperialist anachronistic representation of exotic places (Cole 2016a). McCurry’s India is inhabited by bearded men, women in colorful saris, steam train locomotives, turbans, fishermen in loincloths, colorful faces at Hindu festivals, monks, twirly mustaches, ash-covered Sadhu’s, cheerful street kids and people in rudimentary forms of transportation. This has grown into a stereotype that the Indians themselves even promote in their ‘Incredible India’ tourism campaigns. Any form of modernism is deliberately avoided: Indians according to McCurry’s photographs don’t go to malls, live in skyscrapers, use mobile phones or drive electric cars. “Any given photograph encloses only a section of the world within its borders. A sequence of photographs, taken over many years and carefully arranged, however, reveals a worldview. To consider a place largely from the perspective of a permanent anthropological past, to settle on a notion of authenticity that edits out the present day, is not simply to present an alternative truth: It is to indulge in fantasy,” writes Cole. A fantasy that reeks of an imperialist past, which has now been appropriated by popular Western culture in the form of Iggy Azalea music videos and Wes Anderson films. A fantasy that “withers in the sunlight of realism. But as long as realism is held at bay, the fantasy can remain satisfying to an enormous audience” (Cole 2016a).

After all, according to the world of *National Geographic*, there’s only human life from five a.m. to nine a.m. and from five p.m. to ten p.m., during ‘golden

hour’ sunlight. The treatment of indigenous people and people of color as exotic – mysterious, beguiling, elusive, other-worldly – is still, as the success of McCurry’s work proves, the dominant “socially-accepted vestige of colonial photography,” (Good 2020) endorsed and promoted by the mainstream photography industry.

Double Reward: National Geographic and The Red Shirt School of Photography

National Geographic, the monthly magazine of the National Geographic Society that has been published since 1888, is one of the most read magazines of all time. For many, *National Geographic* provided a first window onto the world. Explorers, photographers, writers and scientists would take people to places they’d never imagined. Its photography inspired countless photojournalists and artists. “Among popular magazines,” write Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins in their 1993 book *Reading National Geographic*, “the *National Geographic* sits near the top of the hierarchy of taste or status” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 7). It is “used by schools as a teaching tool; it is subscribed to by middle-class parents as a way of contributing to the education of their children; its high prestige value affords it a place on coffee tables; its high-quality printing and binding and its reputation as a valuable reference tool mean that it is rarely thrown away, more frequently finding its way into attics and secondhand bookstores” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 2).

Through its long history, The National Geographic Society has strategically deployed realist codes and made claims to objectivity in order to secure a position as both ‘scientific’ and ‘popular’. Under the leadership of Society President Alexander Graham Bell and editor Gilbert H. Grosvenor, photography became the magazine’s trademark by 1910 and already began publishing color photographs by the mid-1930s (releasing its first all-color issue in 1962).⁶ Grosvenor’s principles for the magazine’s photography would be the key to its suc-

⁶The first photographs were published in the magazine in 1896 on the condition that they be subordinate to the text.

cess, with subscriptions growing from 2,570 when he first became editor, to more than two million in 1954 when he stepped down. He insisted that photographs “be beautiful (aesthetically pleasing), artistic (embodying certain conventions of high-brow forms of art), and instructive (realistic in representation)” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 27). Its adoption of realist codes within a scientific context capitalized on the notion of ‘photographs as evidence’, and established itself as a source of accurate information as well as entertainment. Photography, at *National Geographic*, thus places itself midway between art photography and photojournalism. The magazine’s contribution to establishing certain conventions in documentary photography cannot be underestimated, yet upon closer analysis are rooted in a deeply problematic imperial worldview that barely mentions any global problems or conditions of human suffering: “editors, writers, and photographers had to consciously not see” (Goldberg 2018). As one editor put it: “It behooves us to show reality – and nothing is all bad or all good. If [the photographer] didn’t find any happy people, I’d tell him to go back and find them” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 65). The magazine perpetuated a conservative humanist vision in which non-Westerners were often presented as ‘people without history’; “timeless societies and personalities seated in the natural rather than cultural realm,” coexisting without conflict or the burdens of modernization (Lutz and Collins 1993, 108).

This helped the white conservative middle class of America and Europe to locate themselves in a changing world, “to come to terms with their whiteness and relative privilege, and to deal with anxieties about their class position” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 38). Lutz and Collins explain that during the decolonization movements in India and Africa, “images of Westerners were politely removed from colonial and neocolonial contexts, thereby avoiding uncomfortable questions about the nature of their presence, obscuring the contexts and difficulties of the photographic encounter, and creating a vision of the cultures in question as hermetically sealed worlds – captured only in the sense of captured on film” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 39).

In March 2018, the magazine’s editor in chief Susan Goldberg admitted that *National Geographic*’s coverage

was racist in an article titled “For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge This.” She conceded that “until the 1970s *National Geographic* all but ignored people of color who lived in the United States, rarely acknowledging them beyond laborers or domestic workers. Meanwhile it pictured ‘natives’ elsewhere as exotics, famously and frequently unclothed, happy hunters, noble savages – every type of cliché” (Goldberg 2018). The magazine came into existence at the height of colonialism and played an important role in the appropriation of the non-Western world and the dominance over it. This is illustrated by the excess



A spread from *White Gaze*, 2018 © Michelle Dizon and Việt Lê’s/Sming Sming Books

of pictures of (mostly topless) Pacific-island women and scenes in which ‘uncivilized natives’ are fascinated by ‘advanced’ Western technology such as typewriters and cameras. One 1916 caption accompanying pictures of Aboriginals in Australia reads: “South Australian Blackfellows: These savages rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings” (Goldberg 2018). A bold photobook questioning the construct of Whiteness and revealing the im-

perialist, dehumanizing exploits of *National Geographic* is Michelle Dizon and Viêt Lê's *White Gaze* (2018). The book combines poetry and archival imagery in a critical exposition of the magazine's visual and textual language in which the relationship between text and image always reveals something about the power dynamics that are taking place. Inspired by *White Gaze*, and with a collection of *National Geographic* magazines gathering dust in the basement, researcher Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras and I decided to engage with this archive too, but with a focus on a peculiar practice that developed in the early days of color photography. The inherently 'racist' nature of early color film was already demonstrated by Jean-Luc Godard in 1977 when he refused to use Kodak film on assignment in Mozambique on the grounds that it was calibrated on white skin tones and could therefore not adequately render darker skin complexions.⁷ Our project *Double Reward* is a reconsideration of the *National Geographic* archive through the lens of the imperial gaze by posing subjects in red attire for the sake of making better pictures on Kodachrome film.

What happened was that they'd go on these expeditions, and everybody would be in khaki, because that's the color of field uniforms. And they'd come back with the dulllest bunch of pictures you ever saw! You couldn't use them editorially because they had no color. So, we decided to have people wear colorful shirts. But some of them went crazy, went to the other extreme for a while.

— Melville Bell Grosvenor on the genesis of The Red Shirt School of Photography (Bryan 1987, 295).

When Kodak's fast and portable color film rolls were introduced in 1936, Kodachrome became the film technology of choice for the magazine's photographers (as a dye image, and unlike every other film technology of that time, Kodachrome provided grainless pictures with a potential for almost limitless enlargement). It was used by *National Geographic* photographers from April 1938 up to June 2009, when the film was discontinued. The exaggerated worship of color culminated in what became known as 'The Red Shirt School of Photography',

⁷ Artists that have more recently engaged with the racial bias embedded in film technology are Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin with their work *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light* (2012), and An van Dienderen with her short film *Lili* (2015), which both depart from the white female models used for skin tone calibration known as "China Girls" or "Kodak's Shirley Cards".

⁸ The artistic appreciation for Kodachrome color film, and especially its rendering of reds, can be traced further in the work of early color photographers such as Harry Gruyaert, William Eggleston, Fred Herzog and Saul Leiter.

a label used to describe the work of *National Geographic* photographers who, during the early years of color photography, would have their subjects wear overly colorful clothes.⁸ The color of choice being red, which 'pops' best on Kodachrome film (as eagerly demonstrated in Kodachrome adverts in which red objects take center stage). Not only would photographers deliberately choose colorful scenes to photograph, but according to a number of sources, some would go as far as to bring red props (T-shirts, caps, scarves, ...) with them on assignments for their subjects to put on. According to the journalist C. D. B. Bryan, who was given unprecedented access to the Society to write the best-selling book *The National Geographic Society: 100 Years of Adventure and Discovery*, this practice was nothing new; Gervais Courtellement, "whose Autochromes had appeared in the *Geographics* of the 1920s, traveled through Europe, Africa, and Asia with colorful scarves to drape over his models or on nearby fences and walls" (Bryan 1987, 294). Over-posed, artificial and cliché 'picture postcard' photographs became the norm, with the directions "smile, and point at the mountain," as one of its popular mottos (Bryan 1987, 295).

Although there aren't many sources that confirm this practice of posing subjects in red attire, in a text on his thoughts about color photography, photojournalist Philip Jones Griffiths briefly mentions that *National Geographic* photographers "carried red sweaters to adorn subjects in scenic views as a way to add depth to a landscape" (Griffiths 2000). "After the 'Kodachrome revolution' at *National Geographic* magazine in 1935, photographers used to carry a red shirt in their camera bag to reclothe subjects because someone wearing red would 'add colour' to the photograph (red was the chosen colour because Kodachrome film could see it well but had problems reliably recording greens)," wrote Stuart Franklin in his book *The Documentary Impulse* (Franklin 2016, 175). In a 1988 issue of *New York Magazine*, Vickie Goldberg mused that "photographers took colorful props into the field in case the natives were drab, and observant readers might have noticed Bulgarian peasants and Syrian farmers wearing the same brilliant garments in different issues of the magazine" (Goldberg 1988). It is also worth noting here that *National Geographic* Society explorers are often seen in a

recognizable uniform consisting of a red shirt, a red cap and red-banded socks.

Perceived as more threatening and dominant, people wearing red also seem to be closer than those dressed in other colors, even if they are actually the same distance away. Several studies have indicated that red carries the strongest reaction of all the colors, with the level of response decreasing gradually with the colors orange, yellow, and white, respectively. The effect of the color red on the visual perception is universally associated with danger and warning, amongst countless other culturally defined connections; blood, fire, sacrifice, courage, heat,

Double Reward
when you take pictures
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Publicity for Kodachrome Film with the slogan “Double Reward” in *National Geographic*, 1950 © Eastman Kodak Company

activity, passion, sexuality, sin, seduction, anger, murder, anarchy, war, destruction, bravery, cruelty, visibility, proximity, love, joy, ... It is the color that most attracts attention, and is also the brightest color in the daytime (which is why it is used for traffic lights). Zoologist Adolf Portmann observed that “red is evoked in humans by radiant energy of specific wavelengths, which increase muscle tone, blood pressure and breath rate [...] These effects occur also in blind humans and animals, so ‘red’ is not purely an experience of the eye but something more like a bath” (Ronnberg and Martin 2010, 638).

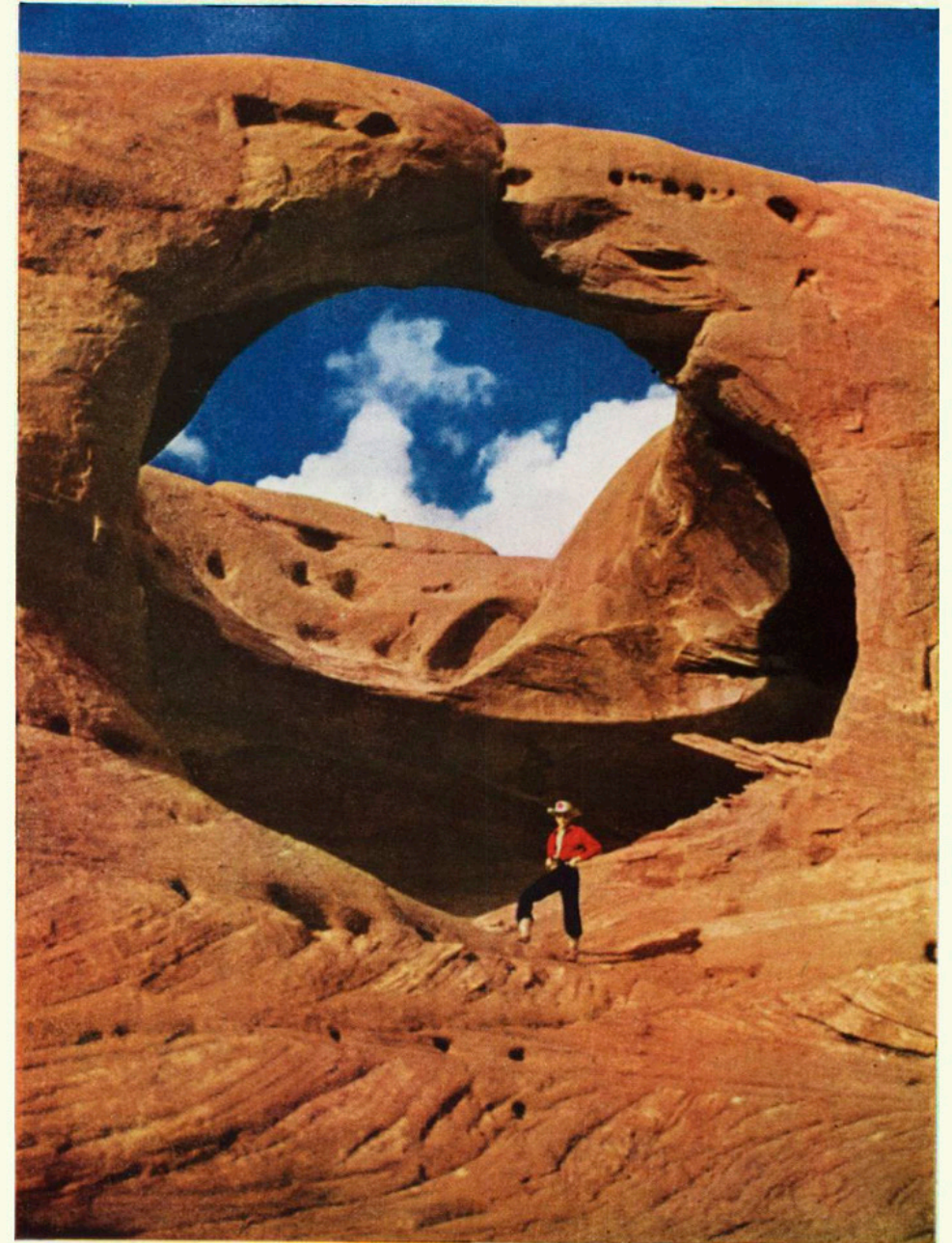
Before the age of mass tourism and global travel, *National Geographic* offered people the ‘postcard views’ of faraway places they could only dream of. Grosvenor and the editors, however, demanded that people appear in the scene to give scale to geography. They even called it “humanised geography” (Jenkins 2011). White people wearing red are often seen overlooking a landscape – looking down on an exotic scene – from a mountaintop, ridge or balcony. A stance that literary critic Mary Louise Pratt has defined as “the-monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene in which dominance is asserted over the land (Pratt 1982). The colonial observer glorifies it, seeing a country that is beautiful, rich in resources, and therefore ‘worth taking’.

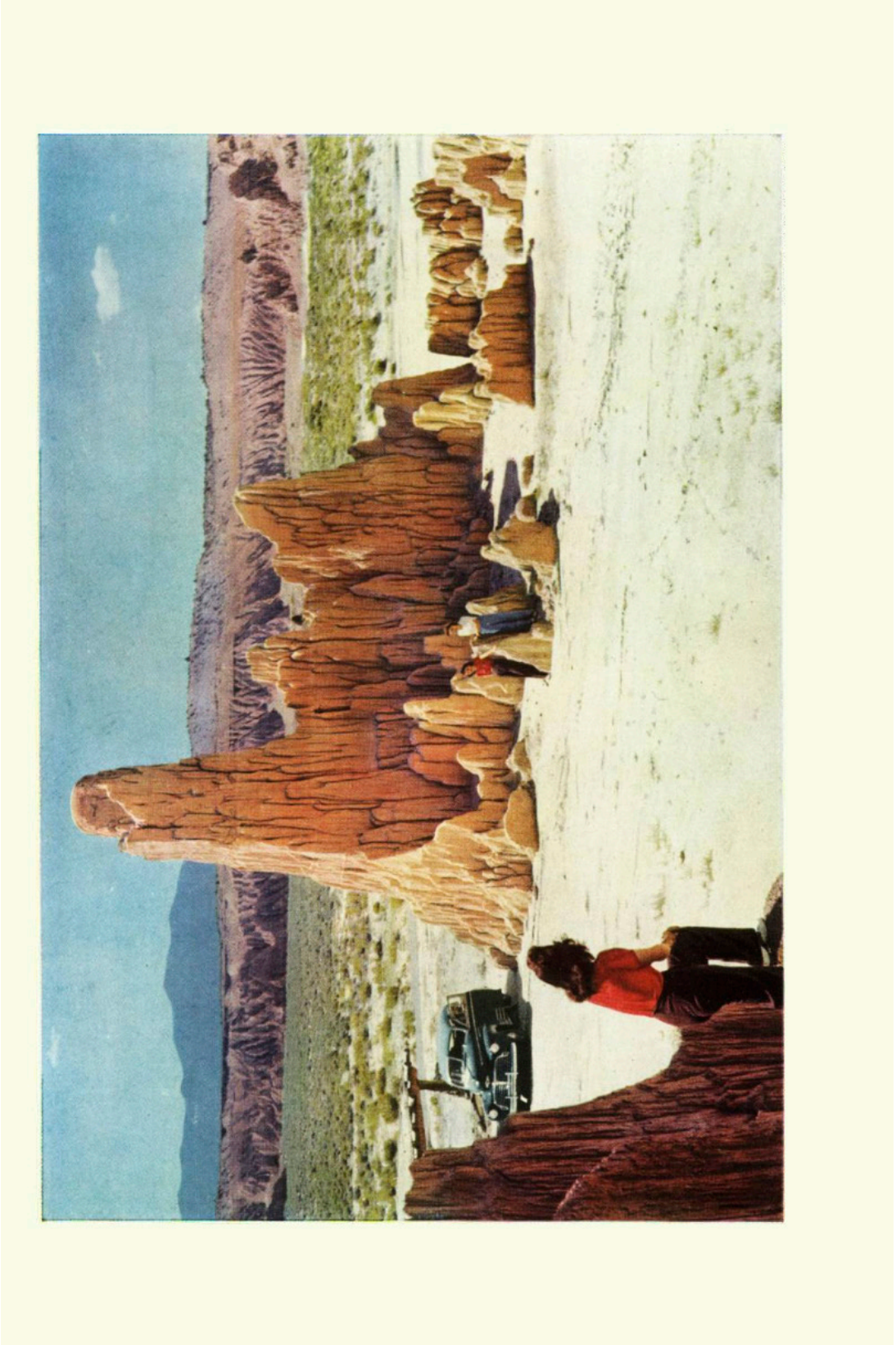
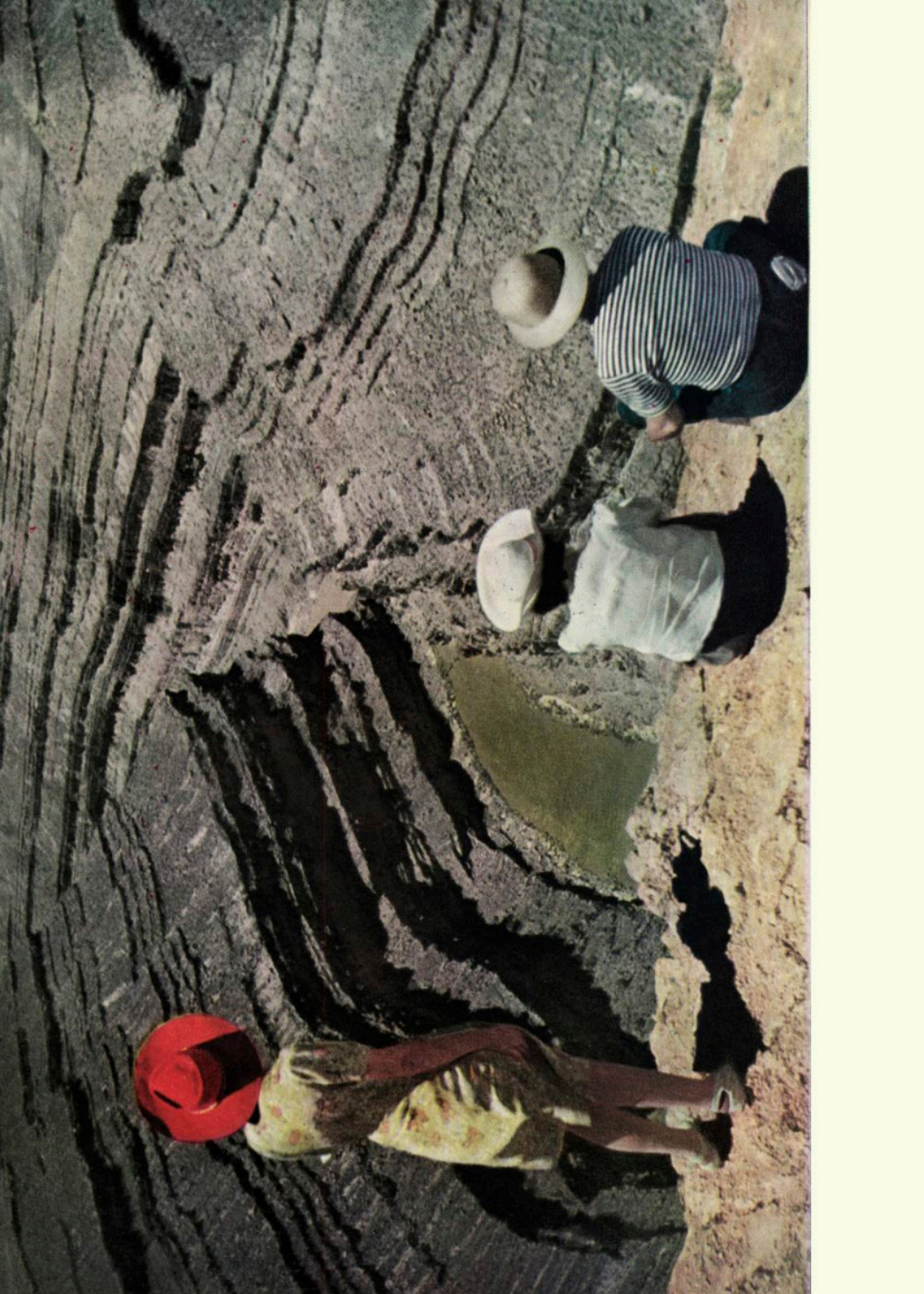
Even though Kodachrome was already unnatural-ly bright, photographers... splashed the strongest possible colors in their pictures so that they would be more effective in print. One result was that the staff photographers—who were constantly being sent to colorful places to slake what was seen as the public’s unquenching thirst for colorful scenes—would often find themselves needing more color to take advantage of the color film and would resort to placing the people in costume.

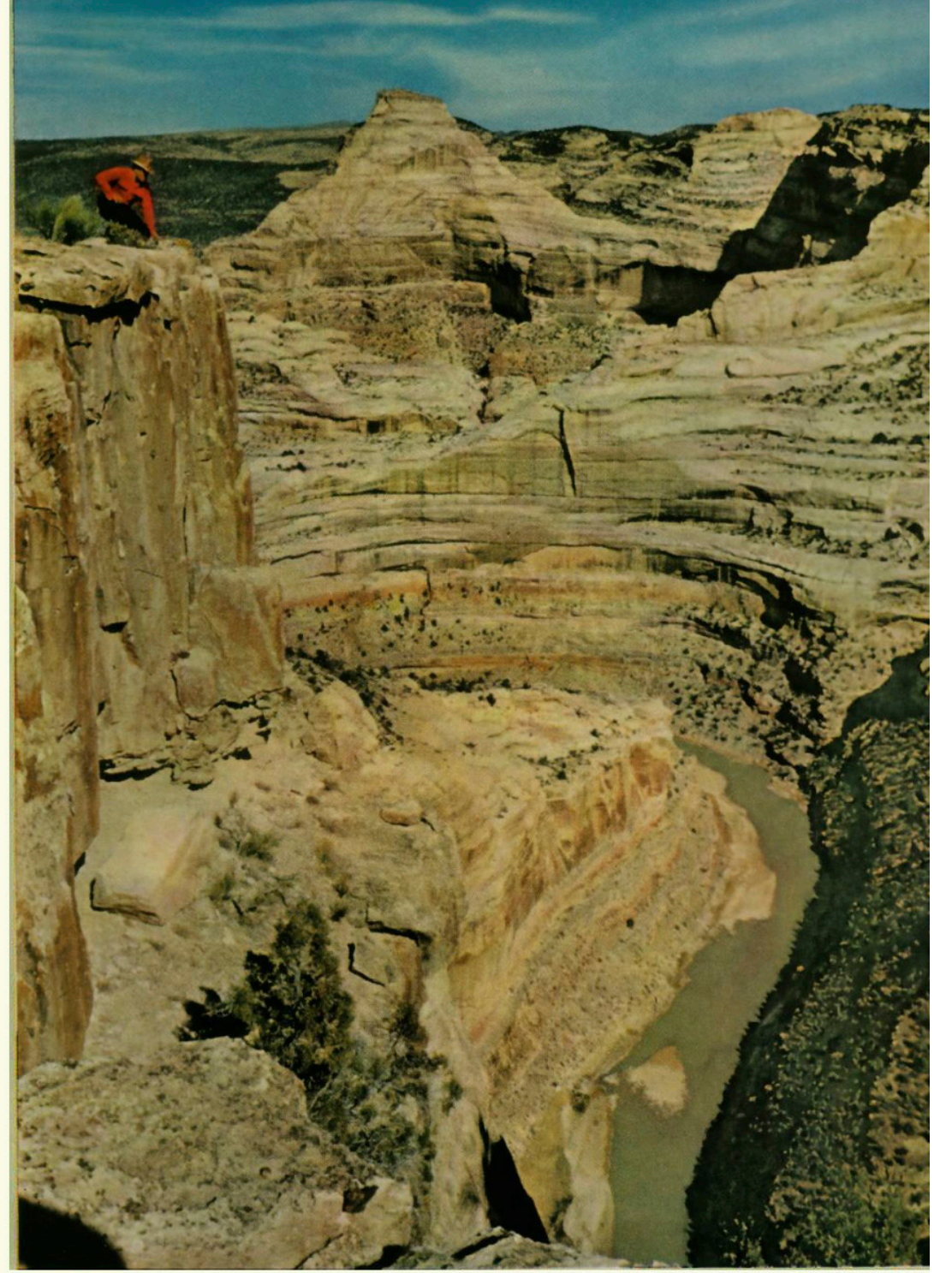
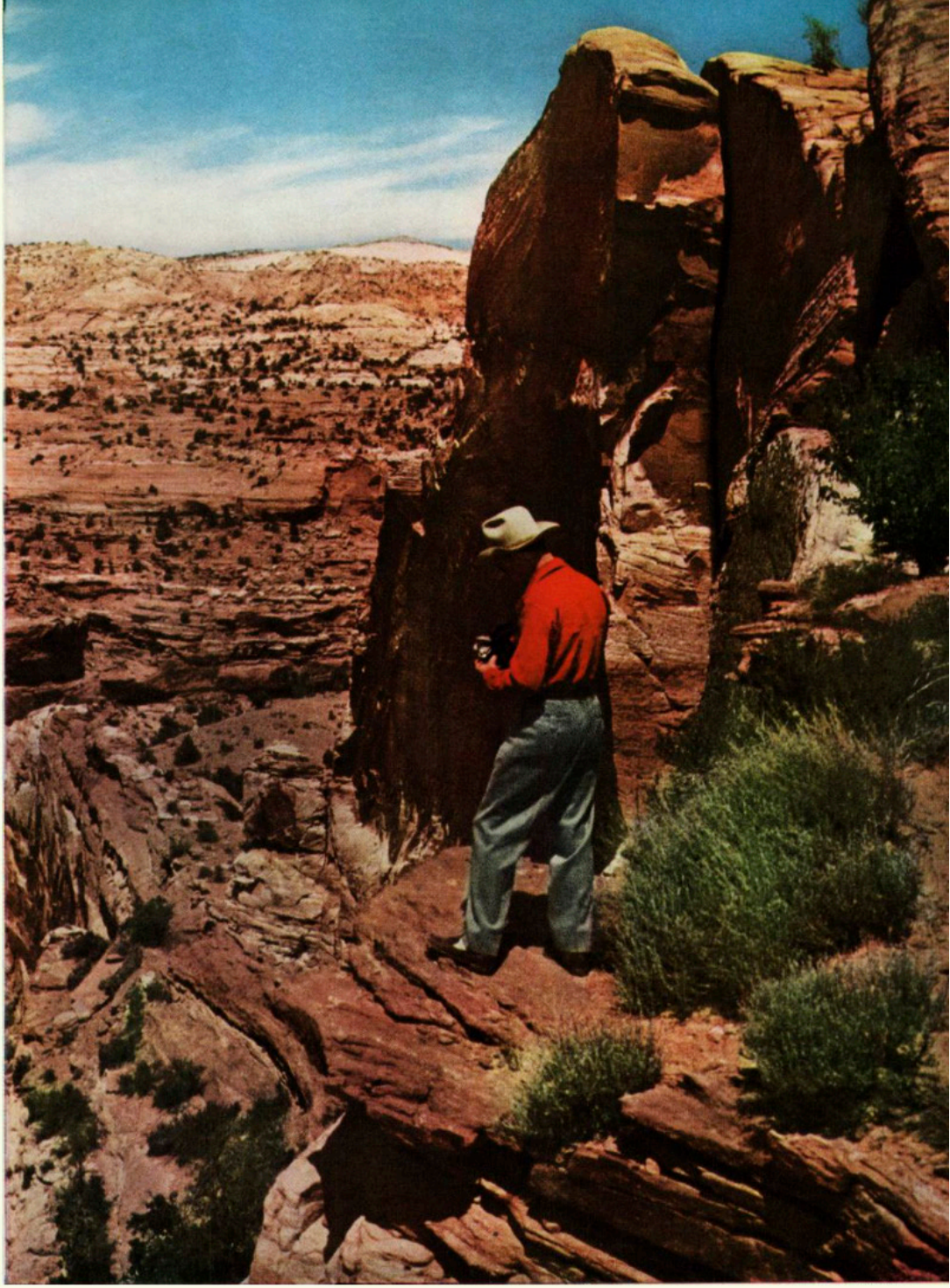
– C. D. B. Bryan, *National Geographic Society: 100 Years of Adventure and Discovery*, 1987.

The project *Double Reward* (2021, in collaboration with Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras) brings together hundreds of photographs published in *National Geographic* between 1936 and 2009 (Kodachrome’s lifespan), in which people are dressed in red clothing that may or may not

have been worn under the directions of the photographer. Installed in a grid, with their size and placement according to the original page layout but with all text removed, looking at these photographs now becomes a speculative game in which we can only guess about the conditions of production behind these photographs – with its actors becoming potential performers – and amuse ourselves with possible scenarios in our imagination. In an interview, Dizon explains that “It’s not only about the imperialist gaze – it’s about the dissemination of that gaze, the ways in which ideology is made accessible for a larger public. The way imperialism is created” (Lachowskyj 2019a). In a worldview where there is no suffering, only beautiful lands and Westerners in red shirts, the color red takes on another meaning. Red is now no longer a method of attracting attention, like a matador’s muleta, but a symbol for *not* seeing. A symbol of the invisible historical and contemporary violence that continues to be swept under the rug, under the sinister guise of happy smiles over scenic landscapes.











2 FRAMES OF WAR: EMBEDDED REGIMES

To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter.

— Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, 2009.

Sublime Atrocity

The famous photographs of the atomic clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were made by a camera operated from the Enola Gay's tail gunner position. The visual impact of these new nuclear weapons was of utmost importance to its developers. In an effort to manage public opinion regarding its use, the real horror and destruction of the bombs were hidden. No photographs of atrocity were disseminated. The iconography of nuclear war was instead replaced by the sublime image of the beautiful mushroom cloud carrying "the imagination into the realm of the supernatural, as with Robert Oppenheimer's oft-quoted reference to Shiva, destroyer of worlds" (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 135). The image of the second explosion over Nagasaki is what became the iconic photograph, not the first over Hiroshima. The perfect symmetrical shape of the blast transfixes the spectator's gaze upwards, towards the heavens, instead of the destroyed city below.

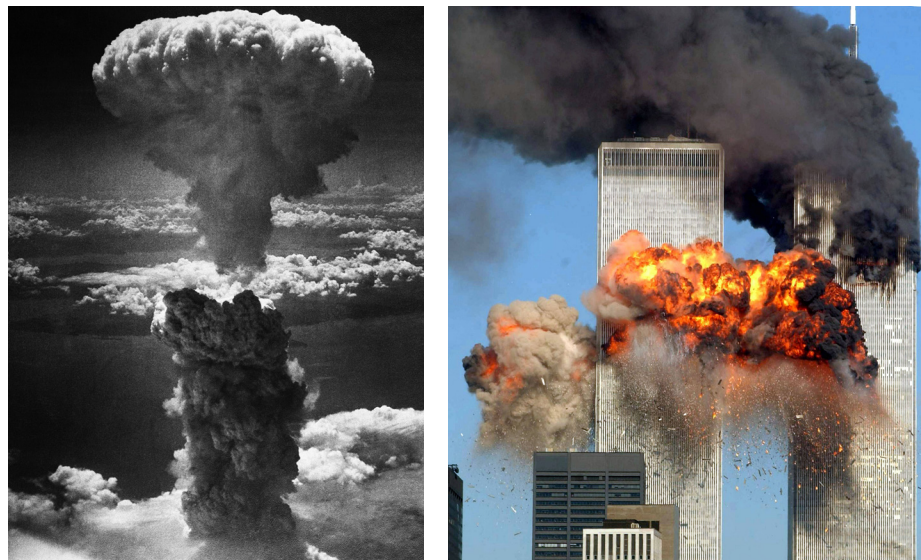
These photographs would forever change the way atrocity is represented. The mushroom cloud photographs were relegated exclusively to the back pages of national newspapers during the direct aftermath of the event, with not a single magazine or newspaper in the US publishing the images on its front page or cover. The mushroom cloud icon is a "condensation symbol of modern destructiveness that anchors a comprehensive strategy of moral containment" (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 136) and a way of 'moral avoidance' facilitating citizen compliance with the national security state.

Scholars of rhetoric and public culture Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites point out that the 'controlled' 1945 test explosions in the Bikini Atolls produced photographs in which the key aesthetic feature of the blasts was their evocation of the Sublime – a terrifying yet awe-inspiring power. A well-known concept in Western art history (Edmund Burke) often expressed as the "simultaneous experience of beauty and terror, and a sense of awe that risks annihilation of the self in the power of

nature” (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 140). At the crest of Sublime visual art stands Caspar David Friedrich’s Romantic masterpiece *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818), which depicts a man seen from behind atop a rock, gazing over the landscape beneath him. Reflecting both man’s dominance over nature and its insignificance within the awesome landscape, the painting is often read as a form of Kantian self-reflection and metaphor for the unknown future.

The Sublime gives a sense of danger without risk. Observing destruction from a safe distance is intrinsic to its pleasurable experience. By situating subsequent bomb tests after 1945 in magnificent natural landscapes, such as the Marshall Islands or the Yucca Flats in Nevada (another assault on traditional indigenous territory), the “scene was set for focusing ever more intently on the towering cloud at the center of every photograph – and nothing else” (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 140). By then, the symmetrical perfection of the explosion’s cloud was perfected and even more pronounced.

With the notion of the Sublime in mind, the popular perception of ultimate destruction at the hands of ultra-modern military technology was carefully constructed. The absence of death and destruction along with



Atomic Cloud Over Nagasaki, August 9, 1945 (photographer unknown) © National Archives and Records Administration [left]. *A fiery blast rocks the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001* © Spencer Platt/Getty Images [right]

the formal perfection of the explosion, became a visual weapon for the advancement of ideology. “The absence of human suffering is consistent with the spectator’s experience, which mutes moral responsiveness” (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 141) through a profound disconnection with the actual impact of the destruction.

The limits of what one could see and imagine were regulated, and would later be exploited further during the Cold War era in which the icon of the mushroom cloud would become the quintessential emblem of fear, mutual destruction and transcendental power. Moreover, Hariman and Lucaites point out that our idea of the mushroom cloud is not based on any one single photograph but a “composite image that remains in the mind’s eye after seeing hundreds of versions of the same” (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 142).

Richard Mosse: *Incoming*

Irish artist Richard Mosse has recently built a career by applying military-grade camera technology to documentary practice. His work can be interpreted in the optic of ‘Sublime atrocity’ in continuation of the iconic mushroom cloud photographs discussed earlier.

He gained recognition with a project titled *Infra* (along with the multi-channel video installation *The Enclave*, with a score by Ben Frost) that was first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2013. The work documents the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo using the now-discontinued Kodak Aerochrome film. A type of infrared color film originally intended for aerial vegetation surveys and for military reconnaissance that registers a spectrum of light beyond what the human eye can see. Grass and trees are registered in vivid fluorescent hues of red, crimson and pink. The film was created with the purpose of revealing camouflaged units within the bush to clearly denote potential targets for aerial bombs. The work consists of a six-screen video installation as well as a series of large framed photographs and an

accompanying publication (*The Enclave*, Aperture, 2013).

Mosse's images depict the direct consequences of a long-term civil war through portraits of soldiers, both dead and alive, often in the mannered mode of fashion photography. Mosse described how when he arrived in Congo, he felt he had "crossed a threshold into fiction" (Seymour 2017a). Isn't he perpetuating the idea of an 'imagined other'? Is his use of color and aesthetics not completely displacing our experience from the conflict rather than elaborating on its causes? Or is it in the very act of visually fictionalizing the DRC into some kind of fantasy dream world that his Western audience is supposed to deduce that this is an invisible conflict which has ventured far beyond the media's news coverage? Inseparable from imperial underpinnings, this is the discussion in which Mosse's work ultimately hinges. In an interview with the *British Journal of Photography*, he explains that he aims to use the military technology "reflexively in order to question the ways in which war photography is constructed" (Seymour 2017a). Is it a viable solution merely to aestheticize and silence with the awe of unexpected beauty in a visual culture so saturated with violent and traumatic imagery? Can we quietly and contemplatively sympathize with the struggles of the subjects? Does self-reflexivity on a formal, artistic level suffice?

It is not until Mosse's next work, the video installation *Incoming* (2016), the large scale *Heat Maps* prints, and the book *The Castle* (MACK, 2018), that his artistic strategy becomes clear. When I first saw the massive three-screen installation at the Barbican Curve gallery in London I was blown away by the visual spectacle – a truly Sublime aesthetical and immersive experience. There is something to admire about Mosse's attempt to deal with situations of crisis through art photography. Although however much admirable, there are quite some ethical considerations to be made. Mosse once again applies military reconnaissance technology, but instead of infrared film, this time a modern heat-sensor camera that can target bodies from up to an incredible distance of over thirty kilometers, now aimed at refugees. The press release for the Barbican exhibition states that Mosse's work is made with "a camera that sees as a missile sees," specifically created for tracking, targeting and

killing the enemy. This technology is supposedly "blind to skin color," and renders people as zombie-like figures, with beady dark eyes and hollow mouths. Heat dissipates quickly as deep black traces amongst phantom grey shapes, imaging a biological trace of the human body, rather than the individual, just like people are now seen as 'data subjects' by border enforcement entities. Images of hundreds of illegalized persons drowning as their boat sinks off the Turkish coast and interspersed with children roaming around camps from Tempelhof to Calais. The visual fetish of candescent thermal blankets is performed once again (like we have also seen in Alex Majoli's *Scene*, Michael Danner's *Migration as Avant-Garde* and Broomberg & Chanarin's *The Bureaucracy of Angels*). All observed from a safe distance many kilometers away, suggesting that these people do not know that they are being filmed.



Still frame from *Incoming*, 2017, three-screen video installation © Richard Mosse

With many refugees dying from bodily exposure and hypothermia, Mosse sees heat as a "crucial metaphor for understanding these narratives," and so motivates his choice for using the camera in a somewhat naive notion of interconnected humanism based on Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). The reduction of life to 'biopolitics', reduced to 'bare life', the figure of man as the bearer of the universal rights

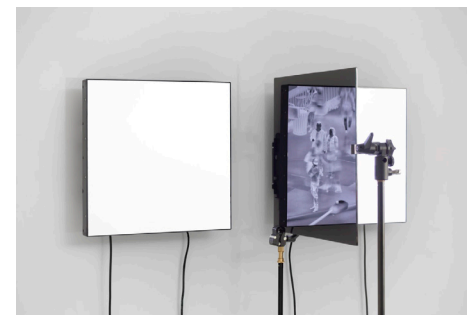
associated with merely being alive. As explained by Anthony Downey in the Barbican catalog, “in politicising ‘bare life’ and the universal rights once associated with it, those rights can be arbitrarily suspended by the state under the conditions of base opportunism and populist, xenophobic or racist rhetoric” (Downey 2017). The refugee haunts the very discourse of human rights and the figure of the citizen in modernity by being deprived of any rights by the state-apparatus, living their lives in a limbo of insecurity. Mosse vividly describes how he witnessed, from miles away, aid workers literally trying to rub the heat back into the dying bodies with their hands, where the thermal handprints could be seen on the blankets and the “thermal life giving warmth being transmitted by the volunteers” (Mosse 2018). One motivation Mosse explains for his artistic approach is what he describes as a ‘narrative dilemma’ in which the plight of the refugee must be documented while at the same time respecting their identities and right to privacy:

The camera also anonymizes the subject, and I think privacy is a key aspect in this work. You can’t recognize who that person is. That’s very important when representing refugees who don’t want to be identified for reasons of their own. So this is a narrative dilemma; do we simply not tell these stories because we don’t want those people to be identified, and they don’t want to be identified? Or do we tell the story in a way in which they cannot be identified? (Mosse 2017).

In another interview with Channel 4 News, Mosse stated: “It’s not just the refugees that are dehumanized, it’s you or I... we’re trying to make a humanist piece of art, which sets the viewer into a space of compassion, complicated by a sense of their own complicity” (Blight 2017). Even though images of atrocity need not be maximally horrific to be morally and politically effective, they should provide “a structure of relationships that give the viewer a basis for speaking against the state” (Hariman and Lucaites 2012, 145). Although the response that *Incoming* creates is one of inadvertent distancing, through technology, of our own conscious or unconscious complicity, and “the conversion of neo-liberal concern into

aesthetic pleasure and our complete inability to really know and understand anything of the experience of a refugee or their suffering” (Shah 2018a).

This double bind between ethics and aesthetics lies at the center of any artistic attempt at dealing with the visual language of crisis and always gives rise to



VideoSculpture XXI (Vegas), 2019, two LCD screens, polarization filter, plexiglass, two tripods, HD video © Emmanuel Van der Auwera/ Harlan Levey Projects

interesting discussions within contemporary photography criticism. Unlike Broomberg & Chanarin’s *The Day Nobody Died* (2008) that is clearly a critique on embedded war reporting, Mosse’s critical intent comes across as questionable. When I walked out of the exhibition in London City, one of the most surveilled places in the world and the epicenter of British imperialism, I felt that the technology used by Mosse in *Incoming* was pointed at the wrong people, or in the wrong way at least. His intent of revealing the surveillance state-apparatus could have been turned towards ourselves instead of the ‘anonymous other’. While testing the camera sometime in 2014, Mosse describes how they “watched silently

from a tower block in east London as a couple sat down to dinner in a building perhaps a kilometre away. They raised their glasses to each other, lovingly. We were spying on a domestic moment, but were unable to identify them. Their privacy was being surveilled, yet they remained faceless, unidentifiable” (Mosse 2019). Belgian artist Emmanuel Van der Auwera made use of the same camera technology in *VideoSculpture XXI (Vegas)* (2019) but directed its gaze towards unsuspecting American citizens in Las Vegas with the archival footage that was initially created to test the camera in the wake of the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting incident. A powerful installation in which the same technological weight of the camera bears a wholly different meaning.

Even though I deeply admire Mosse’s artistry, sensitivity and insight, his intended self-reflexivity on the violent gaze of weaponized camera technology backfired, effectively extending the military’s brutal, dehumanizing gaze onto the very people who suffer from the effects of dehumanization on a daily basis. Mosse’s lack of critical engagement with his subject becomes especially apparent through the novelty of the camera technology that dominates the reception of the work, rather than the plight of migrant subjects. The discourse surrounding the work doesn’t make his intentions particularly clear, especially in terms of what the work attempts to achieve on moral and ethical grounds.

If the body is the subject of a dehumanized gaze under a military-grade camera, does the body remain a target when in the hands of an artist like Mosse? The artistic strategies in both *Infra* and *Incoming* can be seen as an attempt at playing the devil’s advocate, the presentation of a double-negative, or a negation for the possibility of real exchange. In the form of a ‘conceptual inversion’, the work embodies the current status-quo in order to provoke a reaction against itself. It represents the very problems that it strives to criticize. The camera’s way of seeing, *Incoming’s* way of seeing, also represents “the military’s, and the EU’s, and neoliberalism’s, and capitalism’s, and imperialism’s way of seeing” (Blight 2017). In a video interview for Paris Photo 2020, Mosse explains: “My opinion is that beauty is the sharpest tool in the box. I feel that esthetics can be understood to

be the opposite of anesthetic. In other words, it can be used to awaken the senses rather than put you to sleep. And so we have a moral imperative as storytellers and photographers to more adequately communicate these difficult narratives to people, so people are more aware” (Mosse 2017). His emphasis clearly lies on the aesthetics rather than a genuine social or political engagement. Anyone working with difficult political subjects knows that a plight for the creation of awareness amongst your audience is generally an insufficient and disappointing one, even if it defies the norms of documentary humanism through a refreshing new way of presenting it.

Not being able to define the direct impact of the project on the refugee crisis, the work has made waves in the flow of art market capital making considerable profits within a closed art market circuit. Most notably, Mosse is the only artist to win both the Prix Pictet and The Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize for a total of €130.000, and setting the record in 2019 for the auction price of €41,400 for a single photographic print by a photographer under the age of 45 (Barter 2019). This is not to say that artists shouldn’t profit from their work, but under “what auspices and in relation to what contradictory conceptual goal?” as Daniel C. Blight eagerly pleads, “what particular form of privilege allows a Western artist to sidestep this concern? Might it be linked to a form of unwitting cultural superiority; a form of artistic false consciousness?” (Blight 2017). Not made in collaboration or with no clear participation between Mosse and his subjects, he remains *auteur par excellence*. For his most recent work titled *Ultra* (2019), Mosse has stepped away from the problem of humanist representation and no longer deals with a ‘narrative dilemma’ by photographing plants and insects in the Amazon rainforest at the height of burning and deforestation. Under the somewhat pseudo-socially concerned auspice of ecological activism in order to produce attractive gallery objects, he now applies the camera technology of ultraviolet fluorescence to highlight the beautiful unseen nature of this endangered ecosystem.

Luc Delahaye's *Taliban*

I don't wear a bulletproof vest, or drive around in an armored car. I undertake the same risks as the people I am covering ... The majority of photojournalists tell themselves they do this work because it is important, that if people can just see these problems in these parts of the world they will do something about them. I have never believed this. I even think that that is a con. You ask yourself if you have the right to be in such a crisis area. Is it legitimate to bend over someone who is about to die? Is it correct to photograph a dying woman ...? I restore (the suffering) more effectively if I am able to adopt a certain detachment.
– Luc Delahaye, 2003.

Only someone who has witnessed enough violence and death has the capability of making images of war with detachment. In 2001 former Magnum and *Newsweek* photographer Luc Delahaye began making large scale panoramic tableau photographs in Afghanistan for a series titled *History* (2003), as a reaction to his reportage work being decontextualized and published as illustrations rather than being appreciated as independent images. His transition from photojournalism to documentary photography, or sometimes called 'art photography', is an exemplary case that has not gone unnoticed. Delahaye won three World Press Photo awards (1992, 1993 and 2001), the Robert Capa Gold Medal for reportage twice (1992 and 2002) and after his career switch, was awarded the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize for groundbreaking contemporary photography in 2005 (O'Hagan 2011).

Interesting about this transition from magazine pages onto gallery walls is that on his trips to Afghanistan in the early 2000s he produced both work for newspapers and magazines such as *Newsweek*, and made large-format photographs for his personal work, each with different camera equipment, although from the same scenes and subjects. For the purpose of immediacy and instantaneity, traditional photojournalistic images were taken

with 35mm or digital cameras, whereas his artistic work was made with a large format Linhof panoramic camera. The most well-known photograph from this series is of a dead Taliban soldier laying in a ditch. The camera is positioned from a god-like perspective, looking down upon the fallen soldier who gazes up at the sky above him with a grace that almost seems posed.

In an interview, Delahaye explains his intent with *History* as an endeavor "to voice the real and at the same time to create an image that is a world in itself, with its own coherence, its autonomy and sovereignty; an image that thinks" (Duganne 2007, 59). By moving the intent of his imagery away from news production streams and into the sphere of art – large printed tableaux – he allows himself to reflect about the nature of representation in a process of slow, critical detachment and contemplation.



Taliban. November 12, 2001. In the Shomali Valley, a Taliban soldier killed during an offensive of the Northern Alliance on Kabul, the Afghanistan capital, from the series History, 2003, C-print, 110.8 x 236.9 cm © Luc Delahaye

His work is formally stunning and adheres to all admirable qualities of the tableau art form. The photographs have a documentary status, made in a purely observational mode, although with a strong dramatic intensity to them echoing the narrativity of war paintings. Delahaye's coverage of conflict is a poignant description of the Western attitude towards war, evoking a subversive and uncomfortable kind of serenity. But isn't this

attempt to evoke a sense of objectivity also just as much a visual trope as the ‘immediacy’ and ‘instantaneity’ of traditional photojournalism, in which “meanings are shaped as much by the culture and interests of those who read them as by the intent of those who make and use them?” (Duganne 2007, 62).



Taliban, Afghanistan, November 12, 2001 in “The Fall of the Taliban,” *Newsweek*, November 26, 2001 © Luc Delahaye/Magnum Photos

I beg to argue that these photographs do not truly contemplate their own existence as *photographs*, and neither are they transparent in their conditions of production. What happens to images of human suffering when they are taken out of newspapers and hung on the walls of deluxe downtown Manhattan galleries? If his images could ‘think’, as he describes, then they would also need to deal with their own existence as aesthetic objects within the context of the neoliberal art market. *Taliban* was first exhibited at Ricco-Maresca Gallery in New York as a 110.8 x 236.9 cm framed print on sale for \$15,000, accompanied by a limited-edition artist book priced at \$1,000 (Sullivan 2003). In response to a question posed by photography critic Jörg Colberg about the uneasiness created by the work being sold for a lot of money, Delahaye simply responded that he is “avoiding these discussions” (Keijser 2007). This evasive attitude towards the

responsibility of his creations and the discussions that arise from it indicate a kind of pseudo-self-reflexivity, in which the work merely appropriates aesthetic codes from what looks like art rather than being truly critical documentary art.

Delahaye makes the refined supposition that “photojournalism is neither photography or journalism” (Sullivan 2003). His work supposedly criticizes photojournalism and the news media’s claim to objective exposure by monumentally portraying the icon of the dead unnamed ‘enemy soldier’ that appears as a martyr. Yet while making his artistically conceived *Taliban*, he was still on assignment for *Newsweek* and also made a reportage depicting dead Taliban soldiers in the conventional style of news photography.⁹

A truly critical gesture here would have been to present both the original *Newsweek* publication alongside the large format tableau of the same dead soldier, calling into question his own contribution to the visual currency of war reportage, while at the same time elevating similar scenes into the domain of high art. And what if it had been a dead American soldier? Wouldn’t that have been a more powerful statement and sharper criticism of the news media and his former role as a photojournalist? Sontag reminds us that “the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying” (Sontag 2003, 63). Dead US soldiers, and even their flag-draped caskets back home, have been entirely removed from the visual coverage of US wars.

Which type of client of a New York gallery, I wonder, would have purchased this monumental ‘trophy’ of an enemy corpse to be displayed on their private wall? There is essentially nothing wrong with charging exuberant amounts for artworks, which is only a symptom of art market capitalism, but what is lacking here is the sensitivity towards the incorporation of this effect into the work itself, and perhaps a participatory gesture about the subject matter of the photograph. Delahaye falls back into the attitude of the photojournalists, who remove themselves from the responsibility of the work they produce once it departs into the world and becomes entwined with it.

⁹ These photographs were published in “The Fall of the Taliban,” *Newsweek*, November 26, 2001, and in the book *Arms Against Fury: Magnum Photographers in Afghanistan*, Magnum Photos, edited by Robert Dannin (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

Conflict Photography and the Crisis of the Cliché

War cannot operate without the image. The image itself is an integral part of the waging of war. State issued directives on how war is to be reported and represented is an attempt at regulating the public understanding of violence through the creation of ‘perceptual realities’. Photography is a perfect tool for creating an ‘official unreality’ and can easily be put into the service of political agendas. The US wars especially have seen several propaganda stunts or ‘photo-ops’ that received international exposure. The toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Firdos Square on April 9, 2003, for example, was orchestrated by a US military psychological operations unit. It was stage-managed by American troops and not a spontaneous reaction by Iraqis. At one point during the stunt, Marines covered the statue’s face with an American flag. When the crowd reacted negatively to that gesture, the US flag was replaced with a pre-1990 Iraqi flag. The soldiers even brought in cheering Iraqi children to make the scene appear authentic (Martin 2020). The act was filmed and broadcast live on television around the world as a premature American victory, when in fact, the horrors of the war had only just begun (Crichton 2013).

Many have criticized conflict photography for its shortcomings. Peter Bouckaert writes that “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” (Bouckaert 2019). Social and cultural theorist Susie Linfield has rightly pointed out that “stylistic innovation within traditional photojournalism is no longer possible and only imitates dead styles, imprisoned in the past” (Linfield 2010, 9). Three key factors have contributed to the visual conventionalization of conflict photography: military embedding programs in which journalists conform to government regulations; privatized censorship in which self-censorship is imposed by news corporations to maintain their relationships with corporate sponsors and advertisers; and the print media crisis that created a lack of funding

and resources to support long-term, in-depth (photo) journalism.

The beautification and glorification of war is nothing new and has been a visual tradition as old as war itself. An example of privatized censorship is David Shields’ *War is Beautiful: The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict* (2015). The book presents an overview of 64 color photographs collected from the front pages of *The New York Times* on the invasion of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2015. In this collection, the visual tropes of conflict photography become apparent – war is represented as painterly, beautiful, heroic, and lavishly aesthetic. The book is divided into ten themes that glamorize violence and the sacrifices made in the service of war: nature, playground, father, God, pietà, painting, movie, beauty, love and death. Shields asks us to question the complicity of a so-called neutral high-standing journalistic institution such as *The New York Times* to the governmental interests it indirectly promotes with its aestheticized and anesthetized representation of American warfare (the *Times* later sued the publisher for the ‘unfair’ use of licensed photographs in the book).

As a reaction to the independent and critical war reporting during the Vietnam War (also known as the ‘Uncensored War’), the Iraq/Afghanistan wars produced a complex media-military relationship that led to the balance of censorship and free press now largely being structured around embedded (photo)journalism programs (Paul 2004). Scholars have attributed a shift in photojournalism’s witnessing authority to the 1991 Gulf War – the first 24-hour televised war. It’s no coincidence that the early 1990s also marked the beginning of reality TV, enabled by the advent of computer-based non-linear editing systems for video. The mainstream media and the US military have teamed up to create Hollywood-like narratives in which reporters and US soldiers share a glorified experience of combat.

An embedded journalist essentially trades his freedom of speech for a strongly censored guided tour of the front lines motivated by the production of sensational first-hand battle footage. A ridiculous moral contract with the military – a Faustian type deal with

the devil. When looking at photojournalism produced on the frontlines of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we never see enemy troops. Soldiers seem to be firing in the distance, at invisible enemies, hiding behind walls and barricades, engulfed in dust clouds, lost in a foreign sepia-toned desert. There are of course journalists that report on the war ‘unilaterally’, but they are an exception to the rule.

The photojournalist, acting as a proxy for the concerned civilian at home, is confined to a military unit and a set of strict ground rules of what may and may not be photographed (no dead bodies, casualties, explicit wounds or infliction of physical bodily damage, no enemy combatants, and so on). In 2008, a *Times* piece titled *4,000 U.S. Deaths, and a Handful of Images* made clear that graphic photos of dead American soldiers no longer make the news (Kamber 2008). This kind of photojournalism represents the heroic figure of the man who risks his life to bring us sensational imagery of soldiers in action. Himself equally invisible as the enemy combatants, shooting away at soldiers engulfed in their own ‘*Desert Storm*’ fantasies. In this conventionalized war reporting, the dominant ‘good versus evil’ narrative is largely maintained in the form of a Hollywoodesque military crusade. Inversely, real military operations are frequently glorified in the form of Hollywood blockbusters; *12 Strong* (2018), *American Sniper* (2014), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Green Zone* (2010), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), only to name a few. However, we cannot blame the photographers for this formatted image economy and must look towards the large scale epistemological enterprise that maintains it.

Not only are military operations documented by photographers and television crews, soldiers themselves are also now making their own photo and video recordings. Army photographer and soldier Ben Brody, assigned in Iraq to make propaganda for the US Military, describes how he “learned what pictures the Public Affairs Officer would release and what he wouldn’t.” He explains: “soldiers looking calm or stoic. Yes. Soldiers looking angry or frightened or exhausted or confused or lost with eyes like the bottom of the ocean. No” (Mogelson 2020). All photographs made by military personnel are distributed

through the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DIVDS), the content of which is public domain and can be used freely by anyone. Some of Brody’s photographs, such as an infantry captain leading an assault across a field at sunrise, have “appeared in advertisements for tactical radios, batteries, and vape pens” (Mogelson 2020).



“Sunset soldiers” from the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DIVDS)

One of the most common templates found on DIVDS are ‘sunset soldiers’; the corporate face of military propaganda (Keijser 2011). John Louis Lucaites has described these images as an allegory for the US military presence in Afghanistan: “There is no telling if the sun is rising or setting, whether the day is beginning or ending, and so too it would seem with the U.S. occupation. Deep shadows shroud the entire scene in an eerie darkness, offset only by a distant light that seems well beyond the grasp of the forward most soldier” (Hariman and Lucaites 2011). Shadows and backlight that obscures more than it reveals.

Ironically, in *Serious Games IV: A Sun without Shadow* (2010), filmmaker Harun Farocki reveals that the virtual reality software used to prepare US soldiers for combat training is very similar to that of the post-battle operations evaluation software used for treating post-traumatic stress disorders, except for a slight aesthetic difference: “the program for commemorating traumatic experiences is somewhat cheaper. Nothing and no-one casts a shadow here” (Farocki, n.d.).

The gamification of warfare is perpetuated further in the use of soldiers’ helmet-mounted cameras (also known



Still frame from *Serious Games IV: A Sun without Shadow*, 2010 © Harun Farocki

as lipstick cameras), which the mainstream media are “encouraged to use to the greatest extent possible,” according to Department of Defense documents on media embedding procedures (US Department of Defense, 2006). “To be caught in the sightlines of the enemy’s camera,” writes scholar and filmmaker Alisa Lebow “is to foreshadow being caught in the crosshairs of the enemy’s gun” (ten Brink and Oppenheimer 2012, 46). Hours of first-person videos are collected and broadcasted publicly on dedicated YouTube channels such as *Funker530: Veteran Community & Combat Footage*, which has over 1,5 million subscribers.¹⁰ The majority are first-person points of view reminiscent of the first-person shooters video game genre (FPS), in which the player looks through the eyes of the virtual character they control. Once disseminated on the internet, videos made by soldiers are sometimes mixed with video game footage, blurring the lines between them even more. The Funker530 platform also hosts fundraising events for deployed veterans in which people can donate while watching a live stream of professional FPS video gameplay.

In *Frames of War* (2009) Judith Butler elaborates on the epistemological problem raised by the issue of framing and the use of the term ‘to frame’: a picture is ‘framed’ but so too is a criminal or an innocent person to be set up, falsely implicating them in a crime. Butler relays this connotation onto the picture frame, in which the frame becomes associated with a ‘false accusation’ or ‘setup reality’. She elaborates in relation to embedded war

¹⁰ According to their YouTube profile, the channel “is in no way affiliated with any Government, DND or DoD. Videos and links on this channel hold no official endorsement” (Funker530: Veteran Community & Combat Footage).

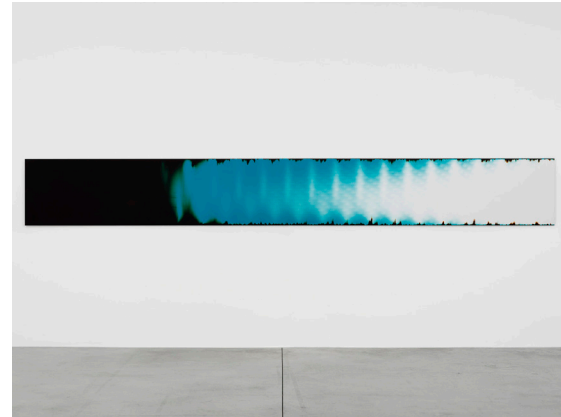
reporting: “If we are to ask whether this regulation of violence is itself also violent in some way, part of violence, then we need a more careful vocabulary to distinguish between the destruction of the bomb and the framing of its reality, even though, as we know, both happen at the same time, and the one cannot happen without the other” (Butler 2009, xiii). The viewer’s inevitable conclusion is thus always defined by the act of ‘framing’ in itself. The frame does not simply exhibit reality but actively shapes it. But it is possible, she points out, to “frame the frame,” or the “framer,” exposing the constructions that uphold it. Butler pleads not for a highly reflexive engagement towards photographs but asks us to “consider what forms of social and state power are ‘embedded’ in the frame, including state and military regulatory regimes” (Butler 2009, 72).



Still frames from videos featured on Funker530’s YouTube channel © Funker530: Veteran Community & Combat Footage

Perhaps the most radical response to embedded war reporting and the current crisis of engaged, professional witness is *The Day Nobody Died* (2008) by Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin. Following on from their series *Chicago* (2006), in which they documented an artificial but realistic Arab town built by the Israeli Defense Force for urban combat training, the artist duo traveled to Afghanistan embedded with British Army units in Helmand Province. Testing the limits of the embedding process, they pretended to be photojournalists and were escorted to the frontlines. “If we had said we were artists, we would not have been given permission to be there. The state feels more in control of journalists than

of artists, who are not really answering to anybody,” explained Broomberg in an interview (Katz 2015). In an absurd Dadaesque stunt, Broomberg & Chanarin unrolled a six-meter section of photographic paper and exposed it



Installation view of *Repatriation II*, C-print mounted on aluminum, 76.2 x 600 cm, from the series *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008 © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin/ Lisson Gallery

to the sun for twenty seconds from the inside of an army vehicle transformed into a mobile pinhole camera. The work offers a total eclipse of the standard shock imagery of warfare, instead, presenting the viewer with a sublime abstraction of a non-moment. All that the beautiful long strips of exposed paper reveal are abstract colors, lines and light-smudges. The work is accompanied by a twenty-three-minute film tracking the cardboard box of paper all the way from London to Afghanistan and back. It shows how anyone who interacts with the box becomes complicit in the project as a challenge to the power hierarchies of the military system, such as when a general wanted to open it and look inside, but couldn't do so without exposing the paper and destroying the work.

The titles of the various prints reference to actual events that occurred but cannot be seen in the images. The title of the series is dedicated to the press announcement that nobody had died that day. Another print is titled *The Fixer's Execution, June 7, 2008*. The abstraction in combination with descriptive, factual titles in reference to news reports creates a “stronger image in the mind's

eye than a photo of a dead body in the sand,” claims Broomberg (Afshar and Broomberg 2020). In this work, and like many other works of visual negation, the imagination is given priority over the descriptive property of photographs.

A key turning point in the work of Broomberg & Chanarin is the portrait they made of Yasser Arafat in 2004. Working on assignment, they were given fifteen minutes to photograph the Palestinian leader in his compound with their large-format view camera. Upon leaving the country, Israeli customs, who knew where they had been, X-rayed the negatives “about thirty to forty times in an attempt to deliberately destroy the films” (Afshar and Broomberg 2020). By the time the films were processed in London, Arafat had died. Broomberg & Chanarin were initially mortified to see a wavy green yellowish line-pattern left on the negatives



Yasser Arafat, 2004, C-type contact print © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin

by the damaging rays. But eventually, they realized that this intervention had transformed a mediocre portrait into a more telling, politically charged one. The layer of abstraction created by the damage inflicted onto the negatives by the Israeli state added a narrative layer to the images, revealing the political power dynamics of the conditions in which they were made. The portrait now contains three authors: it is a trace of Arafat, made by Broomberg & Chanarin, distorted by the Israeli authorities.

This attempted state censorship is literally visible within the image itself. The action of defacing the portrait of a leader is revealed and thus becomes again a form of resistance to occupation in itself. There is a contradiction of language here, in which photography remarks on its own incapacity to communicate the complexity of certain political and social conditions. However, in this very contradiction, there is a different form of photographic truth that is more telling about the situation than a simple portrait of Arafat would have been.

Red Ink: The Limitations of Language

My book *Red Ink* (2018) is a reflection on the limitations of photojournalism in a similar disposition to Broomberg & Chanarin's portrait of Arafat and its engagement with state censorship. In August 2017, at the height of political tensions between the United States and North Korea, under the looming possibility of a nuclear war (when Kim Jong-Un was threatening to nuke Guam and Donald Trump called him 'Rocket Man' on Twitter), I was hired by *The New Yorker* to travel to Pyongyang together with my working partner Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras and American journalist Evan Osnos. Knowing that it would be impossible to reveal the reality behind the regime's facade, the magazine hired me specifically, they explained, for my use of artificial lighting and the theatrical appearance of my pictures.

They thought this could provide a subversive and critical undertone to the unavoidable conditions of state censorship. It was then that it first occurred to me that the work I had developed over the years had finally established itself as a viable strategy amongst news reporting.

Our journey began with a problem that would come to define the aesthetic approach of the photographs: the batteries of my ring-flash were confiscated on the flight from Beijing to Pyongyang. This forced me to construct something similar using two separate smaller strobe lights duct-taped to my lens in an improvised rig described by Osnos as "a large set of antlers rising from the top of the camera" (Osnos 2018). I devised a lighting method combining a ring-flash-like set up with a second mobile light operated by Gonzalez-Figueras. Radiating light from closely all around the lens, a ring-flash equally illuminates its subject and cancels out any drop shadows. This technique is usually applied in commercial product photography, fashion or forensic photography; for close-ups of objects and details, without much spatial depth or perspective. This is because the light from a ring-flash, radiating forwardly outwards from the lens, always creates a dissipating gradient of light behind the



Improvised ring-flash camera rig, Pyongyang, North Korea, August 2017 © Max Pinckers

brightly lit object in the foreground. In order to create equally lit compositions with depth and perspective, Gonzalez-Figueras filled in the background of the scenes with a second light coming from one side. The combi-

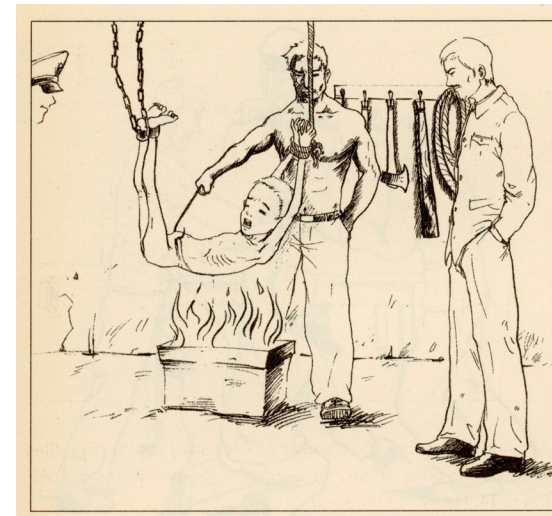
nation of these two techniques is what gives the images their peculiar, artificial appearance, sometimes creating double or contradictory shadows.

When looking at photographs from North Korea one cannot help but project an arsenal of preconceptions onto them. The lack of independently produced visual material about the humanitarian crisis in North Korea creates a myth of deception. Maybe this is one of the reasons why there seems to be an enormous desire to see ‘the real North Korea’ as so many blog posts and viral videos proclaim. To see inside a place that has remained hidden from view for so long, operating in secret, supposedly building an arsenal of nuclear weapons while sustaining itself independently. To witness the terrible human rights violations, the people starving to death and the entire generations of families condemned to life-long labor camp sentences. The striking lack of images and photographs supporting this reality has led to a situation in which conflicting narratives are continuously in dispute. A situation in which the classic notion of photographs fail us – or as Alan Sekula remarked: “the old myth that photographs tell the truth has been replaced by the new myth that they lie” (Roberts 2012) – that we simply don’t know anymore, and don’t really seem to care anymore either. What seems to be more important today is the message they attempt to propagate, and why.

The images from *Red Ink* are conscious of their own deceptive nature – lies that make us understand the truth – that these images can only reveal a manufactured version of reality according to the Kim regime. In the context of North Korea, we no longer consider photographic accounts as truthful and are immediately requested to read them as double negatives, as deceptions, diversions or misrepresentations because *we know that there’s something we don’t know* – some kind of hidden underlying, invisible truth. The abyss between reality and its representation needs to be bridged by imagination, by what is *not* there. An imagination that in a regime of censorship can only be formed by first-hand witnesses who tell their stories, without photographs, sometimes with drawings.

Any serious work of journalism on the conditions in North Korea departs from either literary translations of personal experiences or accounts based on interviews with defectors and escapees. Yet even these stories are not always reliable. An example of such an account is *Escape from Camp 14* (2013) in which Shin Dong-hyuk describes his personal story to American journalist Blaine Harden who then wrote the book in English. It traces the steps of how Shin managed to escape from one of the notorious labor camps. He is the only known person to have been born in such a camp and to have escaped and live to tell about it, becoming one of the strongest voices on the atrocities inside North Korean camps. Even though years after the publication of the book Shin confessed that parts of his story were fabricated and inaccurate, he remains a credible witness and victim of human rights abuses. He also didn’t want to stay in South Korea and attempted to move back to North Korea (where he’d probably be executed for defecting).

An important reference is Jang Jin-sung’s thrilling narration in *Dear Leader* (2015). A lyrical account of his experience as a high-level government official and



Sketches from Shin’s life in Camp 14: “In the underground prison, guards tortured Shin over a coal fire, seeking to find out his role in the planned escape of his mother and brother.” *Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*, Blaine Harden, p. 241, 2013

personal poet of Kim Jong-Il, offering a rare glimpse into the workings of the elite government. His function was to fabricate positive international news reports about North Korea from a Western perspective designed for consumption by the local population. The author, who currently lives in Seoul, leads an organization that helps inform North Korean citizens and aids refugees in setting up a new life.

Another book that describes the dictatorial conditions of paranoia, fear and punishment is Barbara Demick's book *Nothing to Envy* (2010), set during the 1990s famine in which millions died of starvation. All of these accounts are a testament to the lack of visual evidence, yet create a space to project onto photographs what we cannot see in them.

I've always had an interest in propaganda photography because it's explicitly entwined with political and ideological agendas. Unconcerned with truth, its sole intent is to manipulate beliefs. Propaganda contains a simple and effective message that can be either accepted or rejected, but there is no room for doubt or ambiguity. It is purely about conviction. The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) is one of the last places on earth that is completely shut off from the outside world, making it an interesting case study for how it is visually represented. Much of what is known about the so-called 'Hermit Kingdom' is clearly constructed from an ideological perspective, either by the West or by the DPRK themselves, both engaging in a media war. Images that immediately come to mind when thinking about North Korea are of missile tests, military parades, grand displays of mass synchronized performances, overly enthusiastic news anchors, or the great leaders pointing at various things while smiling (brought together in the photobook *Kim Jong-Il Looking at Things* (2012) by João Rocha and Marco Bohr). The photographs depicting the regime's family lineage of leaders are often scrutinized for any possible form of digital manipulation or fakery, which would then supposedly expose their devious trickery and deception. The cult of the Kim family is frequently ridiculed in American popular culture with films such as *The Interview* (2014) (which later led to Sony being hacked by a North Korean cyber-attack in retaliation) or

Team America: World Police (2003).

However, the representation cultivated from a Western perspective may seem no more than a harmless parody, it's important to note that this maintains the simplistic 'good versus evil' narrative, equally propagandistic than the DPRK's own self-representation. Outdated in today's information landscape, this is clearly a remnant of cold war politics, yet provides a comforting solution to a very complicated situation. This culminated when the White House produced a video that was presented to Kim Jong-Un by President Trump in Singapore during their meeting on 6 June 2017. A bizarre advertising-like montage in the form of a faux-movie trailer, loaded with subliminal messages, consisting largely out of corporate stock-footage selling capitalism in all its prosperity.¹¹ It's so boldly propagandistic that this video can only come across as a ridiculously desperate attempt to try and convince the North Korean leader of the significance of their meeting.

¹¹ The visual language of global capitalism is best expressed in the form of stock photography. Cheap images – cheap labor – in massive quantities with an explicitly commercial purpose. It's the fastest, most efficient and superficial form of visual communication through photographs. What makes them so uncanny is that stock photos are always recognizable as *stock photos*. They are instantly identifiable by some kind of unified aesthetic stemming from the impersonal, one-dimensional, sanitized, unoriginal. They are empty, utilitarian shells – unapologetic – deducible to a single-keyword description.

During our four-day trip, we were strictly monitored and guided by foreign ministry officials at all times. Mr. Pak and Mr. Kim, nuclear analysts usually occupied with deciphering US threats, tweets or news reports, were now our tour guides. Osnos and Mr. Pak would discuss nuclear warfare and mutual destruction, political relations, sanctions, dignity and sovereignty. Osnos seemed to be functioning somewhat as an American diplomat, speaking on behalf of his country when eagerly questioned by the North Koreans about the intentions of his deranged president.

We were taken to various locations, all of which were occupied by Koreans casually going about their daily activities. We visited pristine sites, such as a Pyongyang metro station, the dolphinarium, the zoo, a newly built high-rise neighborhood for teachers, a boat restaurant, the ancient Kaesong Unesco Heritage Village, a new orphanage school and the demilitarized zone on the border with the South (DMZ). But most of all, we spent our time in museums and memorials on painfully long guided tours, probably as some form of distraction, to keep us away from unsolicited interactions with Pyongyang inhabitants, or as a way to pass as much time as possible in an environment of grand

nationalistic and historical narratives. It was impossible to change the schedule, which took six months for Osnos to arrange, other than an impromptu lunch at Kenji Fujimoto's restaurant, Kim Jong-il's personal sushi chef.

While on a museum visit early in the trip, it occurred to me that everything I photographed was equally relevant as it was irrelevant. And that the only way to remark on this irrelevance was to simply photograph everything as thoroughly as possible, from dinosaur dioramas and military personnel to the meals I was served at restaurants or elderly ladies hanging around on a street corner. When guided around for the purpose of making photographs that would be seen by a large US audience, it was inevitable to assume that everything was diligently prepared before our arrival on the scene. Although nothing was certain, and everything did seem natural, there was always a feeling that something just wasn't quite right,



A passing bus in Pyongyang, North Korea, 2017, from the series *Red Ink*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

or wouldn't be the same without our presence. Everywhere we were taken there was always some kind of activity, be it families visiting the zoo, people enjoying a picnic or a special event at the dolphinarium (where

I was invited to an on stage hula hoop competition for the entertainment of thousands of spectators). In an effort to make images where people would least expect it, I began photographing from our car into commuter busses as they drove by, hoping to discover something less contrived. Unsurprisingly, these situations looked just the same as they did elsewhere.

Ultimately, the more banal the images, the better they expressed the conditions in which they were made and their function as a diversion. In its most extreme form: a photograph made accidentally while pointing my camera at the floor while testing my lights; the shiny shoes of our guides tucked under their broad pants is all it shows. The title of the book, referring to a joke told by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, makes this 'double-negative' approach to revealing conditions of censorship clear:

In an old joke from the defunct German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: "Let's establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it's true; if it's written in red ink, it's false." After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: "Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair (Žižek 2002a, 1).

Although the letter is written in blue ink, the worker is still able to get his message across by inscribing the very reference to the code into the encoded message itself. This is precisely what I attempted to achieve on an aesthetic level in my photographs from North Korea. To use lighting as a 'code'; to imply artifice in a photojournalistic context (Ginarte 2017). Photography in circumstances of censorship can thus function in a similar way as the established code in Žižek's joke. Photojournalism contains an embedded code by default; that photographs represent reality and reveal something about the nature of that reality. In a condition of strict state censorship,

this photojournalistic ideal fails, and it can do nothing more than reaffirm a state-endorsed view. By contradicting this ‘default code’ embedded in photojournalism by using pronounced artificial lighting, I was able to signal, within the photographs themselves, that what they depict is a carefully constructed embellishment by the state. These photographs, therefore, produce the effect of truth *independently of their own literal truth*.

Instead of trying to look into a closed communist society, Žižek asks us to turn towards ourselves and question our own conditions of liberal censorship: “we ‘feel free’ because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom” (Žižek 2002a, 2). All the terms we use to express the conditions of our current society and existence, such as ‘democracy’, ‘war on terror’, ‘human rights’, ‘freedom’, ... have become empty terms without meaning. In this sense, concludes Žižek, “our ‘freedoms’ themselves serve to mask and sustain our deeper unfreedom” (Žižek 2002a, 2). Every artist deals with finding personal freedom within the constrictions of firm conventions, and in doing so, reflects on the limitations of the language he or she uses. It’s only by accepting the conventions of language that one can ultimately be free.

In spite of this work being made under strict oversight and conditions of authoritarian censorship, it still depicts people with integrity. They may be victims of an oppressed state, but they are people just like us. It’s precisely this that touches me in these photographs; that even under the most strenuous circumstances, people still appear occupied by the small, daily, unspectacular as we do anywhere else. Our guides never asked to see the photographs I had made. They were by our side in the making of every one of them, so I suppose they were confident nothing compromising had been captured. It was only in their best interest, of course, to make us feel as free as possible, while closely monitoring us at all times (even in the privacy of our hotel rooms and bathrooms).¹² This made it impossible to know if our behavior was condoned or not (in most cases, foreigners are only detained at the airport in the final minutes before departure). The constant anxiety and confusion of life under authoritarianism, writes Osnos in his text for *Red Ink*, is like “living with an ‘anaconda in the chan-

¹² Read more about our personal experience on assignment in North Korea in “Pyongyang’s Anaconda in the Chandelier” by Evan Osnos, *Red Ink* (Brussels: self-published, 2018).

delier’. Operating beneath it, you never know when the snake is going to strike, and so you adjust and worry and carry on” (Osnos 2018). I had never felt so paranoid, anxious and confused, yet I also felt unusually free in my photographic approach. The fact that everything was a potential photograph, and equally important to the work as a whole, gave me the freedom to make pictures I otherwise wouldn’t have. Suddenly, form became more important than content.

It was only later when the series was awarded the Leica Oskar Barnack Award 2018 and exhibited in Seoul, South Korea, that the work began revealing itself differently. Upon closer inspection of some photographs, certain details appeared to tell a different story. The only time when our guides kindly asked us to move on, in an attempt to stop me from photographing, was when I made a picture of a group of people sitting on the ground enjoying a barbecue at the zoo. I had no idea why, until a South Korean exhibition visitor pointed out the curious detail of a Fila logo on a man’s t-shirt. The logo was on the precise spot where all North Koreans are normally required to wear a red pin adorning the founders of the nation. It is the only appearance of a brand, commercial product or advertising in all 1,980 photographs I made in North Korea. Other such ruptures are the subtle rebellious scribbles on a school girl’s ruler or the McDonald’s-like arches of a snack bar sign.

The South Korean audience, it seems, was much less informed about North Korea than we had expected. They scrutinized every image with extreme attentiveness to detail, as if to find some kind of clue or relationship to their own way of life. Many of the visitors remarked how surprised they were to see how well their northern counterparts were doing, and how they were, in many ways, just like themselves. *Red Ink* has since been exhibited in various cities in South Korea, and in 2019 the book was translated and published in Korean. The work is being exhibited in the context of reconciliation attempts and used for teaching South Koreans about the DPRK. A propagandist view by the North has now been appropriated by the South for the strengthening of relations between the two. Kang Chull, the publisher of the Korean version



People enjoying a barbecue at Central Ideals Zoo during National Liberation Day (August 15),
Pyongyang, North Korea, 2017, from the series *Red Ink*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

of *Red Ink*, has been working on realizing an exhibition at the DMZ, potentially for visitors from both sides.

The very nature of photography is its reproducibility, its *simulation* of reality, its seeming realism. But essentially it's only a reflection. A reflection of the heart and mind. If photography is to play a truly influential role in society – and bring about actionable change – does it not have to question its freedom? Does photography have the capability of articulating its very un-freedom?

Looking at other photographs made by professionals that have worked in North Korea, it becomes clear that many of the places we visited reappear, sometimes even identical in composition. But that the same photographs are produced over and over again is not worrying here. All these photographers, including myself, dance to the same tune of censorship. What concerns me most is that there's still so much that cannot be photographed – that cannot be made visible – and therefore, by authority of the state, do not exist.¹³ Is the 'state of photography' in this sense not a reflection of our current state of social and political unfreedom?

¹³ For a relatively recent report on the existence of political prisoner camps, see the Amnesty International reports from 2011 and 2016 (Amnesty International 2011 and 2016).



Music Video at Restaurant, Pyongyang, September 17, 2015, from the series DPR Korea Grand Tour, 2017 © Carl De Keyzer [left]. Lunch on Taedonggang Rainbow Boat with Korean Central TV in the background, Pyongyang, North Korea, 2017, from the series Red Ink, 2018 © Max Pinckers [right]



Metro, Pyongyang, October 9, 2015, from the series DPR Korea Grand Tour, 2017 © Carl De Keyzer [left]. Metro Station Attendant at Yonggwang Station, Pyongyang, North Korea, 2017, from the series Red Ink, 2018 © Max Pinckers [right]

3 TROPES, TEMPLATES AND CONVENTIONS

Photographs don't explain the way the world works; they don't offer reasons or causes; they don't tell us stories with a coherent, or even discernible, beginning, middle, and end. Photographs can't burrow within to reveal the inner dynamics of historic events. And though it's true that photographs document the specific, they sometimes blur—dangerously blur—political and historic distinctions. A photograph of a bombed-out apartment building in Barcelona from 1937 looks much like a photograph of a bombed-out apartment building in Berlin from 1937, which looks much like the bombed-out buildings of Hanoi in 1972, Belgrade in 1999, or Kabul from last week. But only a vulgar reductionist—or an absolute pacifist—would say that these five cities, which is to say these five wars, represent the same circumstances, the same histories, or the same causes. Still, photographs look the same: if you've seen one bombed-out building you've seen them all.

— Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, 2010.

When the Formula Knows the Audience: Tropes and Conventions in Photojournalism

The rhetorical power of photojournalism lies in the emotional response it inspires much more than the facts it attempts to represent. It cultivates an 'emotion economy' with visual tropes as its strongest currency. The function of the photograph as a document or emblem of proof is a folkloric myth. Believing is seeing, not the other way around. Philosopher Bart Verschaffel argues that "photos of the worst thing never become restlessly 'generic'. They keep the particular: they always continue to show *someone's* suffering or death, they reveal what one wants to hide, and are therefore *structurally obscene*" (Verschaffel 2013, 14). Yet in order to diminish the shame of looking, a 'generalization' of the image takes place in the form of tropes and templates in which "news pictures that are exceptional and powerful derive their power surreptitiously from the implicit re-use of old, tried and tested visual formulae, and/or from specific powerful images that they evoke and let resonate in the imagination, and not from the unprocessed, uncensored or objective show of 'raw reality'" (Verschaffel 2013, 16).

Critically analyzing the state of photojournalism has been a driving force behind my work – specifically, the development and prevalence of the industry's staple visual tropes, stereotypes and conventions. In an attempt to move beyond merely repeating the old mantra that photojournalism is in crisis, here I will discuss some of the developments that have informed my own artistic practice and reflect on a growing concern regarding photography's creative and societal status.

Tropes are generic images that a photographer can reasonably rely on as already being present in the audience's minds and expectations in the form of 'ideal types' or narrative stereotypes. In order to maintain an illusion of transparency and uphold its moral codes, photojournalism cannot critically reflect on its own constructions without undermining itself. However, by repeating the same strategies over and over again,

it nonetheless faces a deterioration in its engagement with its subjects and response of its audience. Photojournalism seems to be conventionalizing itself. I have many photojournalist colleagues who are progressive and open-minded about their practice that feel they are stuck in a system that doesn't provide the space for them to work freely.

My initial fascination for visual tropology in photojournalism began sometime in 2010 when I noticed a recurring composition applied in socially engaged photography. Images in which the bottom of the frame contains the forehead of what is usually a child or a young man, eyes peeking over the edge of the frame. The landscape depicted behind the person's head functions as a metaphorical 'mental landscape' of the individual's reality, most commonly in a state of distress, chaos or destruction.

The social ontology of photography no longer has the romantic purpose ascribed to it in the twentieth century; first drafts of history, treasures of affection or any of the other high-sounding social functions. The heroic, classic notion of the photojournalist acting as a brave proxy to bring us instant visually striking moments amid front-line action no longer has exclusivity over the flow of visual information. The most important news events of the twenty-first century have been captured on mobile phones or video cameras by non-professionals – people who just happened to be there – in the form of “poor images” (Steyerl 2009b). Photographs don't become iconic anymore. There are only viral images; low-resolution gifs, video, jpgs, augmented and digital realities that float around the internet before disappearing into virtual oblivion. “Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed,” writes Hito Steyerl, they are thus “popular images – images that can be made and seen by the many. They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd: its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission” (Steyerl 2009b).

For my book *Margins of Excess* (2018), I worked with actors in New York City and Los Angeles to make photographs that could be used as photojournalistic templates – creating a kind of ‘stock photojournalism’ – empty containers for the perfect trope. The result was a form of recycled iconography, employable in any context for any tragic event. The images borrow from established compositional formulas often found in the news media after devastating incidents, such as a school shooting or the aftermath of an explosion. These typically include close-ups of people embracing and portraits of bystanders crying, which are published ad nauseam. Images such as these are commonly made and disseminated because they have the maximum emotional impact on the consumer, who can more comfortably identify with them than images of the actual event. By remaking these photographs with actors, they became professional mourners. Art historian Hans Theys compared their role and impact on the audience – weeping in our stead – to that of an ancient Greek chorus (Theys 2017).



Performance #1 (Los Angeles) [left] and *Performance #7 (New York)* [right], from the series *Margins of Excess*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

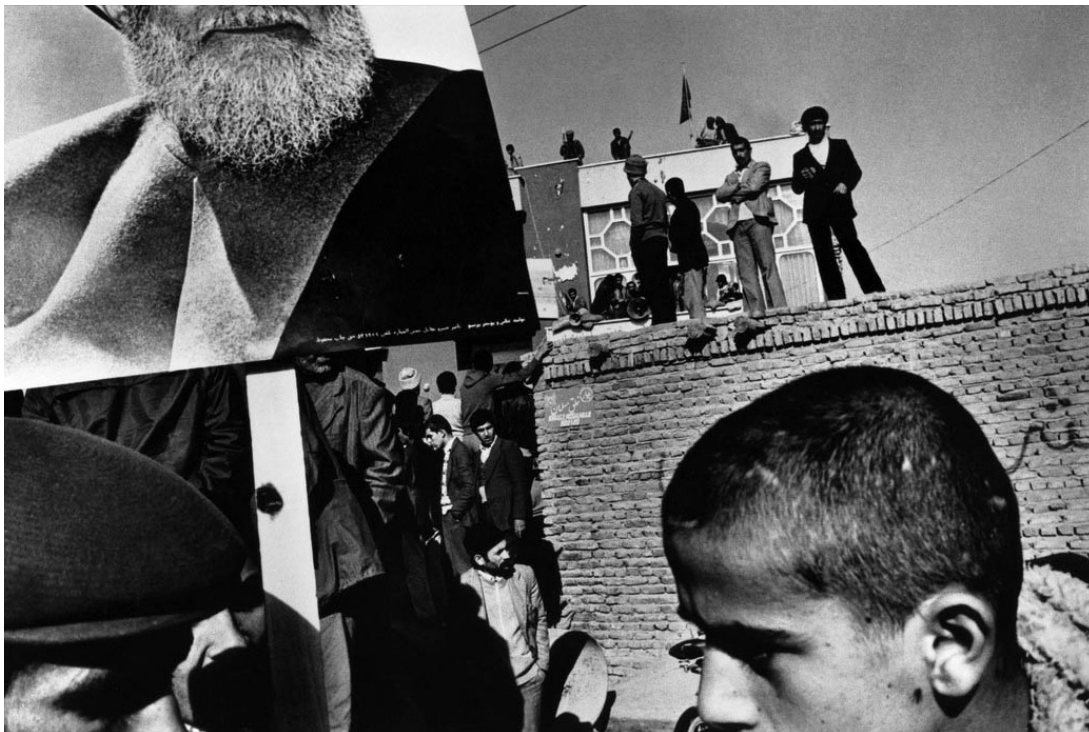
Writing when World War Two was at his doorstep, playwright Bertolt Brecht warned us about the conventionalization of realism and its modes of representation. “The norms of realism must keep responding to the changing conditions of the world,” he proclaimed in 1938, “and must never defer unthinkingly to received ideas about how the world is to be understood or represented”



© Nikos Economopoulos/Magnum Photos



© Andrea Hoyer



Demonstration in favor of the leading opposition figure Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari. Tabriz, Iran, 1980

© Gilles Peress/Magnum Photos



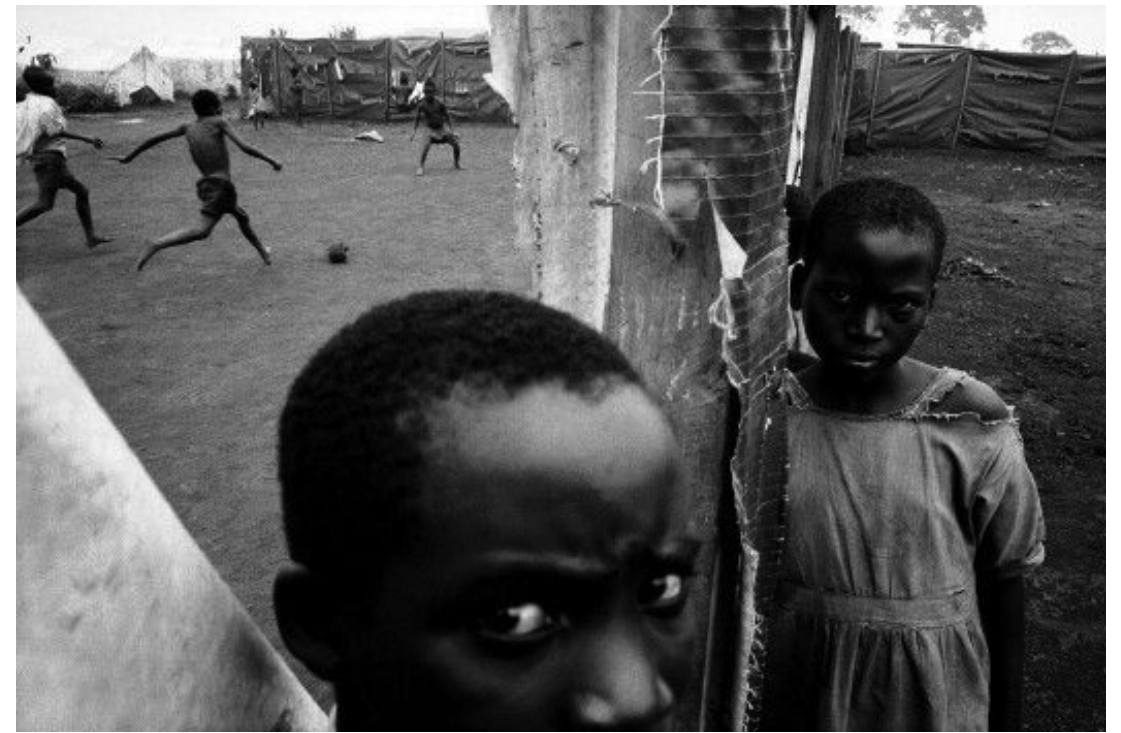
Ruins of central Grozny, Chechnya, 1996 © James Nachtwey



Refugee camp of "Médecins sans frontières" Doctors without Borders. Young member of UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army), Albania. 1999 © Nikos Economopoulos/Magnum Photos



Orphans, Sarajevo, 1993 © Gilles Peress/Magnum Photos



Rwandan refugees, Benaco, Tanzania, 1995 © Eli Reed/Magnum Photos

(Brecht 1938, 81). Today, Brecht's warning shot across the bows seems more relevant than ever. During these times of 'post-truth', 'deep-fakes', 'alternative facts' and 'fake news', we seem to have lost a shared consensus about a 'frame of realism' on which we can all agree.

Filmmaker Adam Curtis has defined this as the 'agreed frame of realism'. One catalyst for change is that artists break the rules. Realism is never absolute and always a critique on a previous form of realism. Curtis argues that fundamentally it is the task of documentary makers to be critical about the agreed and accepted idea of how reality is portrayed to continuously find new forms of realism that are symbolic of the times. Every age has a method of reporting reality to the masses. In the Middle Ages, it was painting; in the first decades of lens-based documentary, it was staged photography and filmic reenactments. The twentieth century saw lightweight cameras, such as the Leica, give rise to a new ethos of authenticity – one that is still awkwardly maintained today. The recurring question these image-making media bring to light is not whether reality itself exists, but whether the audience agrees that what they

see is an honest attempt to represent reality. Speaking to an audience of documentarians at Sheffield Doc/Fest in 2007, Curtis explains that “our so-called realism today is fundamentally born out of a political age, an age in which people believed that politics could not only understand the world, but could also change it. Documentaries were born out of that political ideal. This agreed frame of realism in today’s world has deteriorated to the extent that there is no general consensus about what’s real, what’s fiction, half-truth or opinion” (Curtis 2007).

W. J. T. Mitchell, often considered the founder of visual culture studies, has defined this epoch as an ‘infodemic’ governed by confusion, uncertainty, ‘structural virality’ and overwhelming amounts of information. People no longer trust finger-wagging, expository documentary forms that supposedly present them with facts. With hyper-individualism as the central ideology of our time, the only reality that people seem to trust today is their own inner feelings. But the real question is: “is what we feel really real?” (Curtis 2007).

Although the so-called ‘iconomy’ of crisis photography is undergoing a crisis itself, it nonetheless maintains its position of authority and remains a strong currency in today’s visual economy. As a reaction to a new and disruptive online visual culture, traditional media seems to be holding on to simplistic, conservative narrative formats that are easily digestible. Amidst uncertainty and confusion, the real underlying concern rests in the power structures upholding conventional ‘worldviews’ in the form of outdated visual clichés. Caught up in the predominant ideology of neoliberal market capitalism, photojournalism strives for an efficient, perfected and normalized format based on the established status quo. Images produced by photojournalists are visual currency in an attention economy that thrives on emotionally charged, singular, powerful and arresting photos that seize the consumer’s attention. These images live in an environment dependent on advertising for their survival – eyeballs and mouse clicks equating to dollar signs and price charts. Unlike photojournalism, when we are confronted with advertising, we usually know we are being sold something. The codes of advertising are no se-

cret – its subversive seduction still effective regardless – models gazing directly back at us, broad glowing smiles, subliminal phallic symbols, wristwatches set at ten past ten, and so on. Consumer engagement functions in a very similar way when it comes to photojournalism, yet its value lies in eliciting an emotional response beyond that of desire.

The documentary filmmaker Errol Morris claimed, “it is often said that seeing is believing. But we do not form our beliefs on the basis of what we see; rather, what we see is often determined by our beliefs” (Morris 2014, 93). Studies have shown that communication, in many instances, does not have an informative function but a ritualistic one (Decreus 2017). Consumers of news media search for information that reconfirms their worldview as reconstructions of a world they can identify with and tells them something about who they already are. This is where photojournalism truly thrives, not in revealing the complexity of a given problem, but by provoking an emotional response based on powerful visual cues prescribed by a success formula. “Photographs attract false beliefs the way flypaper attracts flies [...] photography allows us to uncritically think” (Morris 2014, 92).

Just as many of today’s commodities are deprived of their substance – coffee without caffeine, alcohol-free beer, butter without fat, vegetarian meat – with only a simulation remaining, so have documentary photography, especially its cousin photojournalism, become dominated by easily recognizable ‘templates’. They cast the world in the same mold over and over again and, instead of being avoided, they are celebrated and awarded. You know them, perhaps unconsciously or by some kind of deeply engrained affinity. Pietà figures, and toys or shoes amongst the rubble, for example, bodies emerging from the smoke, wailing women, faces half-submerged in water, eyebrows peeking over the bottom of the frame, abandoned children, dazed soldiers, black silhouettes against brightly lit landscapes, hands displaying objects of interest, kids jumping in the water, a bomb’s distant smoke cloud rising above a city, close-ups of emotionally distressed people, shots through car windows or other ‘frames within the frame’. The list goes on. Here, the importance of conformist aesthetics

precedes the claim of the subjects depicted in them. The real danger is when photographic conventions become self-referential instead of self-reflexive; when visual tropes are arbitrarily applied to any subject in any given situation, simply because of their persuasive visual rhetoric.

Errol Morris pointed out the ubiquity of children's toys in war photographs by Associated Press (AP) and Reuters photographers in Lebanon. In a 2007 interview with AP photographer Ben Curtis, who made a photograph of a Mickey Mouse toy amidst the ruins of a house demolished by Israeli airstrikes, Morris argues that this kind of image works because it's vague: "Its vagueness allows us to imagine all kinds of diverse scenarios, depending on our political sensibilities" (Morris 2014, 193). The crime isn't necessarily posing an image by adding a toy to the scene, but rather using particular photographs to advance a political view (both opposing sides using the same photograph). They specifically target the viewers' empathy by creating a dramatic effect. Tropes such as the children's toy amongst rubble after a bombing are ideologically saturated and often function as disguised propaganda.

Why have such tropes become so prevalent in photojournalism, and what implications does this have? In their 2013 paper "Awards, archives, and affects: tropes in the World Press Photo contest 2009–11," scholars Marta Zarzycka and Martijn Kleppe argue that tropes such as 'the mourner', 'the protester' or 'the survivor amidst chaos and ruins' organize a process of a generic understanding of war, disaster and atrocity. The presence of implicit conventions becomes evident when looking at the Amsterdam-based non-profit organization World Press Photo, that hosts one of the most prolific and celebrated photography awards in the industry, dating back to 1955. With an annual exhibition presenting the winning images, seen by over three million people in forty-five different countries, and 45,000 copies of the catalog circulate in seven languages. Evidence of the increasingly significant role played by photography contests such as Visa pour l'image, Pictures of the Year International, the Pulitzer Prize in Photography or the Sony Photography Award is the increasingly large audiences and abundant

media attention, functioning as showcases of professional press coverage of war, disaster and poverty. Here, the printed newspaper pages give way to images divorced from the comprehensive stories to which they pertain, primarily appreciated for their aesthetic qualities and exhibited on gallery walls, posters, billboards and albums (Zarzycka and Kleppe 2013).

Severed from their news context and journalistic immediacy, a shift in meaning occurs when a photograph moves from its original news-environment into the award, festival, gallery or museum space. These photographs are no longer visual counterparts in a greater journalistic context accompanied by captions and articles but become mere aesthetic objects admired for their technical and formal qualities. Their journalistic quality reduced to a visual spectacle. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites point out that the iconic photograph is "the zenith of photojournalistic achievement" (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 27). As the molders of opinion, when particular images become iconic, they are always politically exploited to push ideological agendas. When photojournalists attempt at reclaiming their images in the form of gallery exhibitions or coffee-table books, it more often than not dwindles into mere pseudo-moralistic sensationalism of a universalized worldview by piecing one powerful single image to another; the 'stone-throwing Palestinian' along with the 'mourning mother with child'. Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin describe their experience of enduring a "barrage of photographic clichés over a period of seven days and nights" as jury members for the 2008 World Press Photo contest:

Flicking through the 81,000 images originally submitted a sense of déjà vu is inevitable. Again and again similar images are repeated, with only the actors and settings changing. Grieving mothers, charred human remains, sun sets, women giving birth, children playing with toy guns, cock fights, bull fights, Havana street scenes, reflections in puddles, reflections in windows, football posts in unlikely locations, swaddled babies, portraits taken through mosquito nets, needles in junkies' arms, derelict toilets, Palestinian boys throwing stones, contorted Chinese gymnasts, Karl Lagerfeld, models

preparing for fashion shows backstage, painted faces, bodies covered in mud, monks smoking cigarettes, pigeons silhouetted against the sky, Indian Sardus, children leaping into rivers, pigs being slaughtered (Broomberg and Chanarin 2008).

That year Tim Hetherington's photograph of a dazed US soldier in Afghanistan was awarded the main prize, reconfirming this pattern: a painterly image clearly echoing previously celebrated photographs of dazed US soldiers, such as Don McCullin's *Shellshocked US Marine* (1968) or Larry Burrows' *Reaching Out* (1966). Not only is this archetype deeply embedded in our visual memory through photographs, but it is also predominant in the representation of war and conflict according to the aesthetic and narrative codes of Hollywood cinema and American popular culture, as I demonstrated earlier in this book. Hetherington, who took this photograph, later told Broomberg & Chanarin the following anecdote: his photographs were first published by *Vanity Fair* who also happened to be running a feature on Francis Ford Coppola in the same edition. Both Hetherington's photographs from Afghanistan and stills from Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* were being printed on the office Xerox machine when a staff writer came to collect the fictional stills and accidentally walked away with the real thing.

Indeed, it's the photojournalist's intention to be critical of war and cultivate anti-war sentiments by creating awareness and engagement through their work. However, this claim rarely resonates in the photographs themselves, which have the tendency to fuel the glorification and beautification of war only to be re-consumed by the West according to its own deeply engrained imperialist gaze. Wilco Versteeg has argued that even an "increased knowledge of these codes, steeped, if one likes, in colonial gazes, has done little to change them, and they've thus remained shockingly consistent since, at least, the 1970s: dead Westerners aren't shown; dead Arab men make up a large proportion of our daily war diet; Africans are very often shown in groups and never as individuals; white people are most often portrayed as calm and composed, even when shown as victims of terror" (Versteeg 2020b). Journalism is not simply in-

vestigative reporting for the sake of finding truth; it's a capitalist enterprise with a market and consumers to with it must cater (Tuosto 2008). Reflecting on their experience as jury members, Broomberg and Chanarin ask: "Do we even need to be producing these images any more? Do we need to be looking at them? We have enough of an image archive within our heads to be able to conjure up a representation of any manner of pleasure or horror. Does the photographic image even have a role to play any more?" (Broomberg and Chanarin 2008). So, where do we go from here? What kinds of images are still needed, and how can engaging with them contribute to a more nuanced and impactful understanding of the world?



Shellshocked US Marine, The Battle of Hue, 1968 © Don McCullin [left]. *American soldier resting at bunker, Korengal Valley, Afghanistan, September 16, 2007* © Tim Hetherington [right]

¹⁴ I will expand on postmodern photography criticism in the chapter *Postmodernist Critique: Photojournalism as the Veneer of Social Concern* (pp. 152 – 162).

As twentieth-century postmodernist photography criticism has long-established, feelings of empathy, grief, guilt and isolation ultimately relieve us as viewers from the burden of complicity when looking at photographs of crisis.¹⁴ They are assumed to be redemptive, not for the person in the image, but for the viewer. Martha Rosler famously dismissed traditional photojournalism as the "veneer of social concern" (Rosler 1981, 306). But when it comes to repetitive visual templates, this idea is expanded further. It is no longer about triggering a genuine empathy reaction, but, like the tropes themselves, it is now merely about generating an automated and coded response. Is this not an 'illusion of empathy' rather than

A protester takes a knee in front of San Jose Police officers during a protest on East Santa Clara Street in San Jose, California, May 29, 2020, after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis © Dai Sugano/The Mercury News



Protestor Ieshia Evans is detained by law enforcement near the headquarters of the Baton Rouge Police Department in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, July 9, 2016 © Jonathan Bachman/Reuters



An American young girl, Jan Rose Kasmir, confronts the American National Guard outside the Pentagon during the 1967 anti-Vietnam march. This march helped to turn public opinion against the US war in Vietnam. Washington, DC, 1967 © Marc Riboud/Magnum Photos



an authentic sense of compassion, even if only directed at oneself? Like canned laughter on a sitcom, doesn't a set of embedded signals or visual cues in a photograph simply elicit a response without the need to expend any real effort? The essence, or content, of what is supposed to create engagement with viewers intellectually and emotionally, is bypassed. A shortcut – 'photojournalism lite'. Photojournalistic templates create a response because the audience is hard-wired to react in a certain way – not because the audience knows the formula, but because the formula knows the audience. Why? Because this is far easier, less challenging and more emotionally economical. What if photojournalism was to eventually become entirely formulaic? A set of empty codes that elicit empty, automated responses. Would this be a total disregard for genuine political struggles, and create an artistic vacuum – in a desert of visual redundancy – populated by an indifferent, apathetic audience?

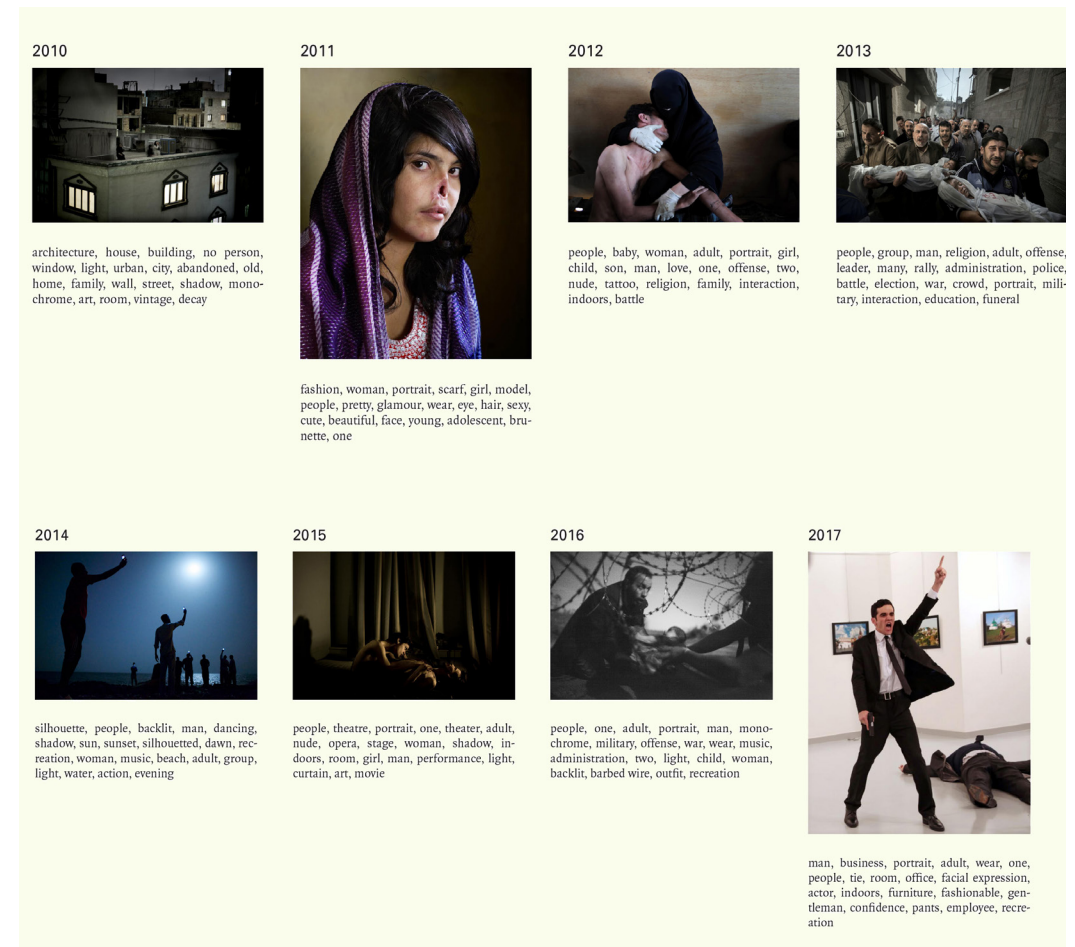
By repeating the same photographs, we are doomed to repeat the same problems. In response to Jonathan Bachman's 2016 photograph of a Black Lives Matter protest echoing Marc Riboud's iconic anti-war image, photography critic Brad Feuerhelm writes that "we are pilfering images of iconography-images that transcend a singular experience into mass understanding, but we are doing so with a zombie prescription that doles out its numbing elixir in repetition. With this repetition comes the sincere weight of repeating the past by welcoming ourselves into the fold of the ineffective" (Feuerhelm 2016). Repetition, familiarity and the idea of the 'sequel' are dangerously at work here. Sadly, we are all too familiar with and readily waiting for the next similar event to occur – one that will be accepted and digested just as easily as the previous. "Proxy images and proxy sequels" such as these, justly concludes Feuerhelm, "are destroying our way of interpreting and understanding real first-hand struggle. They are beating us into submission and worse, we are hailing them as prize-worthy" (Feuerhelm 2016). Four years later, another proxy image to another proxy sequel went viral on social media and bounced around the news echo chamber, that of *The Mercury News* photojournalist Dai Sugano, who photographed a young Black woman peacefully confronting riot police

during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's brutal murder by police.

The dangers of passively conforming to such aesthetic conventions and formulaic choices of subject matter were the inspiration behind *Trophy Camera v0.9*, a collaborative project with media artist Dries Depoorter. With no viewfinder or screen, this fully functioning camera is programmed to recognize, take and save only award-winning photos. It contains a computer which runs on an artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm, trained on all contest-winning images from 1955 to 2017 (main prize category, single image). Using computer vision software, the AI camera instantly judges the photos it takes, comparing them to a dataset comprising hundreds of assigned labels. The most recurring (and thus highest rated) labels being 'people', 'war' and 'military'. When a photograph is taken, the camera attributes a correlation value to the newly produced image, giving it a percentage score based on the chance it has to win the award. If the score is above ninety percent, the camera automatically uploads the image to the dedicated website (<http://trophy.camera>), but anything less is immediately deleted (in 2019, World Press Photo appropriated



Trophy Camera v0.9, 2017, Raspberry Pi Zero W, Full HD camera module for RaspberryPi, 5000mAh powerbank, monochrome 128 x 32 SPI OLED graphic display, plastic casing, 115 x 85 x 191 mm © Dries Depoorter and Max Pinckers. Permanent collection FOMU Antwerp, Belgium



Labels assigned by deep learning-based image recognition algorithms, World Press Photo Award: Photo of the Year, 1955-2017 (excerpt) © Dries Depoorter and Max Pinckers

this criticism by exhibiting it in one of their very own traveling exhibitions). Digital curator at Fotomuseum Winterthur Marco De Mutiis described *Trophy Camera v0.9* as follows:

The work asks us to think of a potential photographer-less world, in which photojournalistic tropes and photographic "success" can be defined and outsourced to machines. It also asks if the automation of such tropes is not already embedded in our current way of looking at the world through pictures that relentlessly use exploitative images of the innocent child and the mourning woman, trans-

lating complex themes of conflict and violence into simplistic and catchy symbols. It reminds us that awards and grants are already defining what a winning image is, through predefined cultural lenses and biases, while likes and followers are already algorithmic metrics that are implementing a hierarchy of success within the economy of attention on corporate online platforms of exchange (De Mutiis 2021).

Photojournalism itself is stuck in conventions, trapped in a construct that it cannot tear away from because it always *frames* something within a form of realism that is constricted and ideologically defined. Through my work, I attempt to undermine photography's authoritative state and its claim to knowledge and truth by rejecting any singular definition of either realism or reality. By challenging our preconceptions and questioning the mechanisms that define what can and should be perceived, seen, heard, said, thought, made or done, I embrace documentary's blind spots and openly let imagination and speculation fill them in. Instead of obsessively policing its moral, ethical and creative rules and regulations in order to maintain its objectivity and integrity, the documentary photography industry should rather look at how it is continually repeating history as



Trophy Camera v0.9 interactive output from the exhibition *mixing / Memory and desire*, BredaPhoto, 2017 © Dries Depoorter and Max Pinckers

a self-fulfilling prophecy in the form of visual tropes, stereotypes and clichés. In order to break this mold, it should be more critical of its own limitations by embracing today's complexity, uncertainty and messiness.

Icons as Perfect Ideological Containers

In 2015 I was invited by the EU-Fest Japan Committee and the European Capital of Culture to contribute to the long-term photography initiative *European Eyes on Japan / Japan Today*. Since 1999, the organization has been inviting European photographers to Japan, each time assigned to work in one of the 47 prefectures. The initiative will end when all prefectures have been covered. I was assigned to Saitama prefecture, a commuter zone north of Tokyo.

Shortly after I arrived, I met with Secretary-General Shuji Kogi of the Committee. Our conversation gravitated towards various aspects of Japanese traditions and the cultural exchange with Europe when Mr. Kogi remarked that Japanese culture had lost its fundamental essence. That bonsai, he exemplified, are no longer perceived as an ancient traditional art, but can now be bought in Ikea's around the world. This led me to question my own role in promoting Japanese culture towards Europe, and how my photographs too, would be exported as a cultural commodity by the European Capital of Culture. Some photographs from this series are now in the permanent art collection of Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, exhibited in embassy's and displayed at cultural events organized in the presence of politicians.

In his book *Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival* (2014), David Pilling writes that "the idea of thinking about Japan as different from anywhere else is seductive. Yet there are many reasons to reject this notion. Those feelings that Japan moves to rhythms incomprehensible to most outsiders have reinforced an almost morbid sense of separateness." Although if we look closer,

“much of Japan’s supposed ‘essence’ turns out to be a relatively modern distillation,” manufactured in the interests of nation-building and maintaining political power in the region (Pilling 2014, 46). A deliberate construction towards a Western audience that roots itself in traditional Japanese culture to establish an idea of ‘Japaneseness’; an identity which separated them from the rest of Asia, but has now lost most of its original meaning.

The image of Japan, saturated by clichés of an impenetrable and technologically advanced island nation with very defined cultural symbols – sumo, kimono, sushi, fugu fish, Yakuza, salarymen, bonsai, geisha, video games and cosplay – developed with early post-war anthropological literature such as Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), which was commissioned by the US Office of War Information during the occupation. An exoticized Western viewpoint with such influence, it affected Japanese conceptions of themselves after its Japanese translation became a bestseller since 1948. In a sense, the Japanese created their cultural self-image based on a Western colonial fantasy, which they then vigorously promoted in order to establish themselves as a powerful and advanced Westernized nation towards the rest of Southeast Asia.

I observed that none of these popular cultural signifiers seemed to be present in Saitama. Everything was merely represented as a cultural token, in the form of images, representations, in popular culture, but never in real life. This led me to the idea of visually constructing these cultural stereotypes as staged photographs, influenced by existing images created by Western artists that preceded me, such as Jeff Wall’s *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Hokusai) (1993) or Werner Bischof’s *Japan* (1954). The work brings together images that represent Japan from an outsider’s perspective by its cultural emblems. An “encyclopedia of Japanese photography tropes,” as Colin Pantall defined it (Pantall 2016). I projected my own ‘Japanese fantasy’ into the work. The title, *Two Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself*, is a reference to an installation by American postminimalist artist Richard Tuttle in which an arrangement of strings is placed on a rectangular floor based on *Ryoan-ji*, a Japanese garden containing fifteen stones positioned in such a way that it’s impossible to see all of them at once from inside the garden.

Japan’s pursuit towards Westernization is epitomized in the social and cultural phenomenon known as *nenmatsu-no daiku* (年末の第九(ねんまつのだい)), meaning ‘year-end Ninth’. An annual end-of-year concert tradition in which ten thousand Japanese musicians perform Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* (in Japan, the German composer’s last symphony is nicknamed “Daiku” or “Big Nine”). A tradition that began with First World War German prisoners of war forming an orchestra in a Japanese detention camp (known as the Bando orchestra, after the name of the camp in Naruto, Tokushima Prefecture). The *Ninth Symphony* (1824) was performed regularly inside the camp on a makeshift stage. After the war ended, the



Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Reynders in front of *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Jeff Wall and Hokusai), from the series *Two Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself* (2015), *Art & Diplomacy*, Egmont Palace, organized by the Belgian Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs, 2019

former POWs performed the *Ninth* outside Bando’s walls for an audience in Naruto and in 1927 the piece was first conducted in its entirety by the Shin Kokyo Gakudan (or New Symphony Orchestra), now known as the NHK Symphony Orchestra (Lynnsay 2015).

In *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (2012) Slavoj Žižek interprets Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, also known as *Ode to Joy*, as a ‘perfect ideological container’. A universally adaptable empty shell into which any standardized idea fits, and can be used by opposing political movements in order to reach the same goal. In Nazi Germany,

it was widely used to celebrate significant public events, performed in 1938 as the climax of the *Reichsmusikstage*, the Nazi music festival, and was later used to celebrate Hitler's birthday. In the Soviet Union *Ode to Joy* was performed as a communist anthem. In China, during the Great Cultural Revolution, when almost all Western music was prohibited, the *Ninth Symphony* was allowed to be played as a piece of progressive bourgeois music. In extreme-right South Rhodesia, before it became Zimbabwe, when it proclaimed independence to postpone the abolishment of apartheid, the melody of *Ode to Joy* (with changed lyrics) was the country's national anthem. At the opposite end, *Ode to Joy* was a favorite of ultra-leftist Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman in Peru. When Germany was still divided, and their team appeared together at the Olympics, *Ode to Joy* was played at the medal ceremony instead of either West or East Germany's anthems. And in 1972 the *Ninth Symphony* became the unofficial 'Anthem of Europe', now the European Union. One can imagine some kind of "perverse scene of universal fraternity, where Osama Bin Laden is embracing president Bush; Saddam is embracing Fidel Castro; white racist is embracing Mao Zedong, and all together they sing *Ode to Joy*" (Fiennes 2012).

This reminds us of examples where the same photographs are used in totally different circumstances or as propaganda by opposing sides. Without captions, a photograph can easily be used and reused, as it was during the fight between Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the Balkan wars as noticed by Susan Sontag, "the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings" (Sontag 2003, 9). Children are often put forward in photographs as the embodiment of ultimate victimhood. The suffering of innocent people touches us most when we see affected children. We haven't been spared from seeing countless such images. In 2015 the photograph of a small boy protectively hugging his baby sister became the emblem of the 7.8 earthquake in Nepal. The two children seem desperate, dirty and alone on a street curb. It later turned out that this image was not made in Nepal but in the northern Ha Giang province of Vietnam a decade earlier (Bennett 2015). The Vietnamese photographer Na Son Nguyen told the *BBC* in an interview that he photographed the children while passing



Can Ty, Vietnam, October 2007 © Na Son Nguyen

through a village, and that "the little girl, probably two years old, cried in the presence of a stranger so the boy, who was maybe three years old or so, hugged his sister to comfort her" (Nga 2015) (just like Steve McCurry's *Afghan Girl* who's frightful gaze reflected his intimidating presence). The photo has since lived a life of its own, from being captioned as 'two Burmese orphans' to 'victims of the civil war in Syria' and illustrating an earthquake in Nepal.

The "codes of representing war, conflict and crisis are deeply steeped in a fear of seeing ourselves: it is, almost always, the other who undergoes the humiliations of wars, hunger, terrorism and epidemics," writes Wilco Versteeg in a reflection on the visual reporting of the Coronavirus outbreak in 2020 (Versteeg 2020b). Not only was the visual representation of this crisis limited to the invisible (desolate streets, empty supermarket shelves, medical workers in hazmat suits, etc.), it was a confrontation of the West's inability to see itself as a victim, creating a disarray of visual anxiety and confusion. There were many instances on social media and official news channels of so-called 'recycled photography'; where photographs were published and shared that turned out to be from entirely unrelated events, such as rows of hospital beds out in the open streets in Croatia in the aftermath of the March 22 earthquake that were mistaken for overflowing Italian hospitals at the peak of the virus

outbreak (Patel 2020).

Reflecting on the visual representation of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fred Ritchin points out that, like with every important news event, most photographs are not actual ‘coverage’ but consist of “facile signifiers,” such as face masks or thermometer guns. As an experienced photo editor, Ritchin argues that the newsroom often struggles with making nuanced decisions when under pressure to keep up with the never-ending news cycle. People making the decisions about which pictures to publish don’t have time to reflect on the situation and the possible meanings an image may have – or even their veracity – they just “plug imagery into a pre-determined template that limits their choices” (Darrach 2020). The initial images that were distributed when the outbreak was confined to China, for instance, were Chinese people wearing face masks. Ritchin writes that this reminded him of the orange jumpsuits issued to detainees at Guantanamo: “Once you saw the orange jumpsuits, the people wearing them are dehumanized, thought of as guilty, although most were later released. The orange jumpsuit signified that they’re different from us, there is an enemy out there” (Darrach 2020). The signifier becomes the code, but the essence of the situation is absent. Photojournalism seems to have given up on telling a more in-depth story, and the viewer has no interest in engagement anymore. It’s not just about context and the lack of it, but about the *types* of images produced and the ease at which they are consumed, shared and published.

The vital lesson Žižek teaches us with the example of Beethoven’s *Ninth* is that this is how every ideology has to work. It’s never just meaning. It always also has to work as an ‘empty container’, open to all possible meanings. But of course, this neutrality of a frame is never as neutral as it appears. In the middle of the piece, at bar 331, the tone suddenly changes into what sounds like a chaotic “carnavalesque parade, a mocking spectacle.”

Contrary to the tone of sublime beauty and universal fraternity, the theme is repeated but in a vulgar *marcia turca* (or Turkish march) style. Žižek reads this musical revolt as a “return of the repressed,” a subversive critique of ideology. The *marcia turca*, he claims, is a “return to normality that



Flag Raising on Iwo Jima, 1945 © Joe Rosenthal



Kenya’s monument of independence at Uhuru Gardens Memorial Park, erected in 1973 (detail), 2015 © Henri Wanjoki commissioned by Max Pinckers & Michiel Burger

cuts short the display of preposterous portentousness of what precedes it” (Žižek 2007). What Beethoven proposes with this intervention are the limitations of universalized ideology. The second part tells the true story; that which disturbs the official ideology and the failure of that official ideology to constrain it and tame it.

Photojournalism today, especially the iconic photo-

Koyunoren, Turkey. Kezban Özer finds her five children who were buried alive after a magnitude 7.1 earthquake struck her village. The earthquake occurred at 5 a.m., when she and her husband were milking the cows and their children were sleeping. The earthquake destroyed 147 villages in the region and killed 1,336 people. World Press Photo of the Year, 1984 © Mustafa Bozdemir/Hürriyet Gazetesi



Family and neighbors mourn the death of Nasimi Elshani, who was killed during a protest against the Yugoslavian government's decision to abolish the autonomy of Kosovo, January 28, 1990. World Press Photo, Spot News, Singles, 1st prize, 1991 © Georges Méryllon/Gamma



A woman cries outside the Zmirli Hospital, where the dead and wounded were taken after a massacre in Bentalha. Mass killings and bomb blasts dominated life since the army annulled the results of the 1992 elections, in which it appeared the Muslim fundamentalist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, would win. The conflict had claimed more than 60,000 lives in five years. World Press Photo of the Year, 1998 © Hocine Zaorar/AFP



graph, functions in a similar way as Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* – as 'empty signifiers'. The informative, ideologically conformist news photograph does not contain a second segment of subversive critique, no *marcia turca*. Whereas the documentary gesture, departing from a principle of self-reflexivity, does include this element of subversive critique of ideology. It explicitly contradicts its own premise of authority within itself and can only speak of reliability, not truth. I will further expand on this thought in the chapter *The Documentary Gesture or Attitude: (Un)defining a Documentary Tradition* (pp. 134 – 151).

Christian Iconography: Redemption, Not for the Victim but for the Viewer

I would willingly change every painting of Jesus Christ for one snapshot!
– George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

The specter of Jesus Christ is not uncommon in photojournalism, his figure resurrects throughout photography's history as one of grief, empathy and guilt. The Hellenistic pathos formula of the beautiful death – heroic victimhood – forms a central theme throughout Western art history. The crucifixion and the Virgin Mary with child are the most common icons, expressing the intimate relationship between victimhood and the rhetorical power of the image. Replicating such poses have proven to be some of the most effective for achieving successful *Trophy Camera v0.9* photos, which reiterate the predominantly Western, Judeo-Christian framing of photojournalism's worldview. The process of lamenting the dead is the most recurring motif amongst World Press Photo awards, with the first prize winners of 1964, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2003, 2005 and 2013 all depicting the familiar scene of people wailing, weeping and crying over the dead.

“In Western culture, the responsibility of remembering the dead, formerly assigned to the mourning rituals

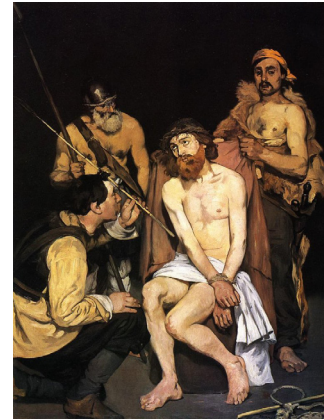
of lamenting, signing, screaming, wailing and silence, has been gradually replaced by portrait photographs of the deceased performing the function of rites of passage,” writes Marta Zarzycka (Zarzycka and Papenburg 2013, 45). The ‘aural’ quality of mourning has been replaced by the visual, within the determined tradition of the Madonna or Virgin and Child. Hocine Zaorar’s 1997 photograph is exemplary. Its caption reads: “A woman cries outside the Zmirli Hospital, where the dead and wounded were taken after a massacre in Bentalha. Mass killings and bomb blasts dominated life since the army annulled the results of the 1992 elections, in which it appeared the Muslim fundamentalist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, would win. The conflict had claimed more



A boy experiencing severe pain from TB meningitis is comforted by his mother at Svay Rieng Provincial Hospital, Svay Rieng, Cambodia. Family members provide much of the personal care at hospitals in the developing world, 2008
© James Nachtwey/VII

than 60,000 lives in five years” (World Press Photo, n.d.). Gaining widespread popularity and utilized for swaying public opinion, the image was quickly dubbed the Bentalha Madonna or Algerian Pietà. In an ironic turn of events, the woman represented in the photograph, Umm Saad, objected to being identified with Christian symbols and sued Agence France-Presse for defamation and the exploitation of human suffering (Zarzycka and Papenburg 2013, 45).

A similar debate on the use of religious symbolism in photojournalism was fueled by Catalan freelance photojournalist Samuel Aranda’s 2011 World Press Photo of the Year. Made in Yemen and first published in the *Times*,



Edouard Manet, *The Mocking of Christ*, 1865, 190.8 x 148.3 cm, oil on canvas

the photograph is of a figure, supposedly a woman, in a black *niqāb* delicately embracing a topless young man in a seated position, back against the wall on the ground. The circumstances are unclear, and there are barely any details that can help the viewer recognize what is happening, except for the white latex gloves worn by the woman that seem to be out of place somehow, arousing curiosity – the image’s punctum? The photograph has all the qualities of a potential icon. Both the woman and the man’s face are obscured and cannot be identified, creating a universal humanist appeal. The scene clearly resonates with the *pietà*, an instantly recognizable ‘timeless’ trope of a woman cradling a bare-chested man that could be interpreted as the self-sacrifice of a martyr. The elegant composition, with its pale color palette and static figures, doesn’t show the heat of warfare but the relatively calm aftermath. At first, Aranda did not get the names of the duo in his photograph, but later went back to meet them (the image was first published anonymously due to security concerns because Aranda was the only Western photographer working in Yemen at the time): Fatima Al-Qaws holding her wounded son, doctor and activist Zayed Al-Qaws. Chosen from more than 100,000 submissions to the World Press Photo contest by over five thousand professional photographers, this image, according to the jury, represented the Arab uprisings as a unique, intimate moment.

Photojournalists seem to be bound to a form of ‘cul-

ture grammar’ that arises from, and perpetuates this enduring and repetitive symbolic system (Jurich 2013b, 8). Limited and formulaic, this generates a lasting impact on public memory. When asked by the British Journal of Photography if the resemblance to the pietà was deliberate, Aranda responded: “It was not intentional... You know how it is in these situations – it was really tense



Fatima al-Qaws cradles her 18-year-old son Zayed, who is suffering from the effects of tear gas after participating in a street demonstration in Sanaa, Yemen, 2011 © Samuel Aranda

and chaotic. In these situations, you just shoot photos. It is what it is. We’re just photographers. I consider myself just a worker. I just witness what is going on in front of me, and shoot photos. That’s it” (Laurent 2012).

“This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.”

– George W. Bush, Sunday, September 16, 2001.

Looking at the history of awarded photojournalism, it’s no surprise that Aranda consciously or unconsciously created this picture. But it becomes especially problematic when codes from Judeo-Christian iconography are applied in photojournalism to document the disruption caused by a contemporary Christian crusade. By assim-

lating the stereotypical burka-clad woman to deeply engrained Judeo-Christian imagery, it encourages to view Muslims as Christians rather than expanding their view of the world. Political theorist James Johnson writes that “we here in the west are encouraged not to appreciate the realities and particularities of another world. Instead we are encouraged to see others as essentially just like ‘we Christians’” (Johnson 2012). Jörg Colberg went so far as to call this “Western World Press Photo” (Colberg 2012a). In addition, Susie Linfield has argued that the photo reinforces women’s traditional gender roles as silenced and depoliticized caregivers playing a non-active role in the uprising. Because of its use of the Madonna and Child trope, the photo is only able to generate a limited response. What else are we as viewers asked to feel but pity? Or is this rather a plea to see human suffering as independent of religion? Critical theorist Sarah Sentilles clarifies that empathy is the central requirement for ethical action. When contemplating Christological images, there is indeed a presumed connection between the experience of looking at violence and feeling empathy. However, she points out, “such feeling is assumed to be redemptive, not for the person in the image, but for the viewer” (Sentilles, 2008). The beneficent action of the empathy generated by such photographs is thus directed towards the viewer, not the victim in the photograph.

Even though photos such as these create a one dimensional understanding of conflicts with reductive labels like the ‘Arab Spring’, it’s important to note that the war in Yemen has very much been a ‘forgotten’ and underreported conflict that since 2011 hasn’t received the news coverage it deserves. Aranda’s photograph at least created some social awareness. The image is also not a cliché of protestors versus military, democracy versus dictatorship, toppling statues or looting, but of a tender moment with emotional sensitivity. And above all, it has created important discussions on the ongoing friction between aesthetics and representation.

In a *BBC* feature a year later, Fatima and Zayed Al-Qaws expressed their gratitude of being featured in the photo that has traveled around the world for thousands to see: “It makes me very happy to see this picture, to see also that it has won such a prestigious award. It makes

me proud. Proud for being a woman, proud for being a mother and proud for being Yemeni. I am very proud that this photo is going around the world and that many people have seen it. Especially it makes me even happier that Western people have chosen that photo,” said Fatima in the interview (Coomes 2012).

Anticipating the Formula

People have generally become aware of the power of news photographs. These conventions have become so influential that they now unfold as ‘photo-ops’ rather than real events, often spontaneously staged by the public as a response to photographers’ presence. There is a keen entertainment-oriented self-awareness that emerges in the wake of a networked global visual culture. For example, protestors play along with the preconceived visual expectations that ‘these are the actions and ges-



*A young protester recovers from the effects of being exposed to tear gas fired by Istanbul police in Besiktas area of Istanbul. The young man struggled to remain conscious after inhaling a particularly strong strain of riot control gas that the police used late into the evening on Saturday, 2013, from the series *The Parallel State*, 2019 © Guy Martin/Panos*

tures the photographer wants to capture, so let’s do our best to fulfill this demand so that maybe, we can take control over the image’. The photographer has in some ways already been bypassed by the conventions defined by the industry, which are now directly being anticipated by the subject/performers themselves in some kind of feedback loop. Why do we see hundreds of people place flowers on memorial sites, entirely surrounded by large international news crews, complete with tents, catering and satellite vans? Or a lamenting Lebanese woman that appeared on three different occasions in 2006, each time wailing over a different destroyed home for a different photographer?

In his film *Photojournalism Behind the Scenes*, photographer Ruben Salvadori unveils how Palestinian teenagers provide the necessary theater of throwing stones and burning flags on a quiet day in East Jerusalem (Salvadori 2011). Another revealing account is photographer Guy Martin’s image of a young man pretending to be unconscious and helped by his friends during a violent protest in Istanbul upon spotting Martin with his camera, as he tells me in an email conversation:

That image was made at the height and most violent days of the Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013. As the young man was sitting on the grass of the Dolmabache Palace on the shores of the Bosphorus in Istanbul, he saw me, recognized my role as a photographer and fell back onto the grass as his friends pulled his shirt apart. It was an image that I think I would not have made if I had been in the role of photojournalist working for a news organization. I would have felt that that moment was “un-genuine,” but he and his friends seemed to understand, in a split second, the power and role of media. So I decided to play, too, and I photographed him and his friends as if he were a wounded hero on the battlefield (which maybe he was). To some extent there is a ‘feedback loop’.

— Guy Martin, email conversation, 2016.

As an act of solidarity during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, a group of protestors staged a reverse reenactment of Floyd’s death in the presence of news camer-

as. In West Palm Beach, a Black man was seen kneeling on a White man's neck, whose unresponsive body lay face down onto the tarmac (Brutus 2020). This 'performative solidarity' by privileged White protestors in demonstrations for Black equality is described by Stacey Patton as a "Catch-22: White bodies are protected by the state, yet the prospect of white death is a way to garner empathy. This proves yet again how little black lives actually matter: Actual black deaths do not move white America as much as the simulation of white death" (Patton 2020).

Photographs are always embedded within ideology and culturally defined, bringing along a set of predetermined implications, be it Western iconography of pity and grief, or racially biased artificial intelligence algorithms. Our predetermined beliefs define what we see and how we interpret images. Although with today's visual literacy, it's safe to say that predominant visual codes, tropes, stereotypes and conventions should be viewed critically, and if used, done so with scrutiny. Organizations such as World Press Photo and other leading institutions of the documentary photography industry should avoid falling into repeating the same templates over and over again, casting the world in a simplified mold of 'good versus evil' – McWorld versus Jihad. This eventually becomes a vicious circle in which photographers try to attain success and recognition by merely hunting for the perfect trope instead of being invested with the subjects they document and the potential impact their work may have.



A black male protestor is seen kneeling on the neck of a fellow white male protestor, whose unresponsive body and face lay flat on the hot road between Okeechobee Blvd and Rosemary Ave in West Palm Beach, 2020 © Wilkine Brutus/WLRN

Appropriating The Hooded Man

"Waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists."
– Sarah Palin, *CNN*, 2014.

Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) protests the killing of 1,600 defenseless civilians in a Basque town by the German Luftwaffe on 26 April 1937. It was considered the most notorious war crime of the twentieth century prior to World War Two. On 5 February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell had a tapestry reproduction of *Guernica* at the UN Security Council covered up by a large blue curtain before giving his famous speech in which he lied about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in



Richard Serra, *Stop Bush*, 2004, litho crayon drawing on mylar, 150.5 x 121.9 cm

Iraq (Walsh 2003). One year later, images of unthinkable cruelty would emerge from behind the curtain, coming back to haunt him.

The leaked photographs from Abu Ghraib prison were first revealed to the public in April 2004 on CBS News' *Sixty Minutes* and Seymour Hersh's articles in *The New Yorker*. The entire archive was later published by *Salon Magazine* in February 2006, in which the photographs were chronologically annotated following the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID) timelines.¹⁵ The Bush administration's efforts to produce iconic counter images of triumph and victory, such as Colin Powell's phantom truck, Saddam Hussein's dental examination (no weapons in there either), the hooding of Saddam's statue, the Mission Accomplished photo-op and subsequent action figures, were all no match for the monumental impact the Abu Ghraib photographs would have. In relation to Nick Ut's "Napalm Girl," W. J. T. Mitchell describes Abu Ghraib's Hooded Man as "a kind of baleful shadow or afterimage of its Vietnamese counterpart" in the power of a photograph to symbolize moral defeat (Mitchell 2011, 5).

Much has been written about the moral, ethical, and political dimensions of the Abu Ghraib photographs in the civic arena. Most notably by Susan Sontag, Stephen F. Eisenman, W. J. T. Mitchell and Andy Grundberg on the aspect of their production and distribution. They make clear that the act of photographing detainees is an act of

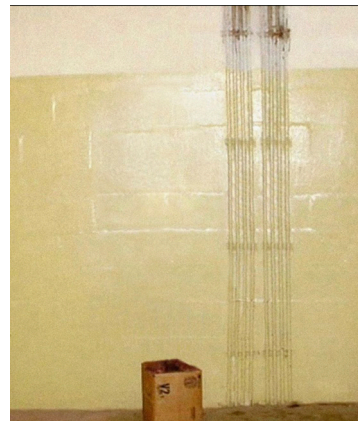
¹⁵ Only 279 images of 1,325 of suspected detainee abuse have been released to the public, a total of 93 video files of suspected detainee abuse, 660 images of adult pornography, 546 images of suspected dead Iraqi detainees, 29 images of soldiers in simulated sexual acts, 20 images of a soldier with a Swastika drawn between his eyes, 37 images of military working dogs being used in abuse of detainees and 125 images of questionable acts.

torture in itself; deliberate acts of maltreatment, humiliation, and domination. A "double act of subjugation," as proposed by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in which the victim is photographed by their oppressor, re-trapping the subject in the social world that produced their victim status, into the "regime of the image" (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 176). Therefore, reproducing and looking at the photographs once again inflicts the humiliation they were designed to enact in what Linfield termed the "double horror" of looking at photographs made by perpetrators.

The appearance of the photographs caused a shock in the American public sphere, not only because of what they revealed but because their very nature was different from any kind of photographs seen before. Intended as weapons, these photographs "both reflect and transcend the United States' military imagination," wrote performance scholar Peggy Phelan (Phelan 2014, 58). They "expose something fundamentally traumatic about looking," continues Phelan, "but unlike high art's attempt to disguise this trauma via the aesthetic aspiration toward the sublime, the Abu Ghraib photographs expose the brutality involved in covering it up" (Phelan 2014, 60). Sontag wrote about their impact in an essay titled *Regarding the Torture of Others* (2004) shortly after their release. She pointed out that "the administration's initial response was to say that the president was shocked and disgusted by the photographs – as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict" (Sontag 2004). Most importantly, in terms of the torture and cruelty they depict, scholar of visual culture Anthony Downey reminds us that these photographs "can never fully reify the trauma of torture and that any attempt to re-present the so-called 'real' of torture – that most private and internalized of humiliations visited upon the body – exposes not so much the power of the image as it does the conditional limits of the image" (Downey 2009, 124). The main concern is therefore not about our response to these images but about our responsibility for them.

What makes them so powerful on the level of representation, aside from the atrocities they depict, is that the Abu Ghraib snapshots represent a direct violation of the traditional function of photojournalism. They trans-

gress the prevailing norms and conventions of photojournalism by evading the constraints of military censorship and the professional picture making establishment. What makes them so traumatic and violent is that they are the antithesis of how wars usually are represented. “These photographs tell us that the codes of objectivity, professional ethics, and journalistic accountability we have all relied on to ensure the accuracy of the news – at least in rough draft form – are now relics. In their place is a swirling mass of information, written as well as visual, journalistic as well as vernacular, competing to be taken as fact,” noted art critic Andy Grundberg about them (Grundberg 2005).



2004, *Abu Ghraib*, from the series *Fatescapes*, 2009–2013 © Pavel Maria

The images from Abu Ghraib contradict the studied heroics of twentieth-century war photography that have been updated to the current conflict. Away from the photojournalistic flourishes designed to make war palatable—the heroic flag-raising, the dogged foot soldiers close to the action, the sense of shared humanity among combatants, and the search for visual evidence that war is universal and inevitable—the often-banal JPEGs from Iraq proffer a very different picture: war is systematic cruelty enforced at the level of everyday torture.

— Brian Wallis, ICP chief curator, *Inconvenient Evidence* exhibition brochure, 2004.

Seen as a result of the US invasion of Iraq in the after-

math of 9/11, these photographs have become the ultimate anti-war icon and an attack on the belief in American exceptionalism. They represent the vulgar obscenity of American pop culture; its hedonism of violence and pornography.

There is an interesting comparison to be made between the iconography of the Abu Ghraib photographs and burning Twin Towers on 9/11. The clandestine torture at a US prison was not meant for the public to be seen; 9/11 was a spectacular event designed to look like a Hollywood disaster movie, broadcast live on television, with the first plane creating a stage for the second. The images from Abu Ghraib are amateurish, low-res, grainy, repulsive; the images of the collapsing towers and its aftermath are sublime, aesthetically pleasing, awe-inspiring. No one questions the authenticity of the Abu Ghraib photographs; 9/11 is shrouded in conspiracy theories. Both are politically charged and widely used as propaganda, and both are symbols of victimhood. Abu Ghraib depicts explicit bodily harm, physical anguish, death; 9/11 is sanitized, there are no bodies to be seen. Today in the West, the Abu Ghraib photographs are vaguely recollected and gradually removed from public discourse; the 9/11 slogan: “never forget.”

The most recognized image from Abu Ghraib came to be known as the Hooded Man (also known as the Man on the Box, Gilligan on the Box, Bagman, or (simply) Abu Ghraib Man), which has become the icon of the Iraq War in the West. Not surprisingly, the iconic image in the Arab and Muslim world is the one of Sabrina Harman smiling and giving a thumbs-up next to a dead detainee in a bodybag.¹⁶ Photographs of executioners posing with their victims are rare. One comparison has been made with the lynching photographs that show Americans smiling beneath bodies hanging from a tree (Apel 2005). But Abu Ghraib wasn’t the last case of its kind. In 2011 a group of US soldiers in Afghanistan known as ‘The Kill Team’ brutally murdered innocent civilians. They would then pose next to their victims’ mutilated bodies for photographs, often smiling at the camera, reminiscent of hunting trophies. They collected their ‘kills’ on USB drives and passed them on from soldier to soldier: “the gruesome images of corpses and war atrocities filed

¹⁶ An additional layer adding to the tenor of this image is that Harman was acutely aware of the atrocities going on at the prison, and made photographs to record and prove this as a testimony to witness (as later became evident from a series of letters she had written to her girlfriend back home at the time, in which she describes her disapproval of the detainees’ treatment and the need to photograph it as evidence).

alongside clips of TV shows, UFC fights and films such as *Iron Man 2*" (Rolling Stone 2011).

Phelan recognizes the traumatic nature of the Abu Ghraib photographs because "they both document and create new blind spots" and "expose the essential blindness that constitutes the act of seeing" (Phelan 2012, 55). They reveal what was not supposed to be seen, and in doing so, remind us of the vast 'known unknowns' that we do not witness. Photographs cannot speak for themselves, and strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. They don't deepen our political understanding of the world. In their book, *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008, after Morris' film with the same name), Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris illustrate the severe limits of photographic evidence. They delve into the stories behind the individual images of Abu Ghraib and point out that some of the most shocking pictures were of the mildest actions, the most brutal images were given the least attention, and the worst torture wasn't photographed at all (Linfield 2010, 157).

I first read about Ali Alqaisi (also known as Ali Shalal Qaissi, Haj Ali or The Claw) in Morris's book *Believing is Seeing* (2014), in which he focusses on the deceptive nature of photographs and unravels some of the mysteries behind them. Morris dedicates a chapter to Ali Alqaisi's appropriation of the Hooded Man photograph. On 11 March 2006, the front page of *The New York Times* ran a photograph of Alqaisi holding a printout of the iconic image to illustrate an article written by journalist Hassan M. Fattah. The caption reads "Ali Shalal Qaissi in Amman, Jordan, recently with the picture of himself standing atop a box and attached to electrical wires in Abu Ghraib." The identity of the Hooded Man remained a mystery until Alqaisi came forward claiming to be the man under the hood, standing atop a ration box, arms outstretched attached to electric wires. He was told that if he stepped down from the box, the wires attached to his hands and genitals would electrocute him. Now, eternalized as an icon, he forever remains in this stress position on the box. It became a national news story, not because he was a victim of torture at the hands of the US government, but because he was the man in the infamous photograph.

It turns out that Alqaisi was, after all, not the Hooded Man in the famous photograph. The *Times* had embarrassingly overlooked a previously published account in their very own archives dating from 22 May 2004. In a



Ali Shalal Qaissi in Amman, Jordan, recently with the picture of himself standing atop a box and attached to electrical wires in Abu Ghraib, 2006 © Shawn Baldwin/The New York Times

correction issued on 26 March 2006, the *Times*' public editor wrote that they had already discovered the identity of the Hooded Man as Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh (aka Gilligan), another prisoner at Abu Ghraib from the same period (Calame 2006). Seven days after their front-page story the *Times* published another article on 18 March in which they formally admitted the error. This article now attacked Alqaisi's integrity, painting him an imposter and opportunist for using the suffering of others for his own fame. To which Alqaisi desperately responded, breaking down in tears: "I know one thing, I wore that blanket, I stood on that box, and I was wired up and electrocuted" (Zernike 2006). The article focusses on attempting to prove that Alqaisi was not the man in the famous photograph, entirely ignoring the fact that he was tortured in precisely the same way.

Fattah, who interviewed Alqaisi for the *Times*, told Morris that Alqaisi admitted to not being the man in the photograph (Morris 2014, 81). Alqaisi has a deformed

hand and was demeaningly nicknamed “The Claw” by the MP’s at the prison. Reporters had initially claimed that his deformed hand was visible in Hooded Man, although upon close examination of the photograph this is inconclusive. In Morris’ analysis of Alqaisi’s portrait by war photographer Shawn Baldwin for the *Times* article, he claims that Alqaisi deliberately hid his deformed hand out of the frame in order to avoid direct comparison with the photograph held in his other hand, and in doing so, abetting to the mystery. Morris also accuses Alqaisi of making false claims and conceiving a deliberate deception. That the mistaken identity “was driven by The Claw’s own desire to be the iconic victim, to be the Hooded Man, and our own need to believe him” (Morris 2014, 93).

The elephant in the room here is that Alqaisi was a prisoner at Abu Ghraib, and *also* stood on the box just as can be seen in Hooded Man. He spent six months at the prison between 2003 and 2004. He was on the official list of prisoners (detainee number: #151716), vividly described the prison spaces in detail, his relationships with other detainees and his experiences of torture. His hand is also clearly identifiable in other photographs. His lawyer, Susan Burke (acting on behalf of victims of US detainee abuse under a class-action lawsuit) is in possession of Alqaisi’s own black ‘poncho’ blanket, which was used as evidence in their case. She also has medical records that prove Alqaisi was electrified. I met with Burke in Baltimore sometime in 2016. She expressed how disappointed she was with the discrediting of Alqaisi’s claims, and the tone in which Morris wrote about him. She told me that it really didn’t help the case for the Abu Ghraib victims and created a general atmosphere of distrust, making their job much more difficult. Burke expressed that it makes no difference whether Alqaisi, The Claw, was also really the Hooded Man.

Having privileged access to the original files and their embedded metadata, Morris has proven that there are two virtually identical ‘iconic’ photographs of the Hooded Man taken seconds apart by Sergeant Ivan Frederick on 3 November 2003. They are made with a basic digital point and shoot camera (Deluxe Classic Cam) with a resolution of 640 x 480 pixels (0.3 megapixels) without



Two versions of Hooded Man: on the left the one by Sabrina Harman on the right the now iconic image made by Sergeant Ivan Frederick, 2003 © US Department of Defense

flash. A third horizontal photograph, made with flash and from a wider angle, was made by Sabrina Harman three minutes later with a higher resolution camera (FD Mavica, 1280 x 1600 pixels, 2.0 megapixels), in which Frederick can be seen alongside the Hooded Man looking down onto the little screen of his digital camera at the pictures he had just made – the images destined to become 9/11’s counterpart. The meta-quality of Harman’s image is silencing. One perpetrator photographs the other, the torturer, casually contemplating a photograph he has just made – as an act of subjugation and humiliation – while the reality of that very image is seen alongside him in the background. Morris argues that Sergeant Frederick’s image is the one that eventually became iconic, in spite of Harman’s being more telling, because “it is stripped of context, like the gestalt duck-rabbit, ambiguous and open to interpretation” (Morris 2014, 92).

The resemblance to the figure of Christ was no accident. Mitchell explains in his book *Cloning Terror* (2011) that “Sabrina Harman’s initial impulse to make photographs was triggered when she noticed that one of the inmates shackled in a stress position ‘looked like Jesus Christ. So I went and got my camera.’ And once you started looking for him, Jesus was and is everywhere in Abu Ghraib, not just as the Hooded Man but as Shit Boy and numerous others” (Mitchell 2011, 141). Hooded Man is a stark reminder of the dark, violent side of Christian iconography with its mockery and torture. The black

hood and cloak are not only a Christian reference but also resonates with images from the Inquisition (Goya), the Ku Klux Klan and other religious societies. Mitchell makes a further analogy between cloning and terrorism: “not just the process by which terrorism spreads like a cancer, virus, or plague, but the *terror of cloning itself*,” a syndrome he calls ‘clonophobia’ that grows out of “ancient anxieties about copying, imitation, artificial life, and image-making” (Mitchell 2011, xiv). Mitchell’s study into the ‘cloning’ of Hooded Man reveals its visual power as a ubiquitous and recognizable icon. Its circulation and popularity have reduced it to “an empty signifier or ‘brand,’ like a corporate logo,” neutralizing and co-opting its political impact. The symmetry and facelessness of Hooded Man “operates like a Rorschach inkblot, inviting projection and multiplicity of association” (Mitchell 2011, 149). Several elements in the image contribute to its status as a universally recognizable icon: the frontally posed figure, facing the viewer, yet anonymous and unidentifiable as an individual; the figure elevated on a pedestal; the symmetry of the diamond-shaped black cloth, easily reproducible as a schematic silhouette in the form of a logo; and of course, the Christological gesture of outstretched arms, open palms facing forward, inviting the onlooker inwards. Hooded Man is a metapicture – a master-image – an icon of image production itself. It “evokes the iconography of Jesus across the entire image repertoire of the Passion of Christ: the hood brings to mind the crown of thorns and the mocked, blindfolded Christ; the pedestal recalls the Ecce Homo and the mock coronation of the King of the Jews; and the arm position recalls the Lamentation or ‘Man of Sorrows,’ as well as images of the risen Christ engaged in gestures of welcoming and rescue” (Mitchell 2011, 115). “Metapictures,” as described by Mitchell, “are pictures that show themselves in order to *know* themselves: they stage the ‘self-knowledge’ of pictures” (Mitchell 1994, 48).

American art historian Stephen F. Eisenman attempts to counter the effect of the Abu Ghraib photographs by placing them into the perspective of art historical references. Hinging on Freud’s concept of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny), he interrogates how images of torture, power and dominion are at once disturbing

and eerily familiar, “demanding yet somehow denying interpretation” (Eisenman 2007, 15). Images passed down from one generation to the next, deeply embedded in visual memory and the physical body. These photographs have been compared to pornographic, sadomasochistic and lynching images as much as they call up artworks by Goya, Bacon, Picasso and many others. Here, Eisenman recognizes the common mythic structure of the ‘pathos formula’ that resonates in the Abu Ghraib photographs. A tradition that extends from Hellenistic times to our own: “the photographs made by soldiers, MP’s and civilians at Abu Ghraib – which by their deployment of sexualized scenarios depict torture as if it were something erotic, or at least potentially pleasurable for the victims – are not exceptional images in the history of Western visual culture, they are the rule” (Eisenman 2007, 44). The Vatican Palace in Rome is clad with imagery enshrining the military and moral superiority of European Christians over Muslims from the East. Not unlike the scenes from Abu Ghraib, half-naked, bound and kneeling captives can be seen in Raphael’s *Battle of Ostia* (1514–17), in which Saracens (Muslims) surrender to Pope Leo IV. The origin of the “modern Western antagonism toward Islam is thus illustrated here in the Vatican, in a fresco commemorating 700 years of crusades, and in the image of a conquered and abject race” (Eisenman 2007, 66). This ‘Abu Ghraib Effect’ as Eisenman has termed it, is the entanglement of the glorification of imperial power and the aesthetic justification of domination and torture.

Mitchell argues that the Christological association is not something that is ‘applied’ willfully or arbitrarily, but rather an automatic response conditioned by the most famous image-repertoire in the world. We do not choose to see these associations, they are inevitable. But does this not depend on our embedded beliefs in the first place; our ‘devotional reading’ of images? I don’t have a religious background and was not brought up with Christian iconography, and never really noticed its presence in photographic iconology until it was pointed out to me. We *can choose* what we see, only we must first recognize what we believe. Isn’t comparing the Hooded Man to the ‘Christ figure’ once again a threat-



Raphael, *Battaglia di Ostia (Battle of Ostia)*, 1514–15, fresco, *Stanze dell'Incendio*, 700 cm wide, Vatican Palace, Rome

ening iconographic cliché? Isn't the range of possible physical positions limited to only a handful of gestures that unavoidably make reference to a repertoire of the representation of the human body throughout art history? And above all, isn't the crucifixion narrative, or the doctrine of the atonement, the very justification used by the US government for their torture practices, in which 'the sacrifice of one life saves the lives of many others'? According to Sarah Sentilles, "applying the crucifixion narrative secures empire rather than disrupts it," violating the victims of torture in three crucial ways: "first, identifying Muslim prisoners as 'Christ' is a form of forcible conversion; second, it renders the photographed violence necessary; and, third, it transforms empathy for the tortured prisoner into fear of the 'other'" (Sentilles 2008). To look at images of torture from an iconological perspective is thus perhaps a form of disregard for the victims themselves. The tension between studying these photographs on a representational level and the inhumanity they depict is what makes them so uncomfortable. "When viewers interpret the photographs as crucifixion images, they, too, write on the prisoners' bodies in English. They impose the narrative of the torturer onto

the body of the tortured," interjects Sentilles. It attempts to make meaningful the suffering of another as something good rather than a mistake, but this only creates yet another violation, because there is no redemption for the tortured of Abu Ghraib.

[Ameen Sa'eed] Al-Sheikh said: "Someone else asked me, 'Do you believe in anything?' I said to him, 'I believe in Allah.' So he said, 'But I believe in torture and I will torture you . . .' Then they handcuffed me and hung me to my bed. They ordered me to curse Islam and because they hit my broken leg, I cursed my religion. They ordered me to thank Jesus I'm alive. And I did what they ordered me. This is against my belief" (Sentilles 2008).

Based on an (unsigned) statement from an interview with Gilligan by CID on 14 January 2004 in which he describes his experience of standing on the box in detail, Morris acknowledges that this humanizes the anonymous person under the hood. He argues that he is "a real person" and that the photograph "should not be viewed as just some image devoid of context to be taken up by any abused prisoner" (Morris 2014, 95). But isn't that the very function assigned to iconic photographs? Is the personal identity of Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl*, Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier* or Jeff Widener's *Tank Man* really relevant to what those images have come to stand for, and the impact they have had on society? The stress position seen in *Hooded Man*, in which one was forced to balance on a box, blinded by a hood, attached to electric wires that would jolt a shock through the body, was also experienced by Alqaisi and other prisoners in the notorious Tier 1A at Abu Ghraib. It's safe to assume that if the 'Jesus position' was the standard operating procedure at the torture prison, it's very likely that others were given the same treatment. Donovan Webster, the first journalist to interview Alqaisi for an article in *Vanity Fair* (Haviv 2005), argues that "to discount the horrors visited upon this man because the famous photo shows a different detainee on the box – and to disbelieve what happened because no photo currently confirms it – well, it shows just how much of an abstraction torture has become inside American culture" (Morris 2014, 82). If Alqaisi

stood on the box, blinded by a hood, unable to see if he was photographed or not – believing that he is the man in the now iconic photograph – what argument is there to deny him this claim? Just like iconic photographs are assimilated in the public sphere, Alqaisi took it upon himself to appropriate an iconic image depicting a torture method that was applied to him and his friends, and uses it to actively support and help Iraqi victims of US torture as head of the Association of Victims of the US-Iranian Occupation Prisons in Iraq.

I met Ali Alqaisi for the first time in his Berlin apartment on 22 November 2017. Operating a laptop tethered to a large flatscreen, he casually presented me with a slideshow of the Abu Ghraib images over a cup of sweet tea, while telling me his story. “It was me in the picture,” he recounts, “I stood in this position and one of the photos is of me. But it was not only me who faced such a situation. One day I was exposed to electric shocks. I bit my tongue and I started bleeding from my mouth” (Pinckers 2018b, 280). He showed me the paintings that he makes in order to deal with his trauma and recurring nightmares. They are of orange jumpsuits, black hoods, and trees. Alqaisi is a loving, warm and gentle man. He



Ali Alqaisi [left] and 151716, painted by Alqaisi [right], from the series *Margins of Excess*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

is exceptionally positive and enthusiastic considering what he went through – something we can’t even begin to imagine.

Alqaisi is the last individual to appear in my book *Margins of Excess* precisely for this reason. Unlike the other stories in the book (Herman Rosenblat, Darius McCollum, Rachel Doležal, Richard Heene and Jay J. Armes) that easily invite us to wander and project our imaginations into them, Alqaisi’s account forms an endpoint – an unimaginable space – a defeat of the ‘American image’. Alqaisi had his bathtub removed in his apartment because seeing it gives him anxiety after being waterboarded seventeen times. A photograph in *Margins of Excess* shows the void where his bath used to stand – the void in our shared popular imagination (it’s no coincidence that Hooded Man was photographed in a shower room at Abu Ghraib, known as Room #37 according to the statement provided by Gilligan). In the book, next to the image of the missing bathtub, is a photograph of a Middle Eastern-themed diorama exhibit in The Airborne & Special Operations Museum Foundation, Fayetteville. The scene displays plastic water containers, those gallon bottles used for waterboarding, under a flatscreen showing the sentence “in war, nothing is as it should be” (Pinckers 2018b, 269). Susan Burke, Alqaisi’s lawyer, told me that if she had photographs of torture made according to traditional journalistic conventions, she would have been able to get the public’s interest much easier.

Each personal story in *Margins of Excess* is accompanied by an archival photograph that the media weaponized against them. When I emailed Shawn Baldwin to ask for permission to reproduce the portrait he made of Alqaisi for the *Times*, he responded with a non-negotiable licensing fee of \$7,500. As Morris had already suggested, Baldwin claims the portrait to be ‘false’ and didn’t want to discuss it with anyone (he has also removed it from his website) (Morris 2014, 85). Was Baldwin’s exuberant licensing fee an attempt to prevent the photo from being published? Or was it a way for him to get back at someone that he thought had tricked him into making a ‘false’ photograph? A way to cash in on a supposedly elaborate scheme by a ‘false’ torture victim? Or maybe his self-credibility simply had a price? (We eventual-

ly licensed the photo for \$140 from the Belgian press database Reporters). The photographer's idea of what is authentic or 'true' is so deeply embedded that he does not recognize Alqaisi as a victim of torture anymore. He is now simply concerned with the credibility of his own work, and on top of that, makes attempts to capitalize on the suffering of others in a vulgar dismay for his own awkward position.



Nothing is As it Should Be, from the series *Margins of Excess*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

Alqaisi's appropriation of the photograph, even though it may not literally depict him, reveals five crucial aspects: that there were at least two people abused in the same manner (with only one to *prove* it with a photograph), that a photograph doesn't need to be taken literally to be taken seriously, that people have the license and the right to appropriate images that represent what happened to them when they lack the photographs that actually depict this; that it is precisely the anonymity of Hooded Man that is the key to its iconic power; and finally, that photographs of this nature cannot *belong* to any one individual but are communal (even though they



Ali Alqaisi's Removed Bathtub, from the series *Margins of Excess*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

have individual stories to them) – they make us responsible for one another (to recall Emmanuel Levinas' 'ethics of responsibility'), regardless of their iconographic references. Downey reads Alqaisi's claim to the Hooded Man as "a moment of empathy, an ethical gesture if you will, whereby one individual makes that leap, so to speak, into someone else's shoes," he continues, "a moment of empathy that somehow reifies the trauma of torture and abuse and thereafter brings it closer to us in all its horror" (Downey 2009, 131).

4 THE DOCUMENTARY GESTURE OR ATTITUDE: (UN)DEFINING A DOCUMENTARY TRADITION

There is no such thing as 'documentary'—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach or a set of techniques. This assertion—as old and fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality—needs incessantly to be restated, despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Documentary Is/Not a Name*, 1990.

The Documentary Gesture

Documentary is a vague and undefined term that has never had a precise definition, yet we can speak of a documentary tradition. It transgresses boundaries of medium-specific disciplines, both in theory and in practice. “Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand” wrote filmmaker John Grierson in 1926 (Hardy 1946, 78), who coined the term. The word is derived from *docere* in Latin, which means ‘to teach’, and the term *documentaire* dates from 1876, when it was used by the French to define their nineteenth-century Orientalist travel paintings. It was first described in the English language by Grierson in relation to film in a text for *The New York Sun* as the “creative treatment of actuality,” insisting that documentary is not news, reportage or information, but “a new and vital art form” (Hardy 1946, 11). Documentary thus required a surplus of beauty in order to carry its weight. It both evokes the “possibility of art participating in and providing an understanding of contemporary realities and social change, and at the same time carefully insist on the impossibility of this project,” explains Mark Nash (Nash 2008).

This original definition still remains relevant today, and in similar opposition towards its informative counterparts of formatted news production, television and photojournalism. The notion of ‘creative treatment’ points to subjectivity, fiction and experimentation, whereas ‘actuality’ points to journalism and the real world that we share and experience, known as the ‘phenomenal world’ or ‘historical world’. Documentary is a way of engaging and understanding this world, while at the same time reflecting on its own shortcomings in the process – acknowledging its own blind spots. It isn’t just a recording or document of the world, but also an interpretation of it. It’s about understanding the relationship between form and ideology while questioning its own position of authorship, in search of a *metacritical* dimension. Truly critical documentary exposes the myths that determine it and takes an ethical stance towards itself, the historical world and the subjects it addresses. In

doing so, the boundaries between fact and fiction are transgressed, alleviated, unimportant. Our contact with the 'real' is always mediated, and never clear about its status as fiction/nonfiction. Part of the documentarian's task is to make this ontological doubt clear.

Every documentary work deals with conventional questions of authenticity and its inevitable relationship to fiction. Yet we cannot precisely pinpoint a clear definition of what constitutes a documentary, and any definition is in itself immediately suspect. The more we attempt to do so, the less we seem to comprehend. Without a clear definition, viewers tend to presume the status of documentary based on recognizable conventions, such as the use of a realist aesthetic, for example, or black and white photography, dealing with social problems, and so on when these codes could just as easily be applied to purely fictional fabrications. Documentary can thus "easily become a 'style': it no longer constitutes a mode of production or an attitude towards life, but proves only to be an element of aesthetics," wrote Trinh T. Minh-ha, reducing itself to "a mere category, or a set of persuasive techniques" (Minh-ha 1990, 88). A good example of this is the recent tendency of contemporary photographers attempting to orientate their discourse around work that supposedly combines 'fact and fiction', in which we have seen many cases of documentary characteristics or 'styles' applied within a fictional context.

The codes and conventions of the documentary aesthetic have become exploited, appropriated and diluted as much as those of photojournalism discussed earlier. To illustrate: the 'based on a true story' principle presents a work as if it were a documentary, in which none of the actors, locations or scenes have any real documentary value, but merely reference to an event that has occurred within the historical world. A good example is Cristina De Middel's *The Afronauts* (2012). Her celebrated photo series marked the beginning of a new genre in contemporary photography supposedly blurring the lines between fact and fiction. A movement that my own work would also come to define, particularly with the book *The Fourth Wall* (2012), self-published in the same year as *The Afronauts*. De Middel's book is often presented as a documentary body of work that makes use of fictional elements. Although it's purely fictional, only

the story on which it's based being true. In this sense, every work of fiction is entangled with already existing stories, be it real events or our imagination. *The Afronauts* is loosely based on a 1964 Zambian space program that never came to be. Edward Makuka Nkoloso, founder and sole member of Zambia's National Academy of Science, Space Research, and Philosophy, would train the first 'afonauts' to travel to the moon in an aluminum rocket using a catapult system, according to De Middel's website (De Middel). Although the series is entirely photographed in Spain, with friends of the photographer posing as astronauts adorned in 'spacesuits' sewn by her grandmother. The viewer is encouraged to believe this to be set somewhere near Lusaka, hence the presence of an elephant, derelict buildings, scrap metal yards and strange unexplainable 'magical' phenomena (the famous alien diorama from the Roswell UFO Museum in New Mexico (US) also makes an appearance). The only significant documentation in the series is what seems to be an original letter from Zambia's Ministry of Technology requesting funding for the space program (although it is not dated).

Unlike James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) which, at the time, was the best visual representation of how the ship actually sank, the societal function of *The Afronauts* seems somewhat misplaced. As writer and photographer Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa remarked: the "farcical tenor" laments "the fact that nobody believes that Africa will ever reach the moon," disguising the "formative role of exploitation in the production of poverty on one continent, and unbridled freedom on another" (Wolukau-Wanambwa 2015a).

In his influential book *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), film critic Bill Nichols outlines six main modes of documentary filmmaking strategies (expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, poetic and performative), in which he mainly distinguishes factors relating to the level of awareness amongst the audience of the presence of the camera and the constructions it produces (Nichols 2001, 194–199). These modes are not to be considered mutually exclusive and generally tend to overlap in a singular body of work. The audience's awareness and comprehension of media techniques also evolve

over time, leading to new documentary strategies and subcategories of existing modes, such as the ‘in-person reenactment’. Even though Nichols’ categorization is concerned with documentary filmmaking, we can extrapolate most of this theory to photography (the most important difference here being that photography only shows, whereas film both shows *and* tells). The power of documentary storytelling lies in the application and combination of the right mode(s) in relation to the subjects or themes addressed. Although ultimately, I believe it is helpful to discard any notions of particular ‘modes’ of working and to just do what intuitively feels right. To work according to a schema, or predefined structural theory, will not be satisfying when it comes to attempting to understand reality from within.

The reflexive mode is the most self-aware approach in the sense that it challenges the conventions of its own representation and impression of reality. It is most doubtful about the possibilities of communication and expression, something that the other modes take for granted. Therefore this mode possibly includes all other modes, since it has the capacity to *think about itself as a mode*: “A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction. It does not work to conceal or exclude what is normalized as ‘non-factual’, for it understands the mutual dependence of realism and ‘artificiality’ in the process of filmmaking” (Minh-Ha 1990, 88–89). It is precisely this attitude towards documentary that makes for a critical and radical approach. Unfortunately seems to be somewhat lacking in contemporary documentary photography when compared to documentary film.

Whereas the great preponderance of documentary production concerns itself with talking about the historical world, the reflexive mode addresses the question of ‘how’ we talk about the historical world. As with poetic exposition, the focus of the text slides from realm of historical reference to the properties of the text itself. Poetic exposition draws attention to the pleasures of form, reflexivity to its problems. It internalizes many of the issues and concerns that are the subject of this study, not as a secondary or subsequent mode of retrospective

analysis, but as an immediate undeferrable issue in social representation itself. Reflexive texts are self-conscious not only about form and style, as poetic ones are, but also about strategy, structure, conventions, expectations, and effects (Nichols 1991, 56–57).

Nichols differentiates between formal and political dimensions of reflexivity: by using formal strategies to obtain a reflexive mode, a political dimension is created in which attention is drawn to relationships beyond the work itself, such as the existing power structures and hierarchies that define the work’s relationship to the world (exhibition institutions, publication enterprises, financial support, etc.). Formal reflexivity is further divided up into subcategories, each proposing a different method: stylistic reflexivity breaks the norms of conventional styles; deconstructive reflexivity contests the dominant codes and conventions of documentary representation; interactivity, by challenging the notion of the invisible photographer or objective ‘fly on the wall’ position; irony, by saying one thing but actually meaning the opposite, by hiding instead of showing; parody and satire (not entirely considered as a strategy on its own) is usually limited to specific elements within a work.

Although not specified as a mode by Nichols in his original disposition, the reenactment has become a vital tool in the reflexive documentary approach, which Nichols would later write about. Reenactments are both referential to a past event, while simultaneously representing a contemporaneous event. They require participation and are self-aware about their theatrical nature. They occupy a strange status of temporality within the documentary framework, especially the ‘in-person reenactment’ in which someone plays themselves from the past. I will elaborate more on the in-person reenactment as a self-reflexive documentary strategy in relation to my own work in the chapter *The Reenactment* (pp. 216 – 267).

There have been many attempts to define the documentary tradition by artists, writers and academics alike, all of which are valid, yet equally ambiguous. The terminology may differ with some nuances on more specific elements of what could define documentary as a school of thought, but the essential ideas remain

more or less the same; a binary dualism between reality and its subjective interpretation. I will not attempt to add to this well-established tradition, but rather reflect on the documentary gesture in the postmodern sense, emphasizing on the importance of self-reflexivity as one of its defining characteristics. I will do so by specifically looking at contemporary photography as a vehicle of documentary expression as to relate closer to my own practice. I believe my contribution here lies in thinking about photographic documentary meaning in the form of artistic projects from the perspective of a critical practitioner, rather than that of an academic. These thoughts merely attempt to understand various reflexive strategies and problems embedded in the documentary attitude as a kind of meta-documentary. I will not attempt to outline a history of documentary photography but instead, focus on various documentary strategies and modes as possible answers to questions related to my own practice.

Because the photograph alone is no longer enough to claim truth, with deep-fakes and digital manipulation now the norm, documentarians are expected to be experts on the representation of truth. They are no longer simply mediators in which images speak for themselves. We must now ask ourselves what *kinds* of truths are being represented and how they relate to each other. In *Consolations for a Post-Truth World* (2017) philosopher Julian Bagginni writes about eternal truths, authoritative truths, esoteric truths, reasoned truths, empirical truths, creative truths, relative truths, powerful truths, moral truths and holistic truths. But in order to make critical documentaries, one must begin by self-questioning: “Truth is not a philosophical abstraction, rather it is central to how we live and make sense of ourselves, the world and each other, day by day” (Bagginni 2017, 108).

Nonfiction/Fiction: Belief and Make-Believe

If we can appreciate documentaries for their dramatic qualities, perhaps we can appreciate fiction films for their documentary revelations.

– Thom Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, 2004.

Every documentary can be placed on a spectrum of gradation between fiction and nonfiction. Before we attempt to truly understand what could constitute a documentary gesture or attitude, let us look towards its opposite: a definition of fiction.

Fiction is usually differentiated from nonfiction based on its function, artistic intent and assertions prompting certain responses from the audience. This response is conditioned by whether the author intends the audience to *believe* what they state or wants the audience to *make-believe* what is being presented to them. There is a considerable consensus amongst scholars (Gregory Currie, Kendall Walton, Stacie Friend, ...) that fiction always involves make-believe and imagination. Even though nonfiction sometimes makes false claims, this does not make it fiction because it asks us to *believe* rather than to *make-believe* its content.

Analytic philosopher Kendall Walton defines fiction as a work that contains an element of imagining. Unlike belief, imagining is neither true nor false, but must be ‘mandated’. And just because it’s fictional, doesn’t mean it’s not true. There are many layers of truth in fictionality and representation, for example, when representing supernatural entities: ‘this is a photo of Superman’, or ‘this is a photo of an actor playing Superman’, or ‘this is a photo of what Superman could look like if he really existed’, and so on. Fiction is often defined as a game of make-belief in children’s games, in which certain props are assigned particular imaginary roles according to the mandated rules of the game. The notion of a game emphasizes the connection between imagination and adherence to a set of predetermined rules. Here, both the author’s intentions and the way a work is typically treated by the viewer, play an important role in the assertion of it being a work of fiction or nonfiction. This

approach does not apply to all examples since there is no clear differentiation between a work *being* fiction and it being *treaded as* fiction. A common example often used to clarify this is the status of Greek myths. These were seen as nonfiction by their original audience, but are now generally treated as fiction, although one can still claim that they remain nonfiction even though we treat them as fiction.

Walton thus defines fiction as works that generate their own fictional worlds in our imaginations. And that we limit our imaginings to whatever is ‘true within the fiction’; the mandated rules of the game. But studies suggest that there is no clear distinction in cognitive responses between fiction and nonfiction. It turns out that we engage in a similar process of imaginative activity when reading nonfiction narratives (Friend 2008, 6). It has been proven that both fiction and nonfiction involve the construction of mental imagery and therefore, the imagination. Photographs do the same; they create mental images that wander outside the frame, constructing a notion of time flowing through the frame, from the moment before and after what is shown by the photograph. We are impelled to imagine more context than what can be seen by the space around and inside the photograph, importing various beliefs from our own reality into the reality depicted by the photograph. These kinds of constructions demand that we believe the content we also imagine, however paradoxical this may sound.

The compatibility between belief and make-believe is found when various notions about the real world are imported into accounts of fictional truths in order to fill them in and understand them. As philosopher Stacie Friend explains: “On one plausible interpretation of how we construct fictional worlds, we start with a mental representation of the real world and modify it as required by the story. The resulting representation contains all the relevant beliefs about the real world that remain consistent with what is fictionally the case. If we imagine what is fictionally true, and what is fictionally true includes what we believe, then we imagine what we believe.” (Friend 2008, 6). In the case of nonfiction and nonnarrative forms such as photographs, we are supposed to integrate representations with our beliefs

about the actual world, and in doing so, influence our understanding of it.

Nonfiction usually asserts belief (even if it prompts imagining), and fiction prompts make-believe, but it becomes truly interesting when these boundaries are no longer clearly defined. Authors of fiction often intend their works to encourage belief, affecting what we know about the real world, and documentaries use fictional elements to stimulate the imagination. Therefore fiction and nonfiction cannot be merely distinguished by the intent of their authors. Yet there still seems to be a difference: nonfiction directly asserts beliefs, and fiction does so only indirectly (Friend 2008, 8). Although what is known as ‘mere-make-believe’ or ‘imagining-but-not-believing’ is unique to fiction, the spectator or reader knows that what they are imagining cannot be true. Documentary, or nonfiction, is limited to representations and imaginings of non-supernatural nature, in which we do not imagine what does not exist within the real world. Furthermore, the general consensus amongst scholars (Gregory Currie, Peter Lamarque, Lance Olsen, ...) is that fiction must also contain fictitious content (made up by the author) in order to strictly count as fiction and not accidentally fall into nonfiction while intending to prompt make-believe.

Friend extrapolates her theory of fiction to nonliteral and nonnarrative forms (images) and considers that a distinction can be made between fiction/nonfiction in which photojournalism and courtroom drawings count as nonfiction. But what about documentary, which doesn’t have a clear set of rules like photojournalism, or apparent intentionality in terms of asserting belief like courtroom drawings do, yet also isn’t just prompting mere make-belief?

Necessary for understanding these concepts in relation to documentary is that Friend rejects the claim that fiction only invites mere-make-believe and not also belief. She claims that “it would be wrong to think that we are supposed to believe, or even take seriously, the proposition expressed by every declarative sentence used in a work of nonfiction, simply because it is a work of nonfiction” (Friend 2008, 10). Furthermore, there are nonfiction cases in which made-up elements occur,

prompting make-belief, yet not sufficiently enough to categorize them as fiction. She also gives some examples of nonfiction that prompt mere-make-believe in the form of speculation, such as “discussions of scientific models posit frictionless planes, point particles and other idealized entities that do not exist. Philosophical dialogues in the tradition of Plato, Berkeley and Hume cause belief only indirectly, by representing the conversations of (fictional) characters. The authors do not make assertions in their own voices, so whatever beliefs we may form are inferred from the mere-make-believe of invented conversations” (Friend 2008, 10). Equally so, one must acknowledge the transmission of truths *through* fiction, in which fictions can furnish knowledge of the actual world. This ‘double consciousness’, or ‘willing suspension of disbelief’; in which one has both an aesthetic experience while at the same time knows that it’s only a fabrication, is what allows us to immerse ourselves into it without losing our ability to critically assess the world it evokes (Wynants 2020, 11).

Asserted Veridical Representation

Any worldly thing whatsoever—whether it be a photograph, a film, a painting, or a CGI [computer-generated image]—is dyadically connected to the world (or reality) in a potentially limitless number of ways, each one of them can form the basis for an indexical function. This implies that it is absurd to pretend that a photograph is more indexical than a painting or a CGI, since it is impossible to quantify the number of ways in which something may serve as a sign.

— Martin Lefebvre, *The Art of Pointing. On Peirce, Indexicality, and Photographic Images*, 2007.

When strictly applied to documentary photography, a philosophical attempt at differentiating fiction from nonfiction would only leave us with purely functional

indexical imagery – or visual traces – such as medical photography, security camera footage or crime scene evidence as obtaining a documentary status. As Alan Sekula declared, “The only ‘objective’ truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something – in this case, an automated camera – was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else, everything beyond the importing of a trace, is up for grabs” (Sekula 2016, 57).

Photography is often seen as ‘pointing at something’ (one cannot photograph something that does not appear in front of the lens). This indexical relationship to reality is “the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface” (Krauss 1985, 203). In a photograph, there is empirical evidence of the truth of appearances and an implicit suggestion towards the social determination of these appearances. The debate on indexicality in photography criticism continues to shape the discussion on photography’s relationship to truth. However, a second-wave reassessment of indexicality after digitalization has now created a whole new topic of discussion. Art theorist John Roberts argues that ‘index-free’ representations such as paintings or computer-generated images (CGI) are no less reliant on indexicality than photographs. They are merely indirect indexical relations to reality. In this sense, a painting would be connected to its object by another sign, such as the painter or the painter’s hand, which is in direct contact with the painting.

Roberts asks: “Is indexicality an ideological hang-over from the social-relational functions of photography, or does it remain, in some form, the primary determining force on photography?” (Roberts 2014, 28). Photography’s underlying indexical causality has not only been a dominating theme within photography discourse for the past forty years, it often reduces photographic thinking into an objective and empirical notion of the photograph as a document, while the social determination of these appearances along with their potency *as pictures* are set aside. Relieving photography of the (tiresome) veridical burdens of truth claims rooted in its indexicality creates a more compelling space to think about photography in the sense of its social ontology, rather than merely *as documents*. Photography’s inherent liquidity, as Joanna Zylińska defines it, compels us to think about the

medium as a way of “framing, understanding and mediating” the world rather than it being a static cultural object or commodity as it has been defined by scholars and historians in the past (Rastenberger and Sikking 2018, 21). Photography is rather a practice of seeing, thinking and reflecting – *photographic thinking*. In the twenty-first century – the photographic century – we need to understand ourselves and the world through images.



John Baldessari, *Commissioned Painting: A Painting by Anita Storck* [left] and *Commissioned Painting: A Painting by William Bowne*, 1969 [right]

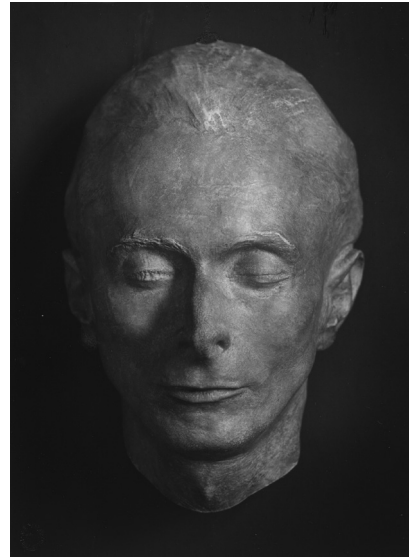
Analytic philosopher Carl Plantinga distinguishes two categories for a definition of documentary: the Documentary as Indexical Record and the Documentary as Assertion. Documentary as Indexical Record establishes a photograph as “the product of a series of mechanical cause-and-effect operations performed in and through a machine – the camera” (Plantinga 2013, 53) ascribing to it a truth claim based on its independent mechanical nature and not on human intentionality. This is what distinguishes it from painting, for instance, in which every decision is performed by human actions. Technically speaking, photographs are independent of beliefs, like “footprints and death masks, traces of the world left by the subjects themselves” (Plantinga 2013, 54). Yet this is only a narrow part of the disposition of documenta-

ry and negates the creative and interpretive nature of images when they are no longer independent, mechanically produced objects, but become part of a construction and intention. In relation to film, philosopher Noël Carroll has argued that we should replace ‘documentary’ with the categories ‘film of presumptive trace’ and ‘films of presumptive assertion’ because these concepts can allow for the use of fictive elements, such as reenactment, in the service of representing real events.

Amongst varying formulations of Documentary as Assertion is the notion of ‘presumptive assertion’, in which the spectator of a documentary merely presumes that it is related to reality as asserted. This depends on the author/photographer’s intention and in which context the work is presented. Although this doesn’t hold much ground as the sole criteria for a definition either. Plantinga combines both these categories in what he calls Asserted Veridical Representation, which leans more towards post-structural theory based on asserted propositions that integrate ideas of self-reflexivity and phenomenology. “When a filmmaker presents a film as a documentary, he or she not only intends that the audience come to form certain beliefs, but also implicitly asserts something about the medium itself – that the use of motion pictures and recorded sounds offer an audiovisual array that communicates some phenomenological aspect of the subject, from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form a sense of the phenomenological aspect and/or form true beliefs about that subject” (Plantinga 2013, 60). Documentaries consequently have a profound effect on how reality is perceived and therefore change our understanding of it, as long as we make the right assertions when inferring them.

Analytical philosophy falls short of establishing a satisfying definition, so perhaps it’s simply the term’s societal function that best describes its implication. What people typically mean when they use the word ‘documentary’, or what is understood as veridical representation, is established by conventions that change and develop throughout history. After all, documentary was born out of an attempt to understand and represent a reality constantly in flux. Changes in political, economic, societal, and technological interpretations of reality are forever expanding the ways in which we can communi-

cate truths, continuously challenging the boundaries of the documentary form.



Death Mask of Erich Sander, 1944, gelatin silver print, 25.8 × 18.7 cm © August Sander

Uncertainty: Multiple and Mutable Realities

The perpetual doubt, the nagging insecurity—whether what we see is “true,” “real,” “factual” and so on—accompanies contemporary documentary reception like a shadow. Let me suggest that this uncertainty is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such [...] The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true.

— Hito Steyerl, *Documentary Uncertainty*, 2011.

Alan Sekula wrote in 1973 that “in photography, the myth of the documentary label is the folklore of photo-

graphic truth” (Sekula 2016, 56). Photography’s indexical relationship to reality and its inherent truth-claim are central to its societal function and documentary value. Still, today’s media realisms are sensational spectacle-driven, 24-second news cycles in which the distrust and doubt in its truth value are already embedded in their very construction, “producing a habitual anxiety centered on the question of truth and manipulation” (Steyerl 2009a). Photography should not be subjected to the harsh categories of truth and falsehood, although “the only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true,” proclaimed Hito Steyerl (Steyerl 2011, 2). Maybe it is this uncertainty that makes the documentary one of the most innovative forms of contemporary art today; creating new relationships between ethics, aesthetics, responsibility, fact and fiction, undermining power structures, economic conditions and political entanglement.

The critical documentary seems to be a mode that finds itself somewhere in-between fact and fiction, realism and constructivism, information and art, reference and expression. It sometimes has the ability to rupture through the constructiveness of formatted knowledge, pragmatism and instrumentality that often accompanies it. While dealing with its own terms and conditions of production, the documentary instantly plugs into a larger contextual framework. It is responsible for becoming part of it, part of an epistemological mechanism, that contributes and affects what lies outside of its own existence as an independent artwork. The documentary attitude, critical method or gesture, is a way of coming to terms with reality – a way of doing, engaging and creating that embraces the “multiple and mutable realities of our world” (Balsom and Peleg 2016, 18). A form that “establishes a link to the world in which reality is perceived as a possible eventuality rather than a past event,” demonstrating a desire to “generate an understanding of contemporary realities, while at the same time admitting the limits of understanding imposed by that same reality” (Giannouri 2016, 230). This does not undermine the idea that truth exists, but rather acknowledges that all documentary is essentially ‘performative’ in relation to the truths it attempts to represent

before they transpire.

I've always experienced the documentary process as a hybrid one, where various approaches can come together in different forms and from multiple perspectives in response to reality's multi-dimensionality. Where the creation of an image can shift fluently from a performative or theatrical act into a sculptural intervention, contextualized by found footage, embedded into a socially constructed narrative, ultimately brought together in the form of a book, film or exhibition installation. Above all, a space in which images are conscious of their own deceptive nature and can openly embrace its limitations, critically questioning itself, doubting and speculating over our mediated relationship to reality when attempting to (somewhat clumsily) represent it through images and narrative.



Supplementing the Pause with a Distraction, from the series *The Fourth Wall*, 2012 © Max Pinckers

5 POSTMODERNIST CRITIQUE: PHOTOJOURNALISM AS THE VENEER OF SOCIAL CONCERN

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her; but he loves her in an age of lost innocence.

– Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1994.

Two Schools of Photography Criticism

Documentary photography theory can be divided into two main schools of photography criticism, two extremes which I will later attempt to reconcile in my own artistic documentary practice. The distrust towards photography as a deceptive medium was established by the postmodern and poststructuralist critique from the mid-1970s with Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, up to the late 1980s and 1990s with John Berger, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Allan Sekula, John Tagg, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Martha Rosler, in which photographs are viewed as no more than incitements of compassion instead of creating any real change in political attitudes or actions. More recently, perpetual warfare against invisible enemies and mass movements of social uprising in resistance to violated democratic principles have generated the necessity for a theoretical re-evaluation of documentary and its societal and political impact. Ariella Azoulay, Susie Linfield, Judith Butler, T.J. Demos and John Roberts are only some of the many contemporary thinkers placing documentary photography back into a sphere of humanism, empathy and human rights, which has also created a renewed interest in socially engaged photojournalism.

A glance at the historical development of documentary photography reveals that the fluctuation between these two schools of thought has defined the medium since its establishment. The now conventional postmodern criticism of photography can be traced back to early twentieth-century discussions by Bertolt Brecht, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the 'aestheticization of tragedy'. Benjamin, in *The Author as Producer* (1934), referred to the New Objectivity movement as having "succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment," referring to Albert Renger-Patzsch's book *Die Welt ist schön* (1928), "transforming political struggle so that it ceases to be a compelling motive for decision and becomes an object of comfortable contemplation"

(Benjamin 1934, 775). Kracauer established a distrust towards photographs and a disenchantment of memory in the capitalist imagination. For Kracauer “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory” and “the assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits.” Behind the smiling ‘photographic face’ of capitalism and consumerism is a “society with no sense of itself, with a memory wiped blank” (Gilloch 2015, 48). Photographs were the antithesis to contemplation and understanding, betraying an indifference towards what things mean, and were therefore highly suspect. Brecht associated the emotional response to photographs with an assault on sentiment by capitalism itself. In 1931, Brecht reflected on press photography as a propaganda tool – as a perfect means for misinformation and manipulation – in what has by now become a widely cited quotation that still remains significant today. Here it is once more:

The tremendous development of photojournalism has contributed practically nothing to the revelation of the truth about conditions in this world. On the contrary photography, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, has become a terrible weapon against the truth. The vast amount of pictured material that is being disgorged daily by the press and that seems to have the character of truth serves in reality only to obscure the facts. The camera is just as capable of lying as the typewriter (Kahn 1985).

Brecht’s thoughts would later be compiled in one of the most instrumental photobooks criticizing photojournalism titled *Kriegsfibel* (1955), in which subversive poems occupy the space of captions in relation to press photos collected from newspapers (*fotoepigramme*, as Brecht dubbed them). As Joachim Schmid writes, “one man’s poetry versus a regime’s propaganda – a hopeless case. The regime perished, poetry survived” (Schmid 2015).

The Steerage (1907) by Alfred Stieglitz is considered the first photograph to be both an informative document and a work of artistic modernism. This image demonstrated that essentially ‘documentary’ photographs

could convey transcendental truths and fully embody all of the principles by which any graphic image was deemed ‘artistic’. Reacting to the painterly pictorialist movement of the time, early photo-documentaries by Lewis Hine, Paul Strand and Jacob Riis combined both accurate recordings of reality with a modernist visual aesthetic. Their images were clear, sharp, well-lit and descriptive. Not like their predecessors who made ‘painterly’ photographs in the pictorial tradition. French author Olivier Lugon explains the importance of Walker Evans in the United States and August Sander in Germany as two key photographers for establishing the documentary as a genre in the 1930s. Both radically broke away from accepted photographic conventions by applying an objective style in which the subjects would shape the photographs rather than their authors (Lugon 2001).

The ultimate goal of documentary photography was to describe reality in detail, as neutral and transparent as possible. The seemingly uncreative, forensic, deadpan, scientific style of Evans’ photographic documentation was only accepted as an artistic gesture because he decisively utilized this formal approach as a ‘style’. He made his intentions of doing so explicit by defining his work paradoxically as a ‘documentary style’ instead of ‘documentary photography’, which was often associated with more traditional norms of realism. This style was defined by a set of formal criteria leading to a specific visual approach, without falling into the uncritical notion of mere technical mechanical reproduction. Subsequently, the work produced for the Farm Security Administration by Evans, Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein did much to establish a traditional idea of documentary photography in the early twentieth century. In the post-war era, a new genre of ‘subjective documentary’ with a stronger personal motive took to the streets. Instead of being in the service of a social cause with the intent to persuade, American street photographers such as Gary Winogrand, Lee Freedlander, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus directed their gaze to the commonplace, day to day life (established by John Szarkowski’s seminal MoMA exhibition *New Documents* in 1967).

This would later be criticized by the conceptual artist Martha Rosler as “a poor argument for the value of disengagement from a ‘social cause’” during the peak of

the Vietnam War (Rosler 1981). Rosler artistically manifested this criticism in a series titled *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–1972), consisting of collages integrating press images from the Vietnam War into photographs of idyllic domestic interiors from popular lifestyle magazines. One of the legacies of modernism and its anti-documentary bias, which was terrified of political engagement, was that it had to set up an absolute boundary between political speech and aesthetic address, she explains in a Zoom panel. She felt it was her task as a critical artist to transgress these boundaries (Clark et al. 2020).



Red Stripe Kitchen, 60.3 × 46 cm [left] and *Balloons*, 60.2 × 47.9 cm [right], from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, c. 1967–72, pigment inkjet prints (photomontage)
© Martha Rosler

It is generally assumed that Cornell Capa coined the term ‘concerned photography’ in 1966 as a way to commemorate his brother Robert Capa and his fellow Magnum Photos colleagues David “Chim” Seymour and Werner Bischof, who had all died while on assignment in the 1950s. In response to the diminishing interest in photography as a form of witnessing, Cornell Capa founded The Fund for Concerned Photography Inc. in 1967 so that photojournalists could ‘bear witness’ without the constraints imposed on them by the print media and the rising competition of television. Although this

term quickly took on another meaning with the photography criticism of the 1970s, where the “individuality of the witness-artist,” to put it in Capa’s words, came under scrutiny (Duganne 2007, 66).

Postmodern Photography Criticism

In the 1970s, when documentary began dealing with its own conditions of representation and embraced its own shortcomings, it took on a postmodern hue. Postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies of self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence. A school of relativism that declared the absolute absence of originality and truth, with appropriation artists such as Richard Prince as prominent figures of this ‘-ism’. Photographs were no longer seen as transparent windows on the world, but “as intricate webs spun by culture” (Grundberg 1999, 100). Images now no longer referred to the reality of the world, but only to each other.

The early beginnings of this shift in documentary critique are marked by texts of Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1928), Bertolt Brecht’s revelation of political ideology through photojournalism as a “terrible weapon against the truth in the hands of the bourgeoisie,” (Kahn 1985) and pioneering metacritical works such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by Walker Evans and James Agee (1941), in which writer and photographer go head to head in an attempt to meticulously describe impoverished farmers during the Great Depression.¹⁷ Documentarians would later shift from cold-blooded observers to moralizing manipulators. “Humanism,” wrote Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), “is nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectations.” Humanitarian imagery was seen as moral rhetoric masquerading as visual evidence (Franklin 2016, 63).

When photography entered the discourse and marketplace of the art world in the late 1970s and began

¹⁷ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was made in July and August of 1936 in Hale County, Alabama, on assignment for Fortune magazine, but not published until 1941.

appearing in galleries and museums, was it confronted with the strain of converting suffering and violence into aesthetic objects. Its artistic meanings and social meanings were torn apart. Debates around the politics of representation, the gaze, the act of looking, and undermining power positions, gave rise to a self-reflexive attitude in documentary photography. This momentum reached its heights in the 1980s with seminal texts by Rosler, Sontag, and Sekula. With *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75), followed by her 1981 text *In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)*, Rosler attacks the populist mainstream ‘liberal documentary’ (in the era of Thatcher and Reagan) and its impoverished representational strategies, pleading for a radically new approach to documentary. “Concerned photography,” wrote Rosler, embraces “the weakest possible idea of social engagement, namely compassion.” The liberal documentary shows unequal social relations as established laws of nature and doesn’t offer solutions. It places poverty in the same category as natural disasters – not to be questioned and without direct accusations. A pessimism towards the aestheticization of photojournalism and its societal function as the “veneer of social concern” or a disburdening of responsibility become mainstream in photography critique. “The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position” protested Rosler, “documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threats into fantasy, into imagery,” feeding the ‘if it bleeds it leads’ mentality (Rosler 1981, V).

In the vein of a Brechtian Marxist worldview, Sekula’s essay *Dismantling Modernism* (1976–78) sharply criticized documentary as a genre that “has contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world” (Sekula 1978). The dual powers of photography as both bearing witness and aestheticizing reality – to generate documents that could also be works of visual art – have created much discussion about the inauthenticity of the beautiful. The photograph contradicts: “stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, what a spectacle!” wrote Sontag. “Photographs

that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful, as captions shouldn’t moralize,” she objected, “a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document” (Sontag 2003, 68). Another form of skepticism to photography’s humanist potential is the postmodernist idea of the exhaustion of the image universe. There are already too many images, everything has already been visualized, and photographers can find more than enough images already existing in the world without the bother of making new ones. If only Rosler, Sontag and Sekula could have anticipated today’s visual culture, in which the suffering of others is visualized, commodified and consumed in a globally networked society more than ever before.

Good Intentions

Salgado is too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures—and with finding the “grace” and “beauty” in the twisted form of his anguished subjects. And this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anaesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action.

– Ingrid Sischy, *Good Intentions*, 1991.

In response to a fast-growing cult-like appreciation and commercialization of ‘concerned photography’ in the 1980s and 1990s, art critic Ingrid Sischy wrote a razor-sharp criticism of Sebastião Salgado’s work in an article titled “Good Intentions,” published in *The New Yorker* (Sischy 1991). She takes over the reins from Rosler’s and Sekula’s critique of W. Eugene Smith, who described his camera and film as the fragile weapons of his good intentions. A text which has now itself turned into somewhat of an iconic reference within this discussion.

Sischy is concerned with Salgado's work at the height of his career as one of the most appraised and successful photojournalists of the twentieth century, which more recently culminated in the biographical documentary film *The Salt of The Earth* (2014) directed by Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, chronicling his life-work. Salgado's oeuvre is recognizable by the epic scenes of human suffering shaped by international conflict, starvation, exodus, labor exploitation and natural landscapes in decline. Projects he dedicates many years to, often in collaboration with his wife, Lélia Wanick Salgado. Underlining his good intentions are his connections to NGO's and organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières and UNICEF (the latter of which he has been the Goodwill Ambassador since 2001), but his work is mainly seen and consumed in the form of enormous traveling exhibitions and lavish coffee-table books. The artistic quality of Salgado's visually stunning photographs have earned him a place within galleries and museums and has created a fanbase mania in popular photography culture as 'photojournalism-plus-much-more'. Supposedly, these images are powerful enough to change perceptions and provide an honorable stage that sheds a hopeful beam of light onto the people depicted in them. Even though he donates much of the profits from his work to NGO's, there seems to be a disparity between his intentions and the life of his photographs.

Here, the heroic auteur takes center stage, and the subject matter becomes arbitrary, treated with the same formulaic blanket approach for every new body of work. Sischy recognizes Salgado's noble ambition of being a "spokesphotographer for forgotten people," and also for "soon-to-be-lost ways of life" (a mission that Jimmy Nelson has more recently taken on with his project *Before They Pass Away*), although cannot equate this with his use of beauty as a formula. His images are "sloppy with symbolism" and his captions "pseudo-educational in tone," she writes, his visual rhetoric suggests "both religious art and the kitsch products resulting from the commercialization of religion. Salgado is given to including cross-like forms in his pictures" (Sischy 1991). He too often presents people in a way "that implies a connection to saints, martyrs, and various other figures

familiar from Judeo-Christian iconography," which essentially fits into a "long and convenient tradition of coupling human suffering and God's will" without accusation for the grounds of this suffering and as something that cannot be cured (Sischy 1991). Setups of juxtaposition and visual poetry in his images objectify the people in them, evoking standardized responses from viewers, such as overheard by Sischy from an onlooker at the exhibition: "I can't look at this picture. It makes me cry," while the woman was looking at it, and not crying (Sischy 1991). Even though photography has done much to expose atrocity and make violence visible, it has not necessarily translated into action. That is precisely the failure at the heart of 'concerned photography', and what postmodernists have been criticizing since the 1970s.

The fierce critique on documentary photography and reportage was so influential it resulted in a kind of representational paralysis for several years, with no significantly radical new approaches emerging in the field. Although this is by now an established discourse in criticizing photojournalism, the mainstream status quo unfortunately still remains largely the same today. Almost thirty years later, it's business as usual and has in some ways become worse. We now have celebrity photographers such as Alex Majoli not just focussing on one particular problem in the world but combining a whole series of different global issues and throwing them all into one basket, using the same Caravaggio-like aesthetic of 'the world as a theatre' in which no one has any agency whatsoever.¹⁸ Sebastião Salgado, Steve McCurry and James Nachtwey are still the most popular and widely accepted norms of what photojournalism is and should be. Privileged White males freely roaming the world with their camera, beautifully documenting global inequality and the 'exotic other'.

¹⁸ For an expanded analysis of Alex Majoli's *Skēnē*, see section *Alex Majoli: Skēnē* (pp. 207–215).

6 PHOTOGRAPHY'S

SENSUS COMMUNIS:

A HUMANIST REVIVAL

The Social Ontology of Photography

Despite photojournalistic practice and the formal qualities of professionally produced news photography not having changed much since a century ago, the current state of confusion and sense of indifference has led to a revived appreciation for humanism in documentary photography criticism. The attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 (the most photographed event in history) and the wars and social uprisings that followed, created a renewed appreciation for the image and the representation of trauma. Acknowledging the importance of the postmodernist contribution to self-reflexivity and critique on the medium, the focus has shifted towards the agency of the subjects represented in and through photographs, in what can be seen as a neohumanist tendency. Despite the fact that photography lies, it also speaks the truth. “Could it be,” asks poet and critic David Levi Strauss, “that the past necessary and substantive critiques of representation have become, in practical terms, hindrances to actually looking at images?” (Levi Strauss 2007). Instead of the idea posed by Sontag that images of suffering transfix and anesthetize, creating a “certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote (‘it’s only a photograph’), inevitable” (Sontag 1977, 15), a loss of engagement is in the process of being restored. Scholar of political science Mark Reinhardt has argued that the anxiety towards the representation (and thus aestheticization) of suffering is rather an anxiety towards the “rhetorical conventions, and the resulting transformative work, of representation itself” (Reinhardt 2007, 23). Contemporary critics and scholars have redefined and reimagined the political potential of photography in which compassion, transparency and human acknowledgement claim a voice in the reception and reading of photographs depicting human suffering. Susie Linfield pleads for engagement with the subjects of photographs by laying bare the postmodernist attitude of photographic skepticism:

They approach photography—not particular photographs, or particular photographers, or particular genres, but photography itself—with suspicion, mistrust, anger and fear. Rather than enter into what Kazin called a “community of interest” with their chosen subject, these critics come armed to the teeth against it. For them, photography is a powerful, duplicitous force to defang rather than an experience to embrace and engage (Linfield 2010, 5).

Very little writing on photography is positive and joyful about its qualities, and much of it focusses on the medium’s limitations and disdain. Emotional responses towards photographs have been relentlessly dismissed instead of experienced, cultivating a pessimistic tone towards the medium as “nothing other than a discontinuous series of representations, copies, fakes” (Linfield 2010, 8). Postmodernist discourse on photography has schooled the modern spectator into “consumers of violence as spectacle” and “adepts of proximity without risk” (Sontag 2003, 99), in which the possibility of sincerity or compassion is drowned by treacherous cynicism. Linfield writes that its “truth-value has been tossed without regret into the dustbin of history, encouraging a careless contempt toward documentary photographs” (Linfield 2010, 12).

As a reaction to comprehensive postmodern discussions, twenty-first-century photography criticism has returned to the notion ‘bearing witness’. It is now much more pervasive in its uncertainty and doubt when it comes to representing facts and questioning its own positions within larger epistemological power structures. Photography has become embracing of its own shortcomings and therefore also more transparent in its production. It poses questions about notions of truth from a more subjective point of view, without necessarily abandoning its humanist values. The feelings of spectators have also become a more important element within the equation as an amplifying force to critical thinking, rather than an undermining one. In today’s hyper-individual age, feelings and emotions now thrive more than ever when interpreting photographs.

Photographs as Emotions Rather than Reason

In her book *The Cruel Radiance* (2010) Susie Linfield argues that ugly photographs of suffering are not more authentic or morally better than beautiful ones. The danger of “confusing moral weight with aesthetic clumsiness” is that this is more “concerned with the clear conscience of the viewer rather than with the plight of the injured subject” (Linfield 2010, 44). Linfield refutes Brecht and his following for only seeing photography’s failures instead of admitting to what photographs succeed in doing. “Photographs excel, more than any other form of either art or journalism, in offering an immediate, viscerally emotional connection to the world.” According to her, there is no doubt that we approach photographs primarily through emotions rather than reason to discover our own intuitive reactions to otherness. People don’t look to photographs to understand the complexities of their inner nature, to gain deeper insights, obtain answers, draw conclusions or provide solutions to global problems. “They—we—turn to photographs for other things: for a glimpse of what cruelty, or strangeness, or beauty, or agony, or love, or disease, or natural wonder, or artistic creation, or depraved violence, looks like” (Linfield 2010, 22). It is precisely the incapability of photographs to explain that makes them valuable. Because they don’t have an inherent meaning, they don’t dictate how we should feel, what we should think, or which questions we should be asking. The point in looking at photographs, especially of suffering and conflict, is not to dissemble them, nor to reject them as deceptions or partial truths, and certainly not to deny the sometimes uncomfortable reactions and emotions they bring about. Instead, photographs invite a beginning of a dialogue, a potential conscious relationship, a process of thoughtful, emotional reflection. The enemy here is to be found in the forces that make people suffer – not in its documentation, she claims. The ethical questions about the aestheticization of violence lie in how we *use* these images. There is essentially no unproblematic way to depict people’s suffering or degradation. Jacques Rancière writes that “the accusation

of ‘aestheticizing horror’ is too convenient, shows too much ignorance of the complex entanglement between the aesthetic intensity of the exceptional situation taken in by a gaze, and the ethical or political concern to bear witness to the horror of a reality nobody is bothering to see” (Rancière 2007). Photography has done much to globalize our consciousness to the extent that it’s simply impossible to use the alibi of ignorance; they now demand a response.

Photographs as Civil Contract

In defense of empathy as a necessity for collective action, Hariman and Lucaites write that “citizenship is transferable from one body to the other, not by legal entitlement or any contractual relationship, but through acts of empathy, affectional identification, and emotional expression on behalf of the other” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 145). Citing Rancière’s ‘communities of sense’, writer Joscelyn Jurich defines this as photography’s ‘*sensus communis*’: a collective exercise of judgment to create “new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be done... [it] cannot merely occupy the space left by the weakening of political conflict. It has to reshape it, at the risk of testing the limits of its own politics” (Jurich 2013b, 15). It is a necessity for creating a compassionate and inclusive, politically empowered visual public sphere.

Photography as a passport of ‘citizenry’ was introduced by Ariella Azoulay in her disruptive book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008). Anyone who addresses others through photographs, either by looking at photographs or by being photographed, becomes an equal member of this so-called photographic citizenship, enabling anyone to pursue political agency and resistance by being represented in photographs or engaging with them. Photographs allow viewers to be somewhere they might not be, to see what would otherwise remain invisible. Azoulay considers photographs as “transit

visas” granting a kind of citizenship that transcends borders: “we are citizens not of nations but of images,” she argues, “we are accountable to one another, responsible for what we can now see” (Sentilles 2017b). In spite of the conditions in which the photograph was produced, and with a clear understanding of photography’s relationship to power and exploitation, Azoulay claims that “photographs cannot be ‘owned’ by a stable meaning and are a sort of free currency for the global citizenry of photography,” (Jurich 2013b, 11) which operates on the basis of a common interest between participating in photography’s act of looking. The act of being photographed is not a process of victimization but rather an empowering civic action or a kind of revolutionary act that takes place in the “civil imagination” (Azoulay 2015). Her intention is to “create the potentiality for a new language of photography that distinguishes between political and visual categories, and to unbind photographs from linguistic labels that limit their interpretation. Azoulay’s assumption is that if our ways of seeing and making photographs ‘speak’ change, the configuration of power relations and collective responsibility will also shift” (Jurich 2013b, 14).

Our Privileges Are Located on the Same Map as Their Suffering

The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers—seen close-up on the television screen—and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on

how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.

— Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003.

Just before her death in 2004, Susan Sontag pivots her view on the depiction of suffering through photographs by reviewing her thoughts from her seminal book *On Photography* (1977). “Let the atrocious images haunt us,” she whispers in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), “even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing — may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget” (Sontag 2003, 102). The frustration and impotence of not being able to do anything about the suffering that we see on a daily basis is reflected in our dismay for the images that bring this to us. The responsibility of our engagement and compassion lies not with the images, but with us as consumers and spectators, and the questions we ask ourselves about what exists in and around the frame. “Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?” (Sontag 2003, 104).

In the same year of Sontag’s compassionate revival, David Levi Strauss also reacts to the beautification of suffering in photography, specifically in response to Ingrid Sischy’s critique of Salgado’s oeuvre (discussed earlier). The anti-aesthetic tendency — the postmodern cynicism — can easily become anesthetic too, “an artificially induced unconsciousness to protect oneself from pain, and to protect the ‘hypocritical frontiers’ of propriety and privilege” (Levi Strauss 2003, 8). “To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform,” he wrote. Aesthetics

“deals with what is *not* there, imagining things into existence” (Levi Strauss 2003, 9). It is not about how much, or how beautiful something is. Beautification cannot be quantified, he claims. In this sense, every image is a form of aestheticization. Although what can be quantified, or at least recognized as some kind of recurring categorization, are the stereotypes and conventions of this aestheticization, and their implicit meanings in reference to clearly identifiable iconography. “Why *can’t* beauty be a call to action?” asks Levi Strauss. Because, I propose, that it is the wrong *kind* of beauty. “Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock,” would be Sontag’s response (Sontag 2003, 72). Let us call this the ‘transparency paradox’ in the contemporary hierarchy of images, in which photographs feel and look more authentic and real when they are less ‘constructed’ — poor images — and do not answer to the conventional visual rules of painterly aesthetics or other formal tropes. Such as the difference in assertions made when looking at a photograph made by a civilian protestor on their mobile phone versus one made by a trained photojournalist with a high-resolution camera and extra lighting equipment.

The problem with this discussion is that the creation of any image is a process of aestheticizing. From the moment something or someone is framed, they become the object of the gaze, they become forms, shapes. And even though both kinds of images are equally so an aestheticization of an event, the photojournalist is often more inclined to make an image that resonates within the realm of an image repertoire, mirroring familiar tropes that are known to be visually effective. While the amateur simply uses the descriptive power of registration to document what is there with basic tools at hand. Nonetheless, both aesthetic qualities equally demand our attention towards what the image makes visible. Linfield’s points out the problem with such arguments: if a well-taken picture of pain is a ‘moral affront’, then what is the solution? A hastily composed image? Sloppiness? Ugliness? “It is as if we, the relatively safe and relatively well-off, can atone for our good fortune only by delving into the visual equivalent of sackcloth and ashes: if a pic-

ture seems sloppy, it's okay to look" (Linfield 2010, 44). Although this reasoning is yet another manifest to our privileged, detached gaze: "this is the aesthetic not of commitment but of guilt, tinged with a peculiar narcissism." Longing for a perfect photograph of pain reveals something troubling: "a desire to not look at the world's clueless moments and to remain, therefore, unsullied" (Linfield 2010, 45). This catch-22 attempting to show the unshowable or speak the unspeakable is the very paradox of the documentary in the neohumanist disposition, and why it has become so important.

Evident from this new school of thought is that the photograph becomes an intermediary for connecting people to each other, a vehicle for establishing relationships between photographed and spectator. The photographer and his or her intentions, or the deconstruction of the photograph itself, now seem less relevant. Photographs have once again become transparent windows onto the world, or better yet, like the impenetrable glass between inmate and visitor mutely staring at each other, both aware of the surrounding prison walls. A deeper understanding of representation is needed in which meaningful photojournalism can challenge the stereotypes and conventions of the current visual codes. We should not just bear witness through photographs and acknowledge the subjects within them, but we should simultaneously recognize the limitations of the 'frame' and always consider what is not included within it. Linfield suggests we use photography's "ambiguities as a starting point of discovery: by connecting these photographs to the world outside their frames, they begin to love and breathe more fully. So do we" (Linfield 2010, 29).

Reconciliation: Engage as Much as Reflect

Are we in need of a new documentary frame of realism that embodies the ambiguity and complexity of our time, in which ties to reality and truth are strengthened

rather than severed? Is contemporary documentary photography truly engaging with today's multiple realisms, and critically responding to formerly established conventions? In order to avoid falling into the dangerous trap of conventions "our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions," declared Brecht in 1938 (the same year Orson Welles broadcast *The War of the Worlds*). With the rise of right-wing nationalism, populist politics and a return of fascism in recent years, it is crucial that documentarians put themselves on the line – put their own privilege at stake – risk and experiment with radical new means of production.

It seems that beauty and social concern don't necessarily play a zero-sum game. Because there are inherent problems with representing the pain of others, it does not mean we should no longer attempt to do so. We should not shy away from the collective responsibility to confront histories of oppression. I believe that the true potential of documentary photography today lies in the possibility of reconciling an emotional and compassionate approach with a critical self-reflexive attitude towards the boundaries of the frame, however paradoxical that may sound. A position that artist and writer Victor Burgin described as "the silent space between aestheticism and sociologism" (Burgin 2018, 10). Contemporary documentary appears to lean towards postmodern constructivism in which reflexivity is a central, if not a crucial element to its status as art rather than information or some form of social engagement. But it cannot afford to collapse into pure self-referentiality and must take up its responsibility to engage as much as reflect. In today's age in which a fluidity of multiple truths and realities compete for credibility, there seems to be a continuous desire for deconstructionism, reflection and critique. Yet there also appears to be a growing disconnection between people and their shared experience of reality. A new age of hyper-individualism may eventually lead towards the need for deeper emotional connections and engagement with others. Documentary's inherent *two-foldness* is what maintains its significance as a means of understanding the world inside and around oneself. As both subjective and objective, critical and poetic, collaborative and idiosyncratic, self-reflexive and emotional,

philosophical and intuitive, engaged and analytical. To quote Linfield once more, it can “teach us how to see, and perhaps even love, more wisely” (Linfield 2010, 30).

In my ongoing project *Mau Mau, History Makers* (working title), I make an attempt to put into practice many of the ideas described above. My main intent with this work is to find a way to balance postmodernist constructivism and a humanist approach. The artistic strategy of the theatrical ‘in-person’ reenactment has emerged as one possible way of dealing with these issues. In some ways, the in-person reenactment has become the culmination of my work in terms of bringing both extreme poles of thinking on photography together. This approach not only thinks about itself and its own conditions of representation, but it also provides a stage – a collaborative platform – for people to express themselves within this self-reflexive space. It is one of many potential documentary gestures that could provide artistic answers to the complex undertaking of dealing with, representing, and understanding realities. Although what sort of new objectivity does this strategy produce, and what kind of self-reflexivity arises from it? Before we can delve into the reenactment as an invigorating documentary strategy, we must first elaborate on the function of theatricality in documentary photography.

7 DOCUMENTARY THEATRICALITY

*You must re-create reality because reality runs away; reality denies reality.
You must first interpret it, or re-create it... When I make a documentary, I try
to give the realism an artificial aspect... I find that the aesthetic of a document
comes from the artificial aspect of the document... it has to be more beautiful
than realism, and therefore it has to be composed... to give it another sense.*

— Georges Franju, *Documentary Explorations*, 1971.

Theatricality as Participation and Performance

In my early work *Lotus* (2011, in collaboration with Quinten De Bruyn), I attempted to create a meta-documentary by making photographs that look staged yet appear too spontaneous to be directed. In this method, a location is treated like a stage onto which a potential situation unfolds. A photographic environment is created in which the camera frame is decidedly defined and the artificial lighting set. Technical production elements explicitly reveal this theatrical construction by sometimes showing tripods and lighting equipment within the frame. Images would often include the figure of the meta-spectator; someone that looks at the main characters within the same photograph, or the meta-photographer; a photographer within the image photographing the same scene, all within a photographically controlled environment in which the stage is set for spontaneous, uncontrollable moments to naturally occur. Instead of pretending to represent reality in a direct ‘truthful’ sense, I created a context in which images lay bare their constructed nature yet allow real moments to unfold.

In accepting the unknowable and departing from there, I was somehow freed from the traditional constraints of documentary’s problems of representation. Rather than undermining photography’s ability to claim a form of truth, I posed a more challenging question, encouraging viewers to examine the connections and beliefs upon which documentary photography’s authority ultimately depend. “A kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual,” as Werner Herzog wrote in his *Minnesota Declaration* (1999), “there are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization” (Herzog 1999). A statement which I can very much identify with, in terms of how I look at the notion of ‘truth’ in documentary photography.

The discourse surrounding ‘staged’ photography seamlessly interchanges the terms ‘theatricality’, ‘per-

formativity’ and ‘cinematic’. It is important to make a distinction in relation to what is meant with ‘theatrical documentary’ in regard to my practice. My idea of theatricality is an extension of the tableau form characterized by French critic Jean-François Chevrier, in relation to a form of photography that emerged in the 1980s.¹⁹ As a new model for photography, the tableau was a way to add value to photography and establish it as an autonomous art form, asserting a position within the regime of representation, borrowing from painting, cinema and theater. Actors in the tableau form “take up position in a frame formed by the optical limits of the apparatus, just as they would in the determinate space of a theatre stage” (Poivert 2010, 537). This new aesthetic in photography contested a number of myths that dominated photographic thinking in the twentieth century, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ‘decisive moment’ or the idea of ‘bearing witness’.

Theatricality suggests that the beholder knows that photographs are performed with the intent of *being seen* and acknowledged. In his influential essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967), modernist art critic and art historian Michael Fried defined theatricality as an effect that turns the beholder into the subject and the artwork into the object. In drawing attention to itself as having been expressly created for the viewer, the artwork intrudes on the viewer’s experience, exerting some kind of ‘special complicity’ from the beholder. We don’t normally think about photographs as being theatrical or overtly calling attention to themselves as having been ‘created’. They are usually seen as moments that are ‘captured’ or observed rather than deliberately put together in a procedure that requires preparation, research and collaboration.

Fried later also introduces the notion of ‘absorption’ in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), in which his earlier concept of theatricality is expanded further in relation to Dennis Diderot’s idea of painted subjects depicted in a state of absorption, thus ignoring the presence of the onlooker. The use of absorptive motifs and structures as a way of establishing “the ontological illusion that the beholder does not exist” (Fried 2008, 34). Fried claims that whenever a self-consciousness of viewing exists, the viewer’s

¹⁹ It’s worth noting that the word ‘theatricality’ was first coined in 1837 and the word ‘photography’ in 1834 (with the official invention dated to 1839).

absorption is compromised, and theatricality is the result.

Figures in Jeff Wall’s work, for example, are frequently depicted as themselves watching an event or contemplating an object – who are ‘absorbed’ in what they are doing – and so bear a form of anti-theatricality, in which they ignore the presence of a viewer. According to Fried, this ‘absorptive mode’ of subjects being immersed in their own thought is a crucial principle of theatricality and the Diderotian tableau that allows photographs to affirm their own theatrical autonomy without making its performative nature towards the viewer explicit. Influenced by the filmmaker Robert Bresson, Wall works with exhaustive repetition, in which his subjects replay the same scene over and over again, sometimes for a number of days. He does this in order to break down the person’s urge to ‘perform’ and dismantles it to its own natural process in a form of ‘behavior’. A method that was initially used in Italian neorealist filmmaking, with people who simply ‘play themselves’, instead of professional actors. People get to demonstrate their way of life, of which they are often proud and enjoy showing it for the camera. When they are fully absorbed in their own actions, as they would normally be when not photographed, is it a performance or a behavior? Are artificiality and performativity, after all, not natural to human beings?

The aim of theatrical documentary photography is thus to appear anti-theatrical, realistic, without calling attention to its own constructed nature, oblivious towards the beholder (when it is in reality, the opposite). Inversely, one could propose that the aim of photojournalism is to appear theatrical, like a painting, spectacular (while attempting to be non-interventional). Maintaining a sense of realism, especially in documentary photography, is crucial to give the impression that the image is authentic, and therefore allows the viewer to connect with it on a deeper emotional and intellectual level in order to willingly believe it.

The practice of theatricality is a matter of subtle balance. When done with integrity and transparency in its production process, staging becomes a means of undecieving how the world is photographically represented. By critically questioning the formats and aesthetics,

we are commonly persuaded to believe through mass culture, stereotyping and so-called objective photojournalism. Although Fried suggests that photography's theatricality relies heavily on the viewer's experience when looking at photographs, my focus as a practitioner will be on the intentionality of the creator when making theatrical documentary photographs.

How can one make explicitly theatrical documentary photographs and still remain realistic, without undermining the agency of the subject? How not to make mere snapshots but also not simply create staged *tableaux vivants*? Theatricality in documentary photography has formed a central theme throughout my work ever since the beginning. The photograph both as a document of a performative act, and a document of a particular abstract concept, notion or occurrence in the philosophical sense. By borrowing characteristics from narrative fiction film and theater, the documentary photographs I create become ambiguous and subtly reveal their constructed nature without dismissing the authenticity of the moments they depict. I usually work with real people in the natural documentary sense, rarely with actors or stand-ins, and always on location (not in the studio). Subjects are sometimes genuinely absorbed in their actions, or sometimes pretend to be. On some occasions, they acknowledge the camera (and the viewer), and sometimes only each other within the same scene. But what is always implicitly acknowledged is their participation. My interpretation of theatricality does not only entail some form of 'theatrical' or 'cinematic' aesthetics (directing, lighting, framing, composition, and so on) but also people's conscious participation and collaboration. It can be described as a form of realism that attempts to lay bare the performative and participatory quality of this collaboration in which the subjects are complicit in the act. In this sense of meaning, documentary theatricality suggests that the people in these photographs are aware of its performative nature and give stature to their visual selves in the process.

Artificial Realism: Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca diCorcia

My initial methodology was inspired by the work of Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Both artists took the studio outdoors and approached the idea of the 'studio' as a mindset rather than a physical space – the 'expanded studio' as Wall has termed it. Much of this attitude has to do with intentionality instead of control or total renunciation to the beholder. Control is seeing this practice in a negative light, but this can be seen positively as *intention*. Photographs in which every detail has an intention, is given meaning, and contributes to the image as a whole. Staging is the result of the artist's intentionality. His or her intentionality is indexically present in the staging of the world. In conventional tableaux, photographic staging is a means to "diminish unintentional details in order to demonstrate artistic intentionality," writes cultural theorist Ernst van Alphen (van Alphen 2018, 93). The staged photograph is thus primarily an expression of the artist's vision and sensibility.

But of course, not everything in a photograph can be controlled: "No matter how precautionary and punctilious the photographer is in arranging everything that is placed before the camera, the inability of the lens to discriminate will ensure a substrate or margin of excess, a subversive code present in every photographic image that makes it open and available to other readings and uses," wrote Christopher Pinney (Pinney 2003, 6). A quotation to which the title of my book *Margins of Excess* is indebted. Roland Barthes claimed that photographs appear realistic and attain some form of documentary value in the very details that are unintentionally included in the frame, around the subject, that reveal parts of reality that the photographer may not have intended to capture.

This so-called 'studio mindset' is a place where free and unforeseen things can happen too, allowing unpredictable incidents of spontaneity to permeate the photograph. In Wall's *War Game* (2007), the children gathered the materials and built the fort that can be seen in the photograph, and the smiling child did so on his own be-

half, only once and unexpectedly, bringing a completely different dimension to the image than Wall had initially planned (de Duve and Wall 2015). These spontaneous el-



War Game, 2007, gelatin silver print, 247 x 302.6 cm © Jeff Wall

ements nonetheless appear as intentional because of the decisive, tableau-like aesthetic and ‘myth’ surrounding the creation process of this approach.

Wall makes staged photographs, often based on moments he has observed in reality.²⁰ Although everything is meticulously rehearsed, constructed and staged, his photographs look documentary in style. Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa wrote that “Wall’s work demonstrates with eloquence and persistence that imagination is foundational to the reception of visual facts, or that seeing requires an often unstated act of faith” (Wolukau-Wanambwa 2015b). Wall defines his work formally as ‘cinematography’ and conceptually as *near-documentary*: “I’m somehow near documentary, but I’m not there. I could be a neighbor. I could be a visitor. I could be a foreigner. I could be a lot of things but I’m not *it*,” he playfully clarifies (Wall 2010). In an interview he explains his process of registering an experience and transforming it into a photograph afterwards:

²⁰ Although most of Wall’s oeuvre consists of near-documentary works, it is worth noting that he also classifies some photographs as mere ‘documentary’, meaning they are in no way prepared for the camera, and are simply photographic registrations. One such work is *Concrete Ball* (2003), which is a photograph of exactly that, turned into a monument by Wall’s registration and presentation of it in a 223.52 x 278.77 cm light box.

When people are exposed in the world where they don’t necessarily have a lot of private space, they enact private things in public, and sometimes we see them, sometimes we don’t. Those moments are kind of moments that photographers in the vein of Winogrand or Frank want to capture as they happen. And occasionally they do capture those things. But you can imagine the millions of things that weren’t captured because Winogrand wasn’t there, or he didn’t have his camera. Either way, he missed it. And if he missed, he missed it forever. In my case, I don’t have to miss it forever. I mean, I’ve missed the real moment forever, the actual moment forever, but I haven’t missed the experience. I haven’t missed the possibility of transforming that into a picture by other means. It doesn’t make the same kind of claims as a photograph taken immediately on the street, obviously, but it makes other claims (Boddington 2019).

Documentary photography has generally been defined by the rudimentary way it has been practiced, namely through the snapshot or reportage. The nature of the camera as a mechanism that can be set off quickly and easily by anyone at any time is fundamental to photog-



New York, 1993, C-print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm © Philip-Lorca diCorcia

raphy. All other kinds of photographs have to relate to this 'normative center of photography' in some way. Wall sees his images as contemplations on the nature of that characteristic. One of his rules, for example, is never to include anything that would disturb the illusion that his photographs depict a moment exactly how it could have been if they were taken in a single moment, as if they *were* traditional street photographs or snapshots. And although they look like snapshots and resemble many of their characteristics, they are not snapshots, but they "contemplate them" (Wall 2010). Not only does Wall contemplate the nature of traditional reportage photography, his images often revisit sites common to twentieth-century photojournalism, such as the city's public space, empty lots, concrete structures, the urban periphery, and so on.

diCorcia does the opposite of Wall, although it essentially comes down to the same philosophical question. He makes snapshots that appear as staged tableaux, although they depict unmediated spontaneous situations. In *Streetwork* (1993-97) and *Heads* (2000-01) he uses artificial strobe lighting in a contradiction with street photography expectations. People are photographed from a distance, without their knowledge or participation, illuminated by spotlights as if on a theater stage or in a film scene. Writer and art historian Peter Galassi once described the effect of diCorcia's flashlights as "the crescendo of violins that announces the crux of a movie's drama" (Fried 2008, 253). In a number of these photographs, diCorcia combines the use of sunlight and flashlight, which creates a specifically unnatural effect that I am particularly attracted to. Especially when the flashlight is equally present as the available natural light, but only reveals itself through contradicting shadows or by coming from an unnatural direction. Not unlike the fascinating light tonality of sunlight reflecting by the tinted windows of glass buildings, casting colorful, magical rays into shaded street corners.

In other words, Wall makes photographs that appear real but are intricately organized scenes, and diCorcia's photographs appear staged but are in fact registrations of the uninterrupted flow of daily street life. These notions of realism and believability were the departing points for my documentary work, and way of thinking

about photography. I began to make work with real people, oriented around a particular subject matter in the form of series brought together in books (not typologies or singular stand-alone images like Wall or diCorcia often make). Together and in sequence, the images create a narrative that also reveals something about the subject's social reality, as in a traditional documentary construction, assisted by written accounts and other forms of documentation. Some photographs are spontaneous snapshots, others entirely predetermined and directed, some reenacted, some anticipated or subtly instigated. Always with the intent of making photographs that are theatrical in their appearance, yet real in their depiction of an occurrence. This blend of actuality, journalism, performance, reconstruction and theatricality creates contradictions, is messy and uncertain. But contradiction not only creates critical viewers, it also reveals an intention by the author.

In the traditional notion of reportage, something had to happen for a photographer to capture it, in the theatrical documentary approach, occurrences are created in order to be photographed. This different approach to the 'photographic moment' grew out of new tendencies in modern art's expression and the notion of time in the second half of the twentieth century. Preference and appreciation are given to the time before the event, leading up to it, and the waiting or anticipating for something to occur – the dead moments.

This crucial difference opened up a whole new arena of possibilities within contemporary documentary and created practices of collaboration, performativity and other critical methods of self-reflection. In this tendency, photographs no longer depend on what happens outside of one's control or intention, but can now be put together collaboratively or with the participation of the documentary subjects. It's somewhere between reportage, performance and documentary from which my essential interests in photography emerge.



The staging of the execution of a militiaman by resistance fighters, 1943. A series of nine faked photographs in which Chris Marker himself played the leader of the maquis armed with a pistol © Christian Bouche-Villeneuve (aka Chris Marker)/Swiss Federal Archives

The Hunt: Shooting Photographs

In April 2019 an elaborately produced television advertisement for Leica Camera (produced by F/Nazca Saatchi & Saatchi) was removed from the internet after sparking outrage in China, resulting in the word ‘Leica’ being censored on Sina Weibo, China’s social media platform. The plot revolves around several photojournalists in politically unstable environments, with its main focus on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, where AP photographer Jeff Widener made the now-iconic *Tank Man*.²¹ The final scene shows People’s Liberation Army officers attempting to aggressively confiscate a photographer’s film after ransacking his hotel room when he manages to evade them by rushing to an adjacent room to make the famous photograph.²² However, China’s attempted censoring of social rebellion is not the real reason this video should be deemed problematic. Titled *The Hunt*, it represents the photojournalist as a lone heroic figure risking his or her life for ‘the hunt’ in war-torn

²¹ Four other photojournalists were covering the scene from the same hotel: Charlie Cole (Newsweek), Stuart Franklin (Magnum), Arthur Tsang Hin Wah (Reuters) and Terril Jones (AP). Ironically, all photographers were using Nikon camera’s, not Leica’s (Nezik and Zand 2019).

²² In 2016 Bill Gates sold the Corbis archive to the Chinese media company Visual China Group, granting them ownership of the photographs from the crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989, with the potential power to remove it from history’s visual canon.

third-world countries. The big-budget action-packed sequence reaches its climax when a male voice-over firmly declares: “We hunt. We chase. We fight. We risk it all. Oddly enough we spend our entire lives in search of something that, for the most part, simply is not... until it is. As the grand moment draws near, we smile to ourselves, and proudly whisper, I’m a hunter.” The postscript of the film reads that it’s dedicated “to those who lend their eyes to make us see” (Saito 2019). This simplistic rendering of the myth of photojournalism is once again presented to us as supposedly unmasking the wrongdoings in the world, yet it uses the same aggressive terminology and tropes as what it is seemingly standing up against.

It has always bothered me that the act of photographing is often associated with ‘shooting’, ‘capturing’ and hunting, both literally and figuratively. This is especially common in photojournalism and street photography: to ‘shoot’ a picture or to ‘hunt for the perfect shot’, to aim with the crosshairs of the viewfinder, and to ‘load’ and ‘reload’ the camera film. The identification of the camera with the gun is a direct mechanism of its repressive power. When “we speak of ‘shooting’ with a camera,” writes Teju Cole, “we are acknowledging the kinship of photography and violence” (Cole 2019). This intimate relationship between camera and gun most likely originates with switching from bullets to film in the practice of safari trophy hunting, with publications such as *How to Hunt with the Camera* by William Nesbit from 1926. As one Namibian luxury resort’s website advertises: “unlike the ill-gotten gains of the trophy hunter which will need to be transported by a willing airline, at considerable price, a prized photograph attracts no government taxes or extra surcharges for the thrill of shooting their wildlife, with a camera” (Arebusch, n.d.). The framed photograph now replaces the animal head as a boastful trophy on the wall. “Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive... there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture... Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time... Eventually, people might learn to act out more of their aggressions with cameras and fewer with guns, with the price

being an even more image-choked world” (Sontag 1977, 10–11). Four decades later, Sontag’s projection resonates. We now experience violence and death on a daily basis through never-ending image streams that make up our virtual worlds, although with no less aggression and many more guns.



Saigon Execution, 1968, contact sheet © Eddie Adams

The camera and its ability to capture the precise moment when death occurs has always been an object of popular fascination. Photojournalism, above all, has an obsession with depicting death in the making. David Hume Kennerly, a Pulitzer Prize-Winning combat photographer, once said that “every photographer dreams of capturing that one great *shot*, that magical moment of passage from life into death” (Perlmutter 1998, xiii, emphasis added). Two of the most iconic war photographs do just that. Robert Capa’s *The Falling Soldier* (1936) and *Saigon Execution* by Eddie Adams (1968). Adams’ photograph of South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing an unarmed Viet Cong prisoner shocked the world and became the face of the Vietnam War (or American War). In 1/500th of a second, Adams captured the instant the bullet makes impact with the prisoners’ temple, distorting his face with a sharp tilt of the head. Decades later, Adams makes a gripping reflection on his

most famous photograph. Following the death of the executioner General Loan from cancer in 1998, Adams wrote in *TIME* that “two people died in that photograph: the recipient of the bullet and General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera” (Adams 2001). The photograph not only haunted Adams but also General Loan and his family too, ruining their lives.

In theatrical, self-reflexive, *near*-documentary photographs, the gun becomes imaginary. The ‘shot’ is slowed down... and the trigger is directed towards the spectator, not the subject. Unlike photojournalism, where the shot is meant to ring out as a revelatory act of ‘bearing witness’, staged documentary photographs shoot with imagination, with intent. The imagination fills in the missing gaps, as it always does, chasing after the reality that escapes it, like a stray bullet. In the following sections I will discuss some photographs in which the act of shooting takes place as a critical, imaginary gesture.



Men displaying home made and imaginary guns, prior to handing them over to the police, Nairobi, 1960s © East Africa Standard

Deana Lawson: Shooting with Imagination

American artist Deana Lawson makes portraits of Black culture by meticulously staging scenes using a documentary aesthetic. Her images silence me with admiration. They trigger my deep fascination for photographs in which scenes and spaces have been designed towards the creation of a single image, yet prick through these illusions by the subtle details that reveal a more messy, untamable reality. In Lawson's work, her imagination presents itself as reality – a reality that moves me. Her photographs feel all too real, and even though we know that they are almost like painterly constructions, we want to believe them.

She works with people that inspire her because of the way they look, and invites them into interiors that aren't theirs; spaces loaded with symbolism, pregnant with metaphors. Drawing on James Baldwin who said, "the crown has already been paid for. All we have to do is wear it," she feels that every subject she meets is already wearing a crown – motivating her to capture within them something that represents the "majesty of black life, a nuanced black life, one that is by far more complex, deep, beautiful, celebratory, tragic, weird, strange" (Lawson 2019). Lawson doesn't consider herself a documentarian but does admit that by making her photographs, she inserts her "singular dream vision within something that's very real" (Lawson 2019).

In *Sons of Cush* (2016) a topless tattooed man sits in a middle-class domestic interior, back to a door with its window taped shut, gazing intently into the camera while holding a newborn baby. To his left, sitting on small tables are framed family portraits, a plastic Chips Ahoy! cup, and what looks like a beheaded Jesus figurine. To his right, disrupting the frame, a second man's arm clutches a stack of dollar bills under an ornamental wristwatch, the word 'DOPE' etched onto his knuckles and heavy gold chains draping onto his chest. Pinned to the wall in the top left corner of the frame is a whiteboard displaying a carefully drawn diagram in the shape of the African continent, annotating the origins of the



Sons of Cush, 2016, pigment inkjet print, 108 × 136.5 cm © Deana Lawson

word 'Cush' – referring to Black history, civilization, family, spiritualism and religion.

Sons of Cush made Lawson appreciate the beauty of gold displayed on black skin: "There is a nobility and majesty of a lot of gold that's worn, and how it's appropriated in hip-hop, and how I think hip-hop actually channels ancient kingdoms: how gold was worn, say, in Kumasi with the Ashanti" (Lawson 2019). Hip-hop also appropriated gold teeth as a form of jewelry. Gold teeth were first present in America during the Jim Crow era in Louisiana and around the Mississippi Delta, and it's generally believed that inserting gold crowns to replace rotting teeth became a tradition amongst former slaves. Initially a safe place to store valuable metal, it gradually became a symbol of wealth and freedom to those that once worked on the plantations. The New York rap scene in the 1980s introduced the grill as jewelry worn over the teeth, usually in gold, but in some cases also silver or even diamond-clad.

This symbolism is at the root of the photograph *Nation* (2017), a pigment print installed in a golden frame (141 x 170.8 cm). The idea for this image came to Lawson in a dream in which a man with a mouthpiece haunts her. She connected this to former President George Washington's dentures by boldly inserting a clinical

postcard-like image of his false teeth in the top right corner of the frame, on top of her own photograph. Having had mouth issues throughout his life, with only one tooth remaining in his mouth on his presidential inauguration day, Washington had a mouthpiece made for him out of ivory, gold wire, and human teeth—slave teeth or teeth he purchased from slaves. His last remaining set of dentures is on permanent view at the Mount Vernon Estate, his former plantation, now a popular tourist attraction.

In *Nation* two men sit on one of those typical nondescript leather couches. The man in the middle, who has curly shiny hair and is wearing multiple golden chains, also bears an unusually eccentric golden device prying open his mouth. For this scene, Lawson purchased a dental apparatus; one that keeps the mouth open during surgery and painted it gold. She wanted it to “be like jewelry, but of course, it’s a medieval, frightening device that could harken back to torturous events during slavery” (Lawson 2019). She wasn’t sure how to use it at first, but Ruben volunteered to put it on. The image is littered with details that constantly contradict the staged nature



Nation, 2018, pigment inkjet print, 141 × 170.8 cm © Deana Lawson

of the scene. A lighter, phone and sunglasses lay cluttered together on the sofa with a crumpled-up T-shirt awkwardly tucked behind it. The camera is tilted, the room tips to one side. Ruben’s eyes are somewhere between open and closed. Behind the protagonist, almost out of frame, is a third man, also topless, looking down at what could be his phone. His face is not only covered by a cloth draping down onto his shoulders, but also by the image-insert of Washington’s dentures. Next to Ruben sits Killa Moe, who mimics the gesture of pulling the trigger of a pistol, taking a shot towards the camera at the moment the shutter is pressed. A double shot. Perhaps “a shot at the audience, or the institution of slavery,” contemplates Lawson, a way of saying “I recognize you. I see you” (Lawson 2019). A shot at making a documentary photograph, or shooting with imagination?

It’s worth elaborating on the formal similarities between *Nation* and *Sons of Cush*. Both compositions are built around a central male figure directly staring into the lens at the viewer, equal in size and proportion to the rest of the frame, photographed from the same distance. Both young Black men share a similar appearance: topless, lean tattooed bodies. Their seating posture, wide open legs, is echoed in the gold chains that drape from one composition into the other. The leather sofa is almost identical, returning in the bottom left part of the frame. Each image has its own periphery figure. A reference or signifier is placed in the upper corners of the frame; the whiteboard diagram on the left in *Sons of Cush*; false dentures on the right in *Nation*. But what interests me most is the spatial composition used by Lawson. Both scenes focus on a corner in the room of a domestic interior, with the protagonist placed at the center of where the three perspective lines of the room meet. Both spaces contain a door functioning as a psychological point of escape in the left wall plane of the room’s corner—an important element allowing the mind to wander freely through the space. This kind of composition is what Hans Theys had recognized early within my own work as a subconsciously recurring visual structure, in which “perspective is used to create a varying range of folded, harmonica-like spaces. Sometimes the middle of a photograph shows us the corner of a room

(but never without at least one possibility of escape on the border), sometimes this effect is reinforced by elements on the foreground (doors, curtains, armchairs etc.), sometimes a corner or another protruding element comes towards us in the middle of the photograph, sometimes two elements that come towards us divide the surface of the photograph into three vertical parts. As a result, the photographs seem to depict a space that is alive, like a forest, but also a space that functions as a theater set or the set of a photo studio” (Theys 2011a). The impression of a theater set is accentuated by the fact that no windows allow the viewer to gaze outside, towards the real world. The walls could be cardboard, ending just outside of the frame. In *Nation*, we even see what looks like the foot of a tripod, a subtle meta-element shedding light onto its own construction, just like can be seen in many images from *Lotus*.

In the Mind's Eye: *A Man with a Rifle*

A work that bears an interesting kinship to Lawson's *Nation* is *A Man with a Rifle* (2000) by Jeff Wall. The image depicts a street scene in which a man in the foreground takes on a pose as if clutching a rifle, knees bent and leaning forward, arms outstretched, aiming towards the empty street in front of him, shoot at something that wasn't there with a gun he didn't have. Passersby in the street seem to take no notice of his presence. Wall had apparently seen a man doing this very action that stuck with him as a mental record. As he often does in his work, he decided to reconstruct the moment for one of his large light box transparencies. Wall explains that by not photographing particular occurrences or moments that he witnesses, it becomes a kind of “free-form” when turning it into a photograph (Wall 2015). This free-form grants him the freedom to reinterpret that distinct moment on the basis of memory and feeling instead of simply having photographed it as a snapshot in the very moment itself.

The notion of ‘photographic seeing’ plays a central role in this process. Most photographers, or visual artists, are able to *pre-view* in their mind's eye what their observations would look like as pictures. I believe that photographers have always lived with ‘the photographic eye’ as a symptom of their lens-mediated relationship with reality and attempt to structure and understand it two-dimensionally. I remember experiencing something similar as a child: I would blink my eyes as if pressing a shutter button, keeping the ephemeral image floating on my retina and in my mind for a few seconds with my eyes closed. I would look through holes and frames attempting to compose the spaces beyond them. Or I would alternately close my right and left eye while focussing on an object in the foreground to see how the perspective would change depending on the object's proximity. This is what social media theorist Nathan



A Man with a Rifle, 2000, transparency in light box, 226 x 289 x 25 cm © Jeff Wall

Jurgenson describes as the ‘camera eye’: “the habit of seeing the world in terms of the logic of the camera mechanism even when you are not looking through the viewfinder. With the camera put away you might still see the world as a potential photograph, to see the best framing, potential lighting, the movement, the depth of field. The working of the machine becomes the working of your own eye and, more intimately, the working of your own conscious awareness” (Jurgenson 2019, 35). Stephen Shore has described this as a state of “meta-cognitive attention” in which you become aware of yourself seeing (Glaviano and Shore 2020).

A Man with a Rifle is a particularly compelling work within Wall’s oeuvre because the scene is unusually performative in nature. Wall’s tableaux usually depict ordinary, banal moments that don’t accentuate their theatrical quality. Yet this scene presents a man that doesn’t appear natural but specifically enacts an unusual gesture publicly. As viewers, we aren’t sure if this reenactment is performed for the camera or in reference to the event it enacts. Furthermore, the actual event witnessed by Wall of the man pretending to shoot people in the street could, in turn, be based on an event the man witnessed himself, or a desire he wishes to fulfill in the future. By choosing to recreate a moment which in itself was already theatrical and mimetic, Wall makes the relationship between photography, performance and theatricality specifically tangible in this tableau.

With Intention

Working with actors, or sometimes non-actors playing themselves, props, predetermined locations, artificial lighting and with the intent of making large scale prints, both Wall and Lawson create a staged environment in which every detail is decisive and meaningful – with *intention*.

When ‘shooting with imagination’, does the documentary claim subside? What lies between documen-

tary, fiction and Wall’s notion of *near-documentary*? In my documentary practice, I sometimes try to make photographs that can be free of “the flesh of reality”, as philosopher Jacques Rancière expressed it (Debuysere 2017). I do so by way of poetry and metaphor – a gesture towards the presence of the imaginary – introducing forms of visual abstraction within a documentary construct. When dealing with documentary photographs, the question is not, ‘is it real?’, but ‘what kind of reality is at play here?’ – how is it real? What does this kind of reality mean? Why does it appear as such, and how does it relate to other existing images of the same subject? What is not being shown? Following this line of thought, a distinction can be made between invention and imagination, in which documentary leans towards imagination and fiction towards invention.

In what became known as the ‘documentary turn’, Rancière explains that in our contemporary visual culture, there is no longer an obsession with “reality hunger,” in the sense that photographs that appear to have no authentic or direct relation to reality can still function in the form of an effect or an idea it produces, that in turn, forms its own references to reality. People don’t desire flesh anymore, they want emotions. The question then becomes, what kind of emotion? (Debuysere 2017).

Wall’s idea of free-form is a method that I apply to my own work, although more in relation to a poetic reference rather than the recreation of past events. The framework provided by a documentary subject creates the space in which images can resonate on different levels. They can be freed from strictly representing the documentary subject directly, and move into a poetic space of communication, which is, after all, the essence of visual expression. This autonomous attitude towards documentary should not be seen as fraudulent or deceptive, the question shifts to one of “value judgements and an ethical code that determines which behaviors are licit” within documentary practice. This is regarded by Joan Fontcuberta as “narrative license,” in which photographs break free from the “shackles of description to attain another condition, that of narrativity” (Fontcuberta 2014, 109–110). A way of creating images that may not objectively describe a reality in the traditional documen-

tary sense, but contributes to a rhetorical framework of information whose ultimate basis lies outside the frame, although is not completely fictional either. Like Wall, who insists that there is no ‘fiction’ in his pictures, and prefers to see them as visions, imaginations, or possible daydreams – as pictures that could appear in the mind’s eye (Wall 2014).



The Flooded Grave, 1998–2000, transparency in light box, 228.6 x 282 cm
© Jeff Wall

In the series *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty* (2014), I photographed a glass of milk being spilled onto a tabletop (*Milk*, 2014; a wink to Jeff Wall’s *Milk* from 1984). The image of spilled milk was a trope used in early Bollywood films to suggest erotic or sexual intercourse, which is strictly censored in the Indian film industry. By using the same visual tropes from Hindi cinema within my own documentary framework on love and romance in India, I am able to convey aspects that are related to the concept of an illicit erotic act through a metaphorical still life. In the same body of work, an image of a suspended burning dress (*The Elephant in the Room is Out of Control*) represents the atrocious practice of bride burning, in which men set their newlywed wives alight when her family refuses to pay additional

dowry. These are examples of a visual strategy in which the images function as an allegorical reference; they are not true in themselves, nor are they false to what they point towards. They ‘shoot with imagination’.



Milk, from the series *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty*, 2014 © Max Pinckers

My understanding of this was initially triggered by a lecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts / KASK Ghent in 2009 by mentor, curator, writer, educator and photography critic Erik Eelbode on the work of Dirk Braeckman. More specifically a photograph from 1994, *C.O.-I.S.L.-94 (The Mountain)*: a grey representation of what seems to be an amateurishly painted mountain with a reflection of a light glare at its peak. A crop from a larger negative and one of the first images in which Braeckman explicitly makes use of the reflecting light glare, which marks the beginning of his spatial gaze, making it a pivotal work in his oeuvre (Eelbode 2001, 69). Another photograph, *V.F.-V.F.-01 (Varnished Door with Flash Reflection)* is particularly striking in its depiction of a dark grey surface with a prominent light glare rolling out of the left side of the frame.

Braeckman’s images are devoid of identifiable elements relating to any notion of place or time. They are anonymous, timeless grey spaces. Never black nor white.

The recurring light glare represents his own presence in his images; artificial flashlight literally reflecting onto a surface turning a space into a two-dimensional plane, into a photograph. The glare represents the consciousness of the images themselves as *being* images. Elaborated by Eelbode as “a good photograph is a photograph that knows it’s a photograph” (Eelbode 2001, 70). The balance between abstraction and transparency is distilled to its essence. I realized that this was what I wanted to achieve in my own documentary work. It was then that it occurred to me that I could make documentaries that were conscious of their own constructions, yet deeply human.



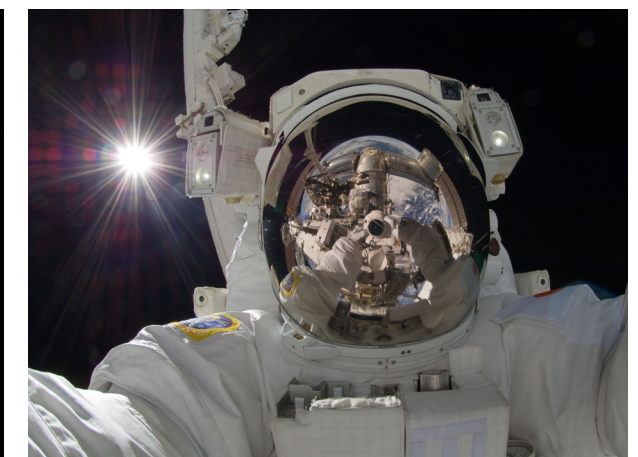
C.O.-I.S.L.-94 (*The Mountain*), 1998 © Dirk Braeckman

Margins of Excess: Necessary Self-Deception

It no longer bothers me when people make small talk about the weather; a banal conversation we know all too well. In fact, I have realized the importance of this ritual. We don’t do this to share some kind of knowledge about the day’s weather conditions, seemingly redundant as this is evident at the moment itself. Instead, we do this to establish a shared sense of realism in which we are

able to meet and understand each other. This interaction creates a trusted space in which we implicitly understand that we share an emotional connection to our environment and to each other. If this ritual goes well, it creates an incentive for deeper conversations to take place. What then, do we make of Trump presenting the American public with a fabricated weather chart in a desperate attempt to prove one of his own false Tweets? (Aguilera 2019). This hyperbole of information manufactured for self-referential objectives shows a complete lack of a shared sense of realism in today’s politics, media, and by extension, in our visual culture.

The shift from twentieth century humanist collectivism to twenty-first century hyper-individualism is reflected in two photographs made by NASA showing Earth. The first one depicting the globe suspended in space, made in 1972, charged by what became known as the “overview effect,” a cognitive shift in awareness of the way we perceive the fragility of life on earth as something that we can only preserve collectively. In the second image, made four decades later, the astronaut turns the camera onto himself, with Earth appearing only as a fractured reflection in his helmet’s visor, eclipsed by the camera and machinery to which the astronaut is tethered.



The Blue Marble, 1972 © Apollo 17/NASA [left] and *Orbiting Astronaut Self-Portrait*, 2012 © Aki Hoshida/NASA [right]

In my book *Margins of Excess* (2018), the notion of how personal imagination conflicts with generally accepted beliefs is expressed through the narratives of six individ-

uals. Every one of them momentarily received nationwide attention in the US press because they attempted to realize a dream or passion, but were presented as frauds or deceivers by the mass media's apparent incapacity to deal with idiosyncratic versions of reality.²³

Herman Rosenblat became well-known because of a self-invented love-story set in a concentration camp during the Second World War, the private detective Jay J. Armes appears to be a real-life superhero, Darius McCollum drew media attention by compulsively highjacking trains, Richard Heene would have staged an elaborate television hoax, Rachel Doležal would have pretended to be 'black', and Ali Alqaisi would have tried to make people believe that he was the 'hooded man' in the iconic photo from Abu Ghraib prison. This book weaves together their stories through personal interviews, press articles, archival footage and staged photographs.

The current era of 'post-truth', in which truths, half-truths, lies, fiction or entertainment are easily interchanged, has produced a culture of 'hyper-individual truths', demanding a new approach to identify the underlying narratives that structure our perception of reality in a world where there is no longer a generally accepted frame of realism. Embedding the stories of the six main protagonists into a clustering tale of cloned military dogs, religious apparitions, suspect vehicles, fake terrorist plots, accidental bombings and fictional presidents, this book follows an associative logic akin to the indiscriminate way a paranoid mind connects unrelated events, or the hysteria of the 24-second news cycle.

In *Margins of Excess* "reality and fiction are intertwined. Not to fool us, but to reveal a more intricate view of our world, which takes into account the subjective and fictitious nature of the categories we use to perceive and define. And then again: not to celebrate superficiality and contingency, but to pierce through the noise, buzz, pulp, lies, dreams, paranoia, cynicism and laziness and to embrace 'reality' in all its complexity," as Hans Theys wrote in his introductory text for the work (Theys 2017).

I deliberately chose not to focus on a single narrative or subject, which would have been the conventional documentary approach but intertwined six main sto-

²³ *Margins of Excess* was produced with the support of the Edward Steichen Award Luxembourg, while artist in residency at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York.

ries together. Inspired by Johan Grimont's idea of "zapitude", these narratives are not divided into clearly defined chapters, but flow over into each other as if zapping on television or flipping through a magazine, "mistaking reality for a commercial break" (Obrist 1999, 269). They are interrupted by sensational mini-news tales that deal with different visual interpretations of authenticity in which beliefs trump facts. For example, Jay J. Armes' section is preceded by a television news report about a Virgin Mary statue at Saint Mary's Church in Indiana reportedly crying with tears running down the statue's cheek. The Heene family's sequence flows over into an early UFO hoax from 1953 in which a monkey is mistaken for an alien. And Ali Alqaisi's narrative skips from the US military accidentally dropping an atomic bomb on a small US town, to the first cloned military dog Specter. Throughout the entire book, there's also a thread about a sniper-duo terrorizing the people of Washington in an alleged white van, which follows us around on our road trip. The only visual marker that points towards the ending of a sequence is the placement of a single image on the left page while leaving the facing right page blank.

The book is constructed in such a way that the protagonists are visually represented in the form of a vertical portrait, sometimes accompanied by photographs of their personal living spaces or details of their interiors, archival photographs and news footage. They are embedded in various registers of text; a headline and an entire press article from a newspaper source (on grey paper), a first-person quote overlaid onto an image, and a four-page interview in the form of a monologue (on cream paper). Entwined within this structure are image sequences that do not directly relate to the life of the protagonists in a documentary sense, but rather contribute to the narrative as imaginary associations. Because these stories deal with how people attempt to materialize their intimate dreams and desires, it provided the space for me to use my own imagination to visualize these fantastic narratives with symbolic photographs made while on the road between the various visits. These symbolic images are not illustrations of the texts or engage specifically with the histories of the protagonists, but add another dimension to the narrative in which my interpretation of these stories manifests itself

in ambiguous photographs that freely associate to them, creating a documentary about the ambiguity of our imagination, rather than the cold facts. I created a space in which I could be myself, and in a sense, a seventh protagonist. The people I choose to work with always reflect in some way my personal vision on the duality of photography too – its ambivalent and ever compelling twofoldness.

Dan Harris: Why did you do it? Why did you tell such a big lie to so many people for so long?

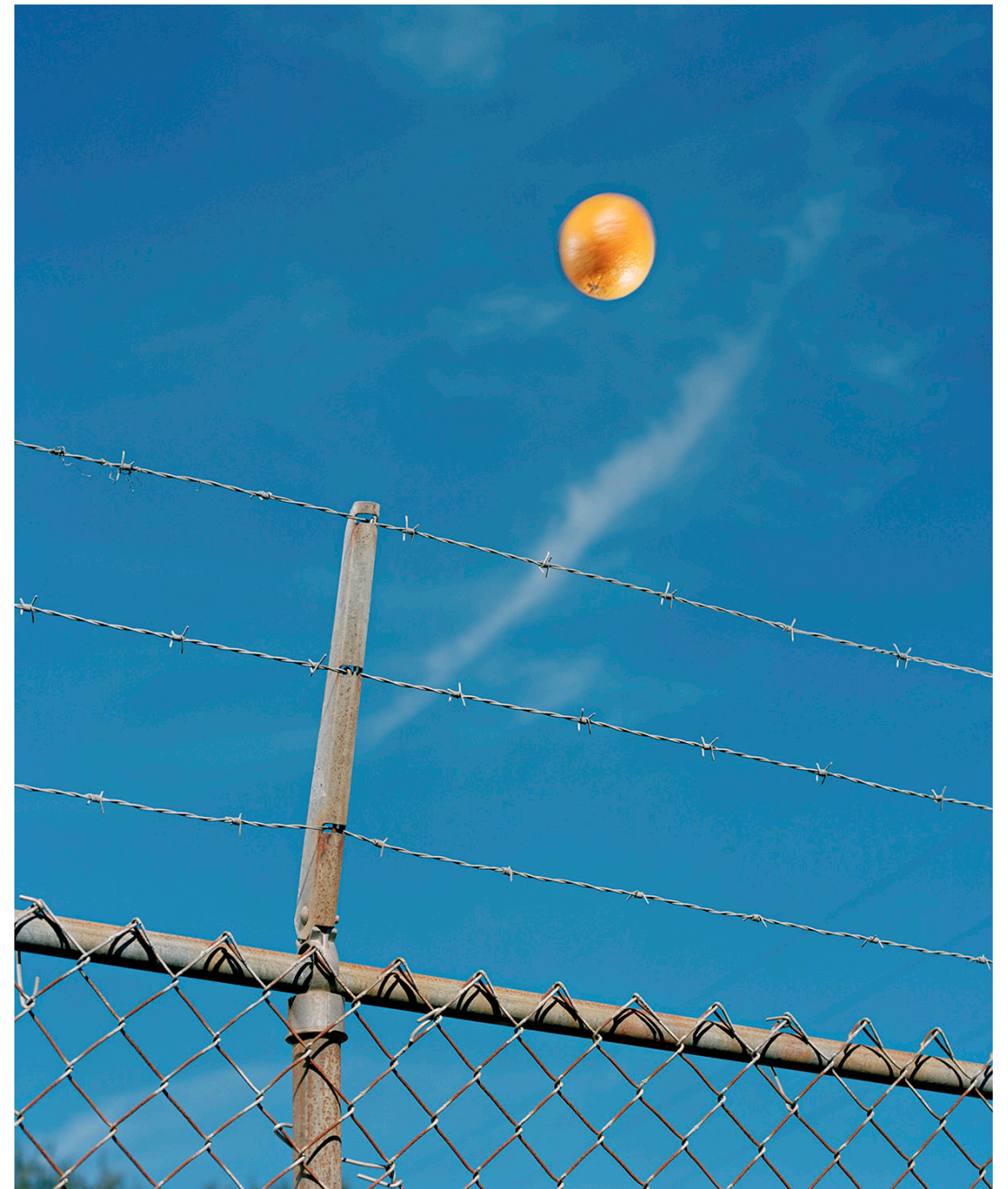
Herman Rosenblat: "It was not a lie, it was in my imagination, and in my imagination, in my mind, I believed it. Even now I believe it. That she was there, and she threw the apple to me.

Dan Harris: How can you say it wasn't a lie? It wasn't true, and you know it's not true.

Herman Rosenblat: Yes. It was not true, but in my imagination, it was true.

– Herman Rosenblat on *Good Morning America* with Dan Harris, February 18, 2009.

A good example of this twofoldness is *The Apple That Wasn't*, a photograph of an orange hovering over a fence. An image made in connection to Herman Rosenblat's "greatest love story ever sold" (Sherman 2008). The Holocaust survivor had claimed to have met his wife Roma, also of Jewish descent and persecuted by the Nazis, during his imprisonment in a concentration camp when they were both still children. She threw him an apple over the fence of the camp every day, and so contributed to his survival – she was his 'angel at the fence'. Herman and Roma only met again many years after the war when a mutual friend set them up on a blind date. They married two months later. Although the story about throwing apples over the fence was a figment of their imagination, Rosenblat did spend time in Schlieben, a sub-camp of Buchenwald. "I wanted to bring happiness to people, to remind them not to hate but to love and tolerate all people," he explained. "I brought good feelings to a lot of people and I brought hope to many. My motivation was to make good in this world. In my dreams, Roma will always throw me an apple, but I now know it is only a dream" (Roberts 2015).



The Apple That Wasn't, from the series *Margins of Excess*, 2018 © Max Pinckers

I was able to contribute to Rosenblat's story with an image of an orange instead of an apple because I have the freedom to manipulate the representation of these stories since *we know they are only dreams*. Dreams – mental images – that now manifest as photographs. The choice of an orange instead of an apple was not only to make this point clear but also because an orange is simply more beautiful against a bright blue sky than an apple (also an unconscious or coincidental reference to John Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line* from 1973). This narrative strategy is key to understanding the intention behind *Margins of Excess* and my approach to documentary photography, where there doesn't need to be a binary opposition between fact and fiction. The book hosts a continuous fluctuation between different hierarchies of truths and their relativity towards each other reflecting on the status of documentary photography as a way of coming to terms with reality rather than attempting to rationalize and objectify it.

Margins of Excess is about the Image becoming reality; about the superego image of the ideal-self that is not only being mistaken for reality but eclipsing reality itself, out of necessity. "I never thought it was fair to say that I was an impostor because in order for me to be an impostor, basically, I would have to say I am impersonating someone else. And actually I wasn't impersonating somebody else, I was impersonating myself," Darius McCollum told me when we met in Rikers Island jail (Pinckers 2018b, 122). In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Rachel Doležal explained that her Black identity is "not a costume. I don't know spiritually and metaphysically how this goes, but I do know that from my earliest memories I have awareness and connection with the black experience, and that's never left me. It's not something that I can put on and take off anymore. Like I said, I've had my years of confusion and wondering who I really [was] and why and how do I live my life and make sense of it all, but I'm not confused about that any longer. I think the world might be – but I'm not" (Samuels 2015).

Visual culture and the role of photography in creating a sense of realism, and thus a sense of self – or necessary self-deception – attests to how "we are made

of and by images, just as much as they are made of and by us" (Jurgenson 2019, 112). The rise of a new form of (self-)consciousness as a never-ending live-stream of our experiences, in which we, as images, become disconnected from our physical bodies – removed from time and space – continuously and simultaneously present in infinite parallel dimensions. Photography's impact on our visual culture is transforming how reality is experienced, and how our perceptions of truth and realism become less confined within the *frame*.

As Hans Theys puts into words in his introduction to *Margins of Excess*, "we all need forms, shapes, words and images to cope with reality, but we should keep in mind that they never completely represent reality and that this doesn't mean that reality is nonexistent. Ideally, we might conclude, words would continually remind us they are but words. And this is precisely what Pinckers intends his photographs to do by infusing them with manifest artificial elements" (Theys 2017).

There is sometimes only a minimal difference between a piece of documentary information and a stereotype, between a guide for orientation in a complex world and wholesale judgements about whole regions and populations. Information and disinformation, rationalism and hysteria, sobriety and exaggeration are not clearly separated within these networks. The border between description and confabulation blurs, and fact and fiction fuse into 'factions' (Steyerl 2008a, 146).

Somewhat to my dissatisfaction, *Margins of Excess* is now sometimes received as a project about 'fake news', and therefore becoming a victim of the intent behind the very term itself; the deliberate confusion and discrediting of truth. When I began with the project in July 2016, the term 'fake news' wasn't around yet, and the idea of post-truth wasn't so common as it is today. It has become so prevalent it is now synonymous with any form of seemingly deceptive information, or narratives that are much too easily dismissed because they don't stroke with our established beliefs. Fake news stories, or 'alternative facts', were first disseminated on social media platforms during the 2016 US elections, producing false

reports as sensational clickbait with the intent of generating massive profits through online Facebook advertising (Subramanian 2017). Fake news is used indifferently as an argument against any information people don't like, without distinguishing whether it's a sponsored post, an actual piece of journalism, advertising, a visual meme, or a rumor. Not only are we confronted with fake news reports written by Eastern European teenagers, we now face the daunting reality of so-called 'deep fakes', generative adversarial networks and the automated spawning of information and news by artificial intelligence algorithms or 'bots'.

As soon as he became president, Trump took advantage of this wide-spread misinformation by relaying it onto journalists and established news agencies in order to discredit any kind of criticism against him. Here, the intentional confusion of news information is politically weaponized for ideological, economic and personal gains. The manipulation of information is nothing new. The only difference is that before we may have been skeptical or suspicious of possibly skewed information, but never really knew if it was the case. Today, people are not just being manipulated, they now *know* that they are being manipulated, leaving them in a permanent state of confusion and doubt. This is where true political power seems to lie today; in the transformation of politics into a strange theater where no one knows what is true or fake, keeping any opposition constantly at bay. This has ushered in an age of hyper-individualism, where people's personal, subjective beliefs have become more important to them than the facts that may refute them.

Alex Majoli: *Skēnē*

Italian photojournalist Alex Majoli's visual approach is sometimes associated with my own strategy of documentary theatricality, which is why I feel the need to express my thoughts about it as to distinguish my own practice from his, especially in relation to his most recent body of work *Skēnē*. Although I appreciate its artistry and aesthetic qualities – the mastery of a pho-



Scene #0525, *Pointe Noire*, Congo, 2013, from the series *Skēnē* © Alex Majoli/Magnum Photos

tographic technique that can only be applauded – I feel that it is blatantly inconsiderate towards the subjects and events it represents, and consider it a documentary strategy I have trouble justifying. It is a symptom of the photojournalist-cum-visual storyteller as the pest of our time (as explained earlier in this book), keeping any criticism at bay by creating a deliberate state of confusion and doubt – disguised as a 'global theatre' – without taking up the responsibility of what is being represented and the ambiguous assertions it (and the author) makes.

Majoli's aesthetic approach has a dense photographic tradition, with predecessors such as Beat Streuli and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, that have used technically similar methods of documentary theatricality. Only they directed their camera's towards regular everyday modern society instead of weighty, politically charged subjects. The delicate nuance between fiction and nonfiction is treated bluntly and without understanding the implications of presenting urgent global issues as potentially fictitious, especially towards the people represented in them.

His most recent work *Skēnē*, to which he has dedicated the majority of his efforts for the past decade (Majoli 2017), premiered at Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York in 2017 and was later exhibited at Le Bal in Paris with an accompanying book (published by Mack and Le Bal in 2019). The work uses a consistent theatrical aesthetic created by complex multiple strobe lighting in real situations, in which only the subjects are illuminated, and everything else fades to black. We cannot help but think of moonlight, or chiaroscuro paintings, yet when we learn that the images are made during the day with strobes that overpower the available sunlight, they become even more fascinating. Seemingly ordinary moments of daily life around the world are alternated with scenes embodying grief, tragedy and human suffering. Produced over a span of eight years and covering fourteen countries, there is a considerable lack of context to accompany the photographs. Neither in the exhibition nor the book do we find information about what exactly is being proposed by the images. When we look past this attractive use of lighting for a moment and attempt to see the scenes for what they really are, it becomes clear that this strategy is in fact just as pictorial as any other photojournalistic aestheticization that we've seen in the past, such as that of Sebastião Salgado or James Nachtwey, only more cinematic in its appearance. Unlike the traditional approach, this does not deal with one particular problem or subject, but a whole bunch of them at once from around the globe, without disclosing anything about those situations or how they relate to each other. A photographer with limitless travel capabilities, privileged enough to fly with a crew around the world for almost a decade, gives absolutely no agency to his

subjects, of which most don't have the same possibilities of free movement or means of expression. What seems more important to the photographer is the maintenance of a strict methodological aesthetic regime in which the appearance of the light, compositional elements, and general atmosphere create a uniform world from very unconnected events. This generates unavoidable tensions between the aesthetic choices that have been made and the situations to which they have been applied. To tar everything with the same brush suggests that all these events are equally connected, equally significant.

Howard Greenberg Gallery's press release states that "Majoli's experiences photographing people in many kinds of circumstances in numerous countries have led him to explore the idea of his subjects being actors in their own lives. His scenes depict the drama and pathos inherent in human struggles" (Howard Greenberg Gallery 2017). In an attempt to clarify the intent of the work, let us examine the context provided in the book. The first written information appears in the form of an introductory quotation recounting a dialogue from a play by Luigi Pirandello (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1921) in which two characters on stage discuss if a dead boy is really dead or if it's just make-believe. The passage concludes with a statement by the director of the play interrupting the scene: "Make-believe! Reality! You can all go to Hell, every last one of you! Lights! Lights! Lights!" (Majoli 2019).

Towards the back of the book are two texts dealing with Majoli's aesthetic strategy: *Alex Majoli's Theatre of Life* by writer and curator David Company, and *Dis-photography* by art critic Corinne Rondeau. Both texts say very little about the status of the subjects and events photographed. They both make multiple religious references and mainly focus on the theatrical nature of the photographs. Rondeau mentions that the work's title, *Skēnē*, refers to the 'backstage' of an ancient Greek theater where characters would change costumes and masks, but would also go to die because the representation of death on stage was forbidden in those times. The only reference Company makes to the people depicted in Majoli's photographs is in the opening sentence of

his text: “Europe, Asia, Brazil, Congo. For eight years, across continents and countries, Alex Majoli has photographed events and non-events. Political demonstrations, humanitarian emergencies and quiet moments of daily life.” He continues, “a sense that we are all actors attempting, failing, and resisting the playing of parts that history and circumstance demand; a sense that we are all interconnected. *Somehow*” (Company 2019, 105). Company then goes on to describe the work in terms of documentary photography’s connection to theater and Majoli’s use of artificial light.

Photography’s relation to theatre is made complicated by its relation to documentary actuality, but this is in many ways an extension of the complication inherent in any theatrical performance. Even when theatre attempts to suspend disbelief, to immerse the audience in the illusion of the drama, the immersion can never be total. The intellectual pleasure of theatre hinges on the tension between immersion and contemplation of the immersion, between identifying with the fictional characters and watching the real actors playing those characters. In being still and silent, photographs invite exactly this kind of double identification. People in the photographs strike us as both actual and fictional at the same time. Actual in that their presence before the camera has been recorded; fictional in that the camera has created a scenic extract from an unknowable drama (Company 2019, 105–106).

Only here we are not dealing with a theatrical performance, fictional characters, or ‘real actors’, but simply with *real people*. Why would one ask viewers to immerse themselves temporarily in the illusion of real drama? How can one use the *real* suffering of others for mere intellectual pleasure? Or is this the so-called “affirmation of illusion over reality” or the “ritualization of the simulacrum” as Rondeau writes? (Rondeau 2019, 109). This is where the core of the problem in this strategy lies. Theater plays contain dialogue, consciously participating actors and a narrative. They are usually not silent spectacles of real human suffering. Above all, these “un-

knowable drama’s” are only unknowable because the author clearly decided not to disclose anything about them in order to emphasize his own artistry and power position. Majoli’s photographs “metaphorically shout but do not wound,” wrote Jocelyn Jurich with Roland Barthes in mind, “the *studium* is clear, but the *punctum* seems absent” (Jurich 2013a, 8).

In the following pages of the work’s accompanying texts, the main emphasis is on the photographer, who works with numerous assistants on location, and who’s presence becomes a “kind of spectacle in itself” (Company 2019, 105). This creates the false impression that the people being photographed become conscious actors and willing participants in his ‘theater’. In an interview with *Musée Magazine*, Majoli responds to the question of how people react to his presence: “There is an initial moment of hesitation from some people, which is the reason one photograph might take longer than usual. It takes time for people to accept their surroundings and fall back into their own character. Suddenly unaware of the camera, people are able to re-enact themselves with more conviction, making the scene more real, if not reality itself” (Majoli 2017). This argument comes across as somewhat far fetched. Many of the photographs were made in situations where it seems highly improbable that the people in front of his lens would be concerned with the discourse of self-representation and illusion, considering that their children were drowning or their friends being buried.

The essential meaning of different archetypes of lighting is deeply embedded within our visual culture in the form of powerful pictorial conventions that give the impression “that there is a natural correspondence between any given subject matter and the way it is represented,” clarifies Company (Company 2019, 105). Theatrical lighting, the kind that Majoli uses, suggests that what we are seeing may not be real. That what we are being shown might be some kind of performance, someone pretending to be someone else, or maybe a fictitious, fabricated event. Perhaps studio photographs with models or actors? This type of light implies artifice. As we know from theater, cinema or classical European painting, this way of using unnatural lighting



Scene #60410, Lesvos, Greece, 2015, from the series *Skēnē* © Alex Majoli/Magnum Photos

hints towards experiencing these images as unrealistic, manipulated, theatrical, epic, exaggerated; to be experienced and watched from a safe distance, as one would a theater play or a film. This, of course, does not stroke with our conventional idea of photojournalistic or documentary imagery. A visual strategy I use in my own documentary work. Company describes breaking or bending these conventions of “appropriate” usage of light as possibly “disturbing and revelatory” in both its betrayal of expectations and its capability of shedding new light on “unresolved thoughts about the world and its representation” (Company 2019, 105). Majoli’s use of theatrical lighting in relation to the moments represented in his photographs is indeed disturbing, but not because we learn something new about the world or how images are perceived, on the contrary, we are asked to distance ourselves from the events depicted in the images, emphasizing our impasse and indifference. Or as Ingrid Sischy would say; “photography that runs on a kind of emotional blackmail fueled by a dramatics of art direction” (Sischy 1991).



Installation view of *Skēnē*, Le Bal, Paris, 2019 © Alex Majoli/Le Bal

In a review for *The New Yorker*, Ben Taub notices that the exhibition installation of *Skēnē* is not accompanied by captions or any other form of contextual information. Framed prints, priced at US\$10,500 each (Knoblauch 2017), are placed side by side in a grid installation on a wall (which could be why the work only contains horizontal images). Taub makes clear that Majoli has no intention of clarifying what he has documented, and systematically liberates himself from this responsibility by embracing the artifice and ambiguity of his creation: “At the gallery opening, one guest mistook the photo of a man in a rice field in India, set between two photos of migrants in Greece, for a refugee surreptitiously approaching the border into Serbia. Unperturbed by the mixup, Majoli recited the title of a play by Pirandello: ‘It is so if you think so’” (Taub 2017).

Only a list of captions in the back of the book makes factual references to places, followed by a scene number code, and superficial descriptions of what is depicted in the photographs. Here we learn that the images depict Chinese internal migrants, dock workers, squatters in abandoned buildings, teenage girls wailing at a funeral, a circumcision ritual in Congo, protestors in Cairo, people praying, refugee camps, courtrooms, homeless people in Brazil, the shores of Lesbos, refugees searching for their missing children, more refugee camps, extreme right-wing nationalist conventions, scenes where the Paris terror attacks took place, British pub-goers, Indian

villages, and a Korean. In her text, Rondeau references Shakespeare and makes a specific comparison to Caravaggio's *The Calling of St Matthew* (1599–1600), which depicts the moment Jesus Christ inspires Matthew to follow him. Another classic example of photojournalism appropriating Judeo-Christian iconography, in this case subconsciously implying that Western beliefs can lead the way for the rest of the world to follow.

A wide range of very different types of moments are brought together in the series, some depicting extreme circumstances of distress, grief and anguish, such as drenched refugee families arriving on the shores of Lesbos cradling their aching children, or a man being heavy-handedly subdued by riot police. People who mostly unknowingly or unwillingly become actors in Majoli's personal drama.

Victims are usually interested in the representation of their own suffering, but only if their suffering is seen as unique and not compared or sized up to anybody else's. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag wrote that "by making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to 'care' more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder – and make abstract" (Sontag 2003, 70–71).

The discussion here is not about photojournalism as potentially confusing, ambiguous or overlapping into other modes of representation (borrowing from cinema or theater), but the connection between what is represented and how its represented, and the intention put forward by the photographer by making particular choices in this interrelationship. It is about the politics of documentary representation and human sensitivity. To speak of reality becoming a spectacle "universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment," wrote Sontag, "it assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world" (Sontag 2003, 98–99). Rondeau poses the question if Majoli's photos represent the "backstage to the materi-

al stage of the society of the spectacle" (Rondeau 2019, 110). If Majoli's intent is to criticize the current state of photojournalism as a theatrical spectacle of the human condition, he certainly has succeeded. Only the catharsis here is that Majoli himself embodies this very condition and does not undermine his own position by sneaking into the backstage. This double negative of participating in – and profiting from – the very industry he is attempting to criticize, reduces it to a void of self-absorbed cynicism and self-reference. The same power structures are reimposed and sustained without any further sense of transparency, agency or acknowledgement of privilege.

Ultimately, if we are going to use our imagination to create a fictitious world as it were a silent theater, without the collaborative accord of the so-called 'actors', why then imagine a negative one in which neo-Nazis and refugees take center stage? Why not speculate about a potential positive world-view where things could be different? Let us not undermine the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the images we choose to imagine are dormant possible futures.

8 THE REENACTMENT

Reenactment at its best works as well as walks through the histories it airs.

– Stella Bruzzi, *Documentary*, 2020.

Embodied Memorials and the Cyclical Nature of Images

A remarkable photograph – a metapicture – made by Roger Jackson on the tenth anniversary of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre is a precaution to the entanglement of the prophetic nature of the (p)reenactment. The image depicts a demonstrator outside South Africa House in London’s Trafalgar Square. He is cradling an effigy of a dead child in his arms and is photographed by multiple other cameramen seen at the edge of the frame. This public protest *pre-formance* becomes a reality six years later when Sam Nzima makes a photograph of Umbiswa Makhubo carrying the body of Hector Pieter-son during the violent Soweto uprising – the real mirror image to its performed predecessor. In his effort to enact an iconic image of Sharpeville, the man in Trafalgar Square also pre-enacted the bloodshed that was yet to come (Nwebury 2012, 220). Jackson’s photograph is an ode to the power of visual conventions; the eerily spectral aura of the archetypes of bodily expression and the cyclical nature of images.



Members of the anti-apartheid movement commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre with a re-enactment outside South Africa House in Trafalgar Square, London, March 21, 1970 © Roger Jackson



Umbiswa Makhubo carries the body of Hector Pieteron. His sister, Antoinette Sithole, runs beside them during the Soweto Uprising, 1976 © Sam Nzima

Film critic Bill Nichols defines the reenactment as rehearsals that stand in for a historical event while indicating that they are, at the same time, neither an indexical record of that event nor merely a later act of representation, but rather some uncanny combination of the two. He describes the reenactment as a fold in time: it takes “past time and makes it present” and takes “present time and folds it over onto what has already come to pass,” allowing the past and present to “coexist in the impossible space of a fantasmatic” (Nichols 2008, 88). Unlike the traditional documentary mode in which events are registered while they unfold in time, in a still image of a reenactment, time folds onto itself in a singular, timeless moment. A reenactment usually takes place much later and is performed for the sole purpose of its documentation and is the “ultimate reliving of an event; it embodies *presentness* at the same time as it practices historical scrutiny,” writes film scholar Stella Bruzzi (Bruzzi 2020, 51). Cinema theorist Ivone Margulies describes the reenactment as “an explicitly after-the-fact practice”

that “ritually renews the bonds with an original event, to provide an exemplary image of conversion, or to create an embodied memorial” (Margulies 2019, 5). The reenactment is thus a kind of *chrono-collage*: a critical challenge to linear homogenous time and proposes multiple and coexisting temporalities and registers, with the body as its primary vehicle for expression.

Fantasmatic Styles of Reenactment

The field of reenactment studies is vast, with a number of main underlying themes such as the place of memory, testimony, and narrative construction in historical knowledge; the ritual and unconscious dimensions of action; the function of film and other recording media for the production or preservation of cultural and collective memory; the imaginary and fantasmatic aspects of character and performance in documentary film and media, and the role of documentary in the construction of social fantasy; the therapeutic value of reenactment; the uses of embodiment in various kinds of learning and pedagogy; or the tensions between political, social, and theatrical senses of acting, only to name a few (Kahana, 2009: 50).

Reminiscent of his earlier disposition of various documentary ‘modes’, Nichols identifies five categories of the reenactment as a filmmaking strategy in his text *Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject* (2008): (1) The ‘Realist Dramatization’ is the most common form widely used on popular reality TV shows such as *Cops*. Suspenseful flashback-like dramatizations echo conventional language from fiction in which realist drama is presented in a supposedly documentary-like aesthetic. This type of reenactment uses stereotypical formal qualities associated with the visualization of the past, such as grainy high-contrast sepia footage for example. It attempts to create an emotional connection with the viewer rather than any form of realist transparency. (2) ‘Typifications’ don’t refer to a specific

event in history and present reenactments as typical past patterns, rituals and routines in a general sense. In this case, the viewer recognizes that these scenes don't claim authenticity in their present-day depictions, but in the actions performed for the sake of the camera in reference to the past. The indexical quality of this type of reenactment finds itself in the *mise-en-scène* created by the author, unless we are dealing with an 'in-person' reenactment where the authenticity of the scene is shared with the subject-actor themselves. (3) 'Brechtian Distantiation', or the 'demonstration', takes this a step further in its deflection away from realist representations. This is the reenactment of social gest in which the separation of the reenactment from the specific historical moment it enacts is greatly increased, creating a fantasmatic effect. Without needing to create an illusionary reference to the past, this form of reenactment can focus more on historical specificity such as particular details or motions instead of being concerned with the aesthetics of the reenacted period. (4) 'Stylization' refers to highly stylized reenactments in which specific elements are overly dramatized in order to emphasize the subjective importance of the event, often creating a sense of separation between the reenacted scene and the actual historical event. This form has the potential of being highly entertaining and aesthetically satisfying, although mostly embodied by iconic signifiers rather than an indexical relationship with the past. This form of reenactment often uses the depiction of heightened awareness in details and evolution of time, with time being an extraction of reality based on memory. (5) 'Parody and Irony' is when reenactments adopt a parodic tone calling the conventions of the reenactment itself into question, or treat a past occurrence with humor. This strategy usually also critically engages with other conventions of filmmaking or photography in which, for example, the production process itself or the behind-the-scenes preparations also become part of the work, exaggerating the separation between then and now, before and after (Nichols 2008).

Nichols himself admits that these are overlapping and fuzzy categories, although he makes the important point of distinguishing reenactments from actual historical footage. "Reenactments," he writes, are "not

historical evidence but an artistic interpretation, always offered from a distinct perspective and carrying, embedded within it, further evidence of the voice of the filmmaker" (Nichols 2008, 88). Reenactments, according to Nichols, contribute to the persuasiveness of a given argument or perspective, rather than actual proof or historical evidence. They amplify engagement and "reanimate the past in a form of interpretation, an inflection that resurrects the past to reanimate it with the force of a desire" (Nichols 2008, 88).

Although Nichols made an elegant analogy of the fold in time from the present onto the past in an imaginary time-space construction, he omitted the importance of this strategy's potential impact has on times ahead. Reenactments not only bring forward the possibility of altering the past – altering the archive through personal agency – they also direct themselves to the future spectator with the potential of the coming generations to create change based on what is made visible. This is a way of working with time as malleable material; malleable *political* material. The reenactment is therefore always also a possible *pre-enactment*. A form of speculation that allows us to make a difference in the present and its possible futures. The reenactment is a "past moment on the run in the present," wrote scholar of performance studies Rebecca Schneider, "moments when the past flashes up *now* to present us with its own alternative futures – futures we might choose to realize differently?" (Schneider 2011, 180).

Mau Mau, History Makers: Introduction

History decays into images, not into stories.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1927–1940.

In 2014 the privately-owned Archive of Modern Conflict in London invited me into their archives. I encountered



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27th August 2019

PROPOSAL FOR A COLLABORATION

Dear Max Pinckers and Associates

As Chairman of the Mau Mau War Veterans Association (Murang'a Branch), I take this opportunity to officially welcome you to our country.

The history of Mau Mau cannot be complete without reference to the great role played by the nationalists of Murang'a County. This is the county where the first steps in agitating against colonialism started after the colonialists' initial brutality of burying one of our early leaders, Waiyaki wa Hinga, alive upside down in the bushes of Kibwezi near Tsavo National Park.

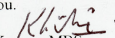
Mau Mau Veterans fought for freedom and human dignity. We are happy you have chosen to talk to us who actually fought in that war. You will get to hear the truth as opposed to the lies and negative propaganda the British spread across Europe. How they sold falsehoods to their own people, while hiding the viscous, racist, hatred, unjust and brutal occupation of our ancestral land, turning us into slaves and labourers. They robbed us by force of gun.

With this collaboration we would like to realize the following:

- (1) Improve the image of the Mau Mau liberation war in Europe and in Britain itself.
- (2) Counteract the negative narrative that our fighters were violent brutes who were on a wicked rampage upon the white settler community in Kenya and instead portray them as genuine liberators of their people from British injustice, occupation and enslavement.
- (3) Utilise the information we create together, the photos and reenactments in drama of what happened to our people. We hope the photobooks and exhibition forums you will organize for this project will help in creating a positive image about us, especially now, when we have an ongoing court case in London in which we are claiming compensation for the atrocities committed by the British colonial administration in the 1950s. We may also want to use this material in court.
- (4) Last but not least, we look forward to this project awakening the moral faculties of those who see and read our side of the story and to fight oppression anywhere in the world today. We hope it will appeal to humanity's moral consciousness and obligation to participate in helping our veterans in their current efforts to improve their impoverished lives and purchase a piece of land for their families. They can then settle their families in their own pieces of land as most of the veterans had their lands forcibly taken away from them while they were in detention or in the forest fighting. We welcome any effort in material or financial form that can have a better and more effective impact in positively changing the lives of the veterans and their families.
- (5) As Chairman, my joy is that we have collaborated with young energetic Belgians in a project. We hope the project can strengthen the relationship between people of our two great countries and eventually change our attitudes towards one another. In this regard, we look forward to undertaking structured social economic projects together in the near future.

We look forward to this collaboration. Once again feel welcome, and feel free to learn as much as you can for the time you will be with us.

Thanks you.


Peter G. Kamau, MBS
Chairman

Letter addressed to Max Pinckers by Chairman P.G. Kamau of the Mau Mau War Veterans Association, Murang'a Branch, Kenya, 2019, from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing
© Max Pinckers/MMWVA

a collection of original documents and photographs from the British Ministry of Information relating to the Mau Mau emergency crisis in Kenya from the 1950s.

The events leading up to Britain's exit from Kenya have become part of a carefully curated history that has established a skewed representation of the Kenyan fight for independence through the well-oiled propaganda machine of imperial rule. For the past seven years, I have been researching this topic and working together with Mau Mau veterans and survivors of colonial violence in Kenya with the support of historians, artists, activists, writers, archives, museums and universities. *Mau Mau, History Makers* (working title) is a long-term and ongoing co-creation in collaboration with Kenyan Mau Mau war veterans and detention camp survivors who are now between 85 and 108 years old. By visually re-interpreting their personal and collective history, we create a counterbalance to the Western narrative that still dominates popular perception today. A past that has been shrouded by the mantle of imperialist history. This documentary work is an attempt at reviving a buried, suppressed history through the agency of oral witness, living memory and bodily experience.²⁴

Now Mau Mau veterans claim their roles as heroic victims instead of terrorists. This re-activation of Mau Mau and Kikuyu myths takes place against the political backdrop of ongoing lawsuits in which veterans and other victims of British imperial rule in Kenya are claiming compensation money from the high court in London for their mistreatment in the 1950s, which has only recently admitted their wrongdoing. But not everyone was happy with the settlement. It left out many, including thousands of members from the Mau Mau War Veterans Association; the people I am working with for this project. The creation of a revised visual narrative based on personal stories and collective memory are motivated by the veterans' intentions of claiming a form of heroic victimhood, the acknowledgement of wrongdoing by their oppressors, the reconciliation with a painful, still largely unresolved past, and ultimately raising funds to buy back the land that was stolen from them.

²⁴ A continuation from the project *The Struggle for Freedom in: "_____"*, in collaboration with Dutch artist Michiel Burger, that ended in 2015.

Regimes of Memory: a Brief History of Mau Mau

The first British settlers arrived in Kenya in 1902 and it gradually became known as the ‘Happy Valley’. But towards the early 1950s resistance movements and anti-colonial sentiment grew, especially amongst the Kikuyu, Kenya’s largest ethnic group. Most of them were forced to work as ‘squatters’ on farms after being removed from their lands. Having fought for the British Army in the Second World War against the Germans in North Africa, Kenyan men were frustrated that they didn’t receive any land or payment for their military service upon their return home.

In Europe today, the words ‘Mau Mau’ are still synonymous with terror and fear. The mighty propaganda machine of British imperial rule made sure to perpetuate the image of ‘impulsive savagery’, as one of bloody, sadistic killings and seemingly senseless violence. Kenya’s freedom fighters were portrayed as a group of criminals and gangsters, a violent and primitive secret society with bestial oathing rituals and explicitly anti-European sentiments. In this respect, its portrayal of a stereotypical Mau Mau offers valuable insight on the shallow and trivialized understanding of the rebellion that dominated the European and American public imagination. Not much is known, however, about ‘Britain’s Gulag’ – the empire’s brutal response to Kenya’s independence movement.²⁵

The origin of the name ‘Mau Mau’ is uncertain. The term arose from a linguistic void, its etymology a mystery, and as the creation of any myth, there are now many stories that lay claim to its meaning. Some read it as an anagram of ‘*Uma Uma*’ (which means ‘get out, get out’ in Kikuyu); others speculate that it was created by the British in an attempt to diminish the movement’s meaning and international legitimacy. Socialist politician and former detainee Josiah Mwangi Kariuki suggested that the name was appropriated by the rebellion in order to counter the colonial propaganda against it. Social and political activist Wangari Maathai has referred to the Kikuyu phrase ‘*maũndũ ni mau*’, which indicates the beginning of a list in which one holds up

²⁵ For a first-hand account of life in detention camps, see Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, ‘*Mau Mau*’ Detainee (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

three fingers introducing its main points – in the case of Mau Mau, these were land, freedom, and self-governance. More recently, it’s been adopted by the Swahili backronym ‘*Mzungu Aende Ulaya, Mwafrika Apate Uhuru*’ (‘let the foreigner go back abroad; let the African regain independence’). Most important is that the veterans refer to themselves as Mau Mau, and this has become the most widely recognized name for the movement internationally and by Kenyans alike.

In October 1952, the British colonial administration in Kenya declared a state of emergency and was on the verge of one of the bloodiest and most protracted wars of decolonization in the empire that lasted more than seven years. As one of the last remaining colonies, with India, Pakistan, Malaya and Palestine already lost, Britain scrambled to hold on and did so with a shocking amount of violence. Not only was this a fight against colonial oppression, but it was also a civil war between revolutionaries and loyal Africans to the British. Alongside the Europeans stood Kenyan loyalists, also known as Home Guards, and members of the Kings African Rifles. A conflict that would create a complicated long-lasting division of wealth and power that still remains unresolved today. “Blood, sweat and tears. Mau Mau won the war, the spectators stole the trophy,” rapped the hip-hop collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau in their 2008 song *Angalia Saa*.

In the name of retaining colonial control and ‘rehabilitating’ those in favor of an independent nation, the British state constructed a large-scale network of more than one hundred work camps, detention camps, torture centers and emergency villages throughout the country. This network of detention camps was formally known as the ‘pipeline’, designed in 1953 by Thomas Askwith, Commissioner for Community Development in Kenya’s colonial administration. The notion of a pipeline was used to denote the progression of individuals from their initial detention to their ultimate release. Some detainees would be moved through dozens of different camps in an attempt to extract a confession. Along with the pipeline, a rigorous villagization program was developed that placed over a million Kikuyu women and children in villages behind barbed wire fences, spiked trenches and watchtowers.

The fight for independence was initiated by the Kenya African Union, a political organization, and gained momentum in the early 1950s with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, its militant counterpart that popularly became known as Mau Mau. As a homegrown resistance movement (unlike the Algerian, Zimbabwean or even South African rebellions that were supported by outside help), bound by an oath and armed with rudimentary homemade guns and pangas, the Mau Mau developed renowned guerrilla warfare tactics in the Aberdares and the forests around Mt. Kenya, against which superior British military power was ineffective.

Only thirty-two European settlers died in the rebellion, and fewer than two hundred casualties were recorded among British regiments and police. Yet, according to the Kenya Human Rights Commission, the British held more than seventy thousand people in detention camps at the peak of the emergency, with at least one hundred and sixty thousand people passing through the network over the course of the war. Many were forcefully deprived of their land, which has not been returned to this day. Thousands were systematically tortured as the Empire tried to ‘rehabilitate’ them, popularly referred to as ‘screening’ by its survivors today as there is no word in Kikuyu or Kiswahili that captures the same meaning. One thousand and ninety Kikuyu were hanged for Mau Mau related crimes, executed in ‘mobile gallows’ that traveled from one town to the next. “In no other place, at no other time in British imperialism, was the state execution used on such a large scale,” wrote historian David Anderson (Anderson 2005, 7). Kenya’s central region is littered with mass graves, and human bones are emerging from the soil.²⁶

“Mau Mau was a disease which has been eradicated and must never be remembered again,” wrote Jomo Kenyatta on the eve of independence in 1963, shortly after becoming Kenya’s first president. “I have no intention of retaliating or looking backwards,” he famously proclaimed in his post-election speech, “we are going to forget the past and look forward to the future.” This collective amnesia has led many people in Kenya to forget where these camps were or even that they existed at all. Kenya’s freedom fighters are forgotten heroes, mostly

²⁶ Although not all bones are deemed equally heroic. See: David M. Anderson and Paul J. Lane, “The unburied victims of Kenya’s Mau Mau Rebellion: where and when does the violence end?” *Human Remains in Society: Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass-violence* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

²⁷ Kenya Subsidiary Legislation 913, gazetted on August 12, 1950.

living in poverty, deprived of their land and recognition. Former detention campsites, prison cells and torture chambers have been repurposed into school compounds or other community buildings. Despite the presence of so many camps in Kenya, and with thousands still bearing unhealed wounds, the history of detention isn’t taught in schools, and it’s not even part of collective national memory. It remains hyper-localized, only alive within families and villages. Equally so in Britain (and as is the case with many former imperial powers, including Belgium), the history of colonialism is not taught sufficiently in schools, often presenting the country as the savior rather than an oppressor (Goodfellow 2019).

Although earlier accounts by Kenyan authors such as Maina wa Kinyatti (*Thunder from the Mountains*, 1990), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (*Weep Not, Child*, 1963) and Josiah Mwangi Kariuki (*‘Mau Mau’ Detainee*, 1963) had already pleaded for retribution for the dark secrets the empire attempted to cover up and erase from history. Two books that finally had some effect on the moral consciousness of Europe and the rest of the world were published in 2005, and eventually led to Britain’s official apology: *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* by Harvard historian Caroline Elkins and historian David Anderson’s *Histories of the Hanged: Britain’s Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. This lack of awareness can be attributed to numerous factors. In an attempted cover-up known as Operation Legacy, the British Colonial Office destroyed or hid all documentation related to the presence of camps and the human rights violations that took place within them in order to prevent the records from being inherited by its ex-colonies. Neocolonial Kenya banned the Mau Mau movement in fear of its dissenting voices. The utterance of the words ‘Mau Mau’ remained illegal and taboo up to 2003, when President Mwai Kibaki scrapped the colonial-era legislation that outlawed Mau Mau as a terrorist organization (Plaut 2003).²⁷ This greatly suppressed oral history and community discussions around the subject, and prevented Mau Mau veterans from forming organizations and claiming compensation from the British government in UK courts. It also means that there was no Truth and Reconciliation Commission (like in South Africa), no restorative body of justice to heal the wounds of the past. Former Home

Guards remained in power and the land divisions put in place by the British administration were maintained.

Many of those who experienced life in the camps, villages and forests are now of old age, ill-health or have passed on. But Kenya's colonial past hasn't been forgotten. On 6 June 2013, a speech by UK Foreign Secretary William Hague in the London House of Commons made unprecedented history in the form of an imperial apology: "The British Government recognises that Kenyans were subject to torture and other forms of ill treatment at the hands of the colonial administration. The British government sincerely regrets that these abuses took place" (Hague 2013). Fifty years after Britain's exit from Kenya, the United Kingdom agreed to a compensation payment to 5,228 claimants for a total sum of £19.9 million, along with the construction of a memorial in Nairobi commemorating the torture and ill-treatment inflicted during the colonial era.

It was the first time an imperial power expressed grievance for the atrocities it committed. In 2011, as a result of these court hearings, the UK government was forced to admit that it had secret documents pertaining to its Kenyan operations, leading to the declassification of what is now known as the Migrated Archives: a vast collection of some twenty thousand colonial files from Britain's thirty-seven former colonies.²⁸ This repository of evidence led to the claimants winning their case. However, a secret archive of an estimated 2.1 million files is still illegally withheld from the public sphere at Hanslope Park, a high-security government communications centre in Buckinghamshire, in which "batches of files are catalogued according to the length of shelf space they occupy, with six metres and two centimetres dedicated to files about Rhodesia, for example, and four metres and 57 centimetres holding files about Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, the KGB spies who operated inside the Foreign Office and MI6. There are 50 metres of files on Hong Kong, 100.81 metres about the United States and 97.84 metres of "private office papers" (Cobain 2013). Before any of those files can be made public, they must be revised and checked manually, one by one, by state personnel in charge of the declassification process (mostly retired clerks that work at a painstakingly slow pace). At this rate, clearing the collections

²⁸ All files are publicly available and can be consulted in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, 141 series) at The National Archives in Kew, London.

would take around 340 years. The British government is once again sweeping its colonial history under the rug. In 2018, another forty thousand Kenyans took to the English courts seeking damages for the sufferings they had endured during the emergency. The Mau Mau case has created a global precedent for victims of other former colonies to claim compensation for human rights abuses, such as Greek Cypriots in 2019 (Smith 2019).

The In-Person Demonstration: Touching Time Beside or Across Itself

People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.

– James Baldwin, *Strangers in a Village*, 1953.

How can one visualize the past by photographing the present with a future audience in mind? History and memory have a complicated relationship with photography. Rather than making a historical analysis only based on provable facts, I'm interested in a visual representation that combines existing photographic archives, physical remnants from the past, and the participation of people who experienced the war themselves. A visual historiography in which ambiguity, uncertainty and speculation are inherent to the retelling and reclaiming of history based on memory and physical traces. How can we re-think the prevalent formats of photographically representing the suffering of others, or in this case, an enormously complex topic such as human rights violations of a colonial past?

I propose the participatory in-person reenactment, defined here as the 'in-person demonstration', as a potential strategy for a self-reflexive yet humanist documentary approach to dealing with the representation of unresolved historical narratives. Not only is this a much under-explored method, but it also grants photography to sever its indexical bond to reality without completely detaching itself from it; they reveal truths but lack



(untitled), John Mwangi, Paul Mwangi Mwenja and Peter Irungu Njuguna demonstrate the treating of a wounded fighter in a Mau Mau cave, 2019, from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing
© Max Pinckers/MMWVA

‘lookalike-ness’. Expanding from Freud’s idea of repetition or the acting out of a memory as a method of therapeutically ‘working through’, Stella Bruzzi writes that “documentary reenactments provide the thread that makes sense of a fragmented narrative,” reconstituting “the past to ensure that it is not forgotten, but also to ensure that it is understood” (Bruzzi 2020, 52). It allows us to speak about the past in the present tense, and about the present in the future tense. “It allows the documentary to add flesh to fact, to locate its argument not in the abstract domain of impersonal logic, but in the concrete domain of embodied experience and historical occurrence” (Nichols 2001, 57). The resulting photographs are

historically loaded, performative, documentary records, testimonies, and above all, reveal their constructed nature within the photographs themselves.

At the heart of *Mau Mau, History Makers* is what Ivone Margulies has defined as the “in-person reenactment” (Margulies 2019), an artistic method in which people demonstrate personal experiences from their own past. Or what film historian Kristen Fuhs has defined as the “participatory reenactment,” in which “subjects engage with and even re-perform their own experiences represent a conscious performance of self that exceeds the limits of historical inscription. In these participatory reenactments, subjects use their words and bodies to both describe and perform their historical selves. The body bridges temporal and spatial gaps—it is what connects a past event with a present performance” (Fuhs 2012, 58).

In *Mau Mau, History Makers* survivors perform ‘demonstrations’ in which they claim their roles as heroic victims instead of terrorists in a visual response to a skewed European imperialist narrative. Photographs of embodied experiences slide through time in a process described by Rebecca Schneider as the “touching of time beside or across itself in the zigzagging lived experience of history’s multi-directional ghost notes” (Schneider 2011, 31). What distinguishes the in-person demonstration from other forms of mimetic, illustrative reconstructions of the past is that the agency of what is being demonstrated lies entirely with the performers themselves. The document now becomes the individuals – their physical presence and the performance of their imagination. This ambiguous agency of the protagonist-turned-actor grants the performers the opportunity to treat the original events and experiences creatively, allowing them to transform their memories in order to resonate with the contemporary context. In the form of a still photograph, or mimetic representation, these images become indexical to an ambivalent complex history, awakening the “the psychically real but fantasmatic linkage of now and then” (Nichols 2008, 77).

I introduce the term ‘demonstrations’ instead of ‘reenactments’ as an addition to the ‘in-person’ and ‘participatory’ definitions. Reenactments don’t quite call up the right connection, and the historical reenactment is

usually associated with well organized grand historical tableaux involving costumes, extras and some form of predetermined action plan usually defined by amateur historians and hobbyists. In agreement with Fuhs, “we do not often associate reenactments with self-expression” (Fuhs 2012, 55). Historical reenactments often focus on epic war battles with an emphasis on historical accuracy and a communal authentic, immersive reenacting experience. The term most likely “conjures up images of men play-acting soldiers in civil war battles, not performative engagements with more personal histories” (Fuhs 2012, 55). The three variable meanings according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* for the noun ‘Demonstration’ are: (1) an act of showing that something exists or is true by giving proof or evidence; an outward show of a feeling or quality; (2) a practical exhibition and explanation of how something works or is performed; (3) a public meeting or march protesting against something or expressing views on a political issue.²⁹ Most considerably, the elderly Kenyans themselves use the term ‘demonstrate’ when performing for a photograph.

The initial idea to work with reenactments as a documentary strategy was triggered by a scene in the *BBC* documentary film *Kenya: White Terror* (2002), based on the research of Caroline Elkins. During an interview, Mwangi Kenyari, a former detainee of a British prison camp, takes the *BBC* journalist to the very cell where he had been tortured and kept for eight days. There, he spontaneously performs a reenactment in order to make his testimony clear, or perhaps because he didn’t have the words to explain it. Standing upside down with one foot up against the wall (not having the strength anymore to get his second foot up), he declares that he was “naked, tied by bars, and brutally beaten on the testicles with a stick before having his eyes seared with hot coals” (McGhie 2002). This kind of unprompted performance would unfold during many of my encounters with Mau Mau veterans and camp survivors later on until they would eventually form the key premise for visually documenting their personal testimonies.

Before beginning the process of photographing their demonstrations, I conducted a workshop with Mau Mau veterans and former detainees in which they engaged

²⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. “Demonstration.”

with the archival material that I had collected from various institutions. Much of this material, dating from the 1950s, villainizes the Mau Mau freedom movement. They would then think of ways in which to respond, visually and verbally, according to their own personal experiences. The use of archival material in the work does not intend to function as some kind of validation of historical authenticity. On the contrary, it presents the one-sided view of the perpetrator and its imperial gaze. The intent with creating photographs together with Kenyans today is to decolonize institutional archives and correct these corrupt narratives by eventually contributing these newly created images to those archives.³⁰ We are, in a way, attempting to correct these archives by subversively re-performing its missing images through their embodied experiences, and in doing so, reclaiming the archive.

These spontaneously improvised micro-performances are examples of *how it may have been*, emphasizing the act of the demonstration itself and the spectral aura of repeating what is historically unique. Elderly veterans, for instance, don’t wear the same clothing that they may have while living in the forest; instead, they appear in casual suits. Walking sticks can be seen along the fringes of scenes with many other anachronistic objects. But historical accuracy isn’t the point here. Rather, the very fact that these people, decades later, are able and motivated to physically perform what they’ve experienced to a European photographer is what resonates (implicitly implying my own complicity in this postcolonial power structure). As Margulies clarifies, “To draw attention to recreated scenes is an integral part of the testimonial process: what is said is uniquely true not because it refers to actual events but because of its performative valence, and its co-presence with a viewer” (Margulies 2019, 11). Similar to Brecht’s theatrical *verfremdungseffekt* or ‘alienation effect’, that would remind the audience that they were looking at theater and not reality – to arouse the critical consciousness of the spectator rather than numb it – the photographs of demonstrations are not meant to look realistic. Rather than creating a convincing illusion, they are intended as a means to stimulate critical thinking and discussion in a mode of

³⁰ An example of a successful intervention into an archive was recently performed by Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen in a project titled *ImageNet Roulette*. By removing 600,000 images from the training dataset, Crawford and Paglen corrected the racist and sexist biases of an important image database on which machine learning AI systems are trained.

‘Brechtian Distantiation’.

Nichols noted that “reenactments occupy a strange status in which it is crucial that they be recognized as a representation of a prior event while also signaling that they are not a representation of a contemporaneous event” and that “viewers must recognize a reenactment as a reenactment even if this recognition also dooms the reenactment to its status as a fictionalized repetition of something that already occurred” (Nichols 2008, 73–4). In *Mau Mau, History Makers*, elderly gentlemen pretend to shoot – taking aim with their rifles – using walking sticks, camera tripods or other convenient ‘gun-like’ objects as an imaginary gesture of ‘shooting back’.

Even in-person reenactments are not truly personal reflections of an experience, but part of a larger image-repertoire – or language – on the basis of which they are performed and turned into new images. These repetitions are not only of personally experienced events, but of memories based on existing images, images from other historically related events, or other people’s memories and stories that share the same trauma. They are a combination of physical and emotional memory – shared and individual, communal and personal – that make it possible for anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender to share collective memories and to assimilate them as personal experiences of historical events through which they themselves did not live. The potential of privately felt public memories, or a ‘third memory’, is a concept put forth by historian of visual culture Alison Landsberg as the “prosthetic memory” (a concrete example of this is that everyone remembers the horrific events of September 11, but many of those who recall that day did not witness the event with their own eyes) (Landsberg 2004).

One of the most influential contemporary artworks departing from an in-person reenactment is Pierre Huyghe’s two-screen film *The Third Memory* (1999). The film recreates the bank robbery from the film *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975) in a ten-minute re-staging featuring John Wojtowicz, the man on whom Al Pacino’s gay bank-robber character was based. Huyghe’s reenactment shifts between the first memory of the actual event to the second cinematic memory of *Dog Day After-*

noon, and to the third memory of Wojtowicz’s reenactment itself performed on a rudimentary version of the *Dog Day Afternoon* set. Noticeably, Wojtowicz’s account is influenced by the collision between the first and second views. Fictional liberties taken by the screenwriters have, over time, confused Wojtowicz about the actual events of the robbery, thus manipulating the event in his own memory. In Huyghe’s film, for example, the bank robber reveals that he watched *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) just before committing his crime, influencing some of the decisions he made in planning the robbery (remarkably, both *The Godfather* and *Dog Day Afternoon* feature Al Pacino in a leading role). Art critic Sjoukje van der Meulen points out that an important moment in Huyghe’s remake is when the bank robber exclaims “but in the REAL film...!” Referring to the real event as film, “he seems to fictionalize the event itself, thereby not only pointing out the paradoxical bond between reality and representation, but also implicitly questioning the ontological logic of their fundamental difference” (van der Meulen 2011).

Another important art reference is Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). A re-staging of a violent miner’s strike at the time of Thatcher, which escalated into a huge battle with police in a field reminiscent of a war scene. Having watched the event on television in 1984 as a young boy, Deller was shocked by the brutality of oppression and was convinced that the media had represented the miners as more violent than they had actually been. With the help of a commission, he organized a “thousand-person crime re-enactment,” with eight-hundred historical reenactors and two-hundred former miners who had been part of the original conflict (some playing police officers instead of themselves). The former miners perform their strike once again, based on their ‘living memory’, this time against actors, and in doing so reconsider the social change and actions of solidarity that had occurred since the original strike. The performance provides a dialogical space and agency to the miners who are given the opportunity to narrate their own “unfinished messy history” of the past event (Correia 2012, 198). Although Deller’s intention was not about healing wounds, “it would take more than an art project to heal wounds,” he pronounced. It was about

confronting the past without being ashamed of what happened (Figgis 2001). A counter-narrative to the ‘false’ politically influenced media coverage of the time that characterized the miners as ‘the enemy within’, as described by Thatcher. In Deller’s reenactment, the audience of the performance is called to sympathize with the miners and their unfair treatment. An act of “digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem,” as he described it (Deller 2001).

Mike Figgis’ film documentation of the performance reveals abrupt smiles on the faces of participants during scenes of vicious clashes between miners and police. Subtle disclosures pulling us back from a realistic illusion into a performance. Something that reveals the reenactment *as* a reenactment. As in absurd Surrealist stagings in which the *mise-en-scène* becomes a critical gesture. Treated as a “space in which parody, self-mockery and many other feelings derived from the comic, turn the pretentiousness of the staging into a platform and also a speculative arena,” writes art historian Michel Poivert (Poivert 2010, 539). Smiles can also be seen in some of the photographs made with Mau Mau veterans, when carrying a wounded soldier, for instance. Not only does this prick through the illusion of the performance, but it also reveals the genuine pleasure of the participants, or perhaps a way of confronting trauma?

In my experience with photographing in-person demonstrations by Mau Mau veterans, it became clear how they become split figures suspended between past and present. Their performances seemed deeply ambiguous regarding its relation to the original experience or actual historical event. With many of them over ninety years old, their memories have now become foggy. Here, photographs are not made as registrations of memory but embody a multiplicity of fragmented memories, also deriving from archival film footage and well-known photographs of the Mau Mau emergency crisis. The demonstrations they perform are somewhere in-between personal remembrance and collective memory, without clearly expressing the need to distinguish between them. The act of remembering and performing stressful memories is a process of memory reconsolidation: “Every time you remember something, you create



(untitled), General Bahati demonstrates how he led a group of Mau Mau carrying a wounded soldier, 2015 (in collaboration with Michiel Burger), from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing
© Max Pinckers/Michiel Burger/MMWVA

the memory again, strengthen it, build it up, change it. The act of remembering alters the memory itself. The more often you remember something, the less accurate it becomes” (Sentilles 2017, 105). Yet what is performed or demonstrated can only be regarded as authentic within the construction of the documentary framework since we are dealing with personal stories in the form of still images, in turn contributing to a historical image repertoire, to be remembered again in the future.

Creating another layer of ambiguity is within some of the questionable archival imagery itself that appears highly theatrical and performed, most likely reenactments specifically staged for propaganda purposes. This became especially apparent to me when a spontaneous performance took place in the emergency village replica



(untitled), Charles Ngaragari Karuitha and Eliud Mwai Munyiri demonstrate a Mau Mau oath-taking ceremony, 2019, from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing © Max Pinckers/MMWVA



we had built on the Karatina University campus, where a group of men aggressively evict a couple from their homestead and detain them for questioning. Its visual resonance eerily similar to a 1950s *British Pathé* newsreel in which an identical moment can be seen taking place, that in turn, appears highly histrionic. Documentary tropes, previously existing images and templates – empty ideological containers – form the fundamental premise for photographic in-person reenactments, because every reenactment needs an image repertoire to depart from, and in turn, contribute to, in order to undermine and contradict. By placing the historical archival imagery at the same visual hierarchy as my own contemporary images, the ambiguous nature of how photographs relate to history becomes evident.

Some of the photographs in the project so far depict forest fighters tending to wounded soldiers, women smuggling food and hiding ammunition, people behind barbed wire fences in a detention camp replica, women sleeping in caves used as hideouts, the assembling of a homemade gun, interrogation sessions, a woman burying her dead baby after being beaten during forced labor, secret oath-taking rituals and the unveiling of bodily scars and bullet wounds. Designed to raise the emotional temperature, these photographs can sometimes be confronting to look at, making us feel uncomfortable, somehow complicit.

Our reality is assembled from details, and rarely from a whole picture. The act of demonstrating is about subtle elements, the micro-gestures of hands, subtle body postures, gazes, and the physical relationship to others within the same frame. In a beautiful scene (also recorded on film), Charles Ngaragari Karuitha and Eliud Mwai Munyiri perform a Mau Mau oath-taking ceremony. They pretend to sacrifice a goat with a *panga* (machete). They do this at a location where oath-takings took place, beside a cascading waterfall that drowns out the sound as not to give their positions away. The goat is turned upside down and placed on a bed of sacred leaves. Eliud gently slides the blade of his *panga* over the goat's chest and legs in a series of smoothly choreographed movements. Charles and Eliud then each eat an imaginary piece of goat meat followed by a prayer in unison to *Ngai*, facing

Mount Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya), the Kikuyu God.

Long before Jacques Derrida introduced us to hauntology (Derrida 1994), Susan Sontag wrote that “narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (Sontag 1977, 80). Employing the emblem of the ghost in order to refer to a persistent return of the past in the present, hauntologists not only see all representations as ghostly, but they are also haunted by what escapes representation itself. This aesthetic of the negation of appearance, or the appearance of negation, is what according to T. J. Demos determines the “spectro-poetics” of hauntological documentary artworks (Demos 2013a, 13). *Mau Mau, History Makers* is engrained with hauntological weight, in which every photograph conjures specters from the past. Not only do the images from archives haunt the present, but the newly produced photographs of mass graves sites, former torture chambers, and heroic victims evoke a nostalgia for a future that never came to pass. This work has the intention to create a foundation on which future generations can learn from and confront their ghosts in order to move towards positive forms of peace and reconciliation.

Gaps Between the Real and the Unspeakable: Reenacting Trauma

Scientists exposed mice to the smell of cherry blossoms and then administered electric shocks. Later they bred the mice, and when they exposed the offspring to the smell of cherry blossoms, the offspring were afraid, though they'd never smelled cherry blossoms before, though they'd never been shocked before, certainly not while smelling cherry blossoms.

– Sarah Sentilles, *Draw Your Weapons*, 2017.

A study involving mice suggests that trauma is hereditary and can be passed on genetically from one gen-

eration to the next (also known as transgenerational trauma). Especially post-traumatic stress disorders and historical traumas in which collective suffering becomes engrained into society are passed down through generations. Considering the traumatic and complicated nature of a civil war within an anti-colonial revolt, with sensitive issues of personal complicity and conflicting national narratives, survivors of the war are more inclined to show rather than tell. People that have witnessed traumatic events often suffer from ‘hysterical blindness’, often experiencing them in third person as to distance themselves from coping with them. When re-performing traumatic events, art historian and film director Lukasz Ronduda asserted that “what is real cannot be presented directly, because the essence of trauma is that the psyche is not ready to represent it and capture it in words. Therefore, in the life of the psyche, the real can only appear in the form of unclear repetitions” (Ronduda 2005, 29). During such confrontations, the specters of colonial oppression cannot be uttered, but they can be visualized and demonstrated. Images as mute witnesses create an implicit space for expression that leaves room for ambiguity, a way of intervening in the present by reconstituting and revising the past. This liberating trait of a visual and silent demonstration is what makes it so appealing both as a photographic documentary strategy and a form of expression – an uncanny spectacle of a traumatic moment displaced in history, yet remarkably present. In this sense, reenactments such as these are more telling than the original depictions of the events because they reveal the true nature of trauma as a gap between the real and the unspeakable.

In his film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* Rithy Panh experienced a similar insight. One of the former guards at S21 was attempting to tell his story, yet was incapable of finding the right words. Instead, he invoked gestures that completed the phrases he could not utter. “And it’s then that I discovered that there was another memory, which is the bodily memory,” explains Panh. “Sometimes the violence is so strong that words don’t suffice to describe it. And also that violence may be so strong that the words become inaudible” (ten Brink and Oppenheimer 2012, 244). The body is a site of memory – like phantom pain. Performance has the potential to

uncover traumatic repressions of the past and to create understanding between victims and perpetrators. “Most reenactments began with the aim not of *knowing* what history was like but rather *feeling* what it was like... allowing a necessary degree of play between the prototype and the copy”, writes Bruzzi (Bruzzi 2020, 5).

This brings to mind Polish artist Zbigniew Libera’s work *Positives* (2002–2003), in which he investigates photojournalism and the power of the media to shape our visual memory and manipulate conceptions of history. Libera re-stages famous historical press photos meticulously regarding formal elements such as aesthetics and composition, only he changes the characters and the general context of the event by making ‘positive’ versions of them. The “Napalm Girl” is swapped with a nude, grinning woman in a recreational setting, or a group of concentration camp prisoners have been reconfigured as smiling figures in striped pajamas (Ronduda 2005, 29). Libera explains his motivation for making the work as “another attempt at playing with trauma. We are always dealing with memorized objects, not the objects themselves. I wanted to employ this mechanism of seeing and remembering and touch upon the phenomenon of memory’s afterimages. This is how we actually perceive those photographs – the harmless scenes trigger flashbacks of the brutal originals” (Libera, n.d.). Libera’s positive images are reminiscent of glamorous commercials. In an inverse sense, they criticize our



Nepal, 2003, from the series *pozytywy (Positives)*, 2002–2003 © Zbigniew Libera

visual numbness towards the flood of shocking images to which we now respond to in a similar way as we do to advertising. By creating versions of iconic atrocity photographs that are easier to look at, easier to digest, Libera attempts to 'unblock' the original 'negative'; to unblock our instinctive aversion towards the real traumatic witnessing of horror in order to make us reflect about our process of seeing and remembering (Bas 2016).

It became clear to me that the most brutal memories cannot be visualized photographically without omitting the atrocity itself. "Some of them [detainees] were tied to Land Rovers and then pulled along the road until you are dead," as veteran Maina Njathi described during a workshop (Pinckers 2021b). Paul Mwenja tells us about "a White man who came with a bucket and said that all detainees should have their testicles cut off until his bucket was full. One would be forced to bend over and then they would be cut and thrown into the bucket as other people watched" (Pinckers 2021b). During interrogation, women "would get a bottle or boiling eggs shoved up their vaginas," causing most of them to die of complications later on, explains Beninah Wanjugu Kamujeru. These kinds of scenes cannot be imagined,



(untitled), torture tools, 2019, from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing © Max Pinckers/MMWVA

let alone visualized. They can only poorly and painfully be described in words. I chose to merely depict the tools used in such torture practices, such as a glass bottle, pliers and an egg. A seemingly innocent still life, subliminally charged with trauma.

Following a conversation with Alice Wanjiru about her experience of living in an emergency village at Gatumunganga, she chose to demonstrate the most significant moment of this dark period in her life. She recounted how she was interrogated and beaten, forced to confess having taken a Mau Mau oath, while being eight months pregnant. Later that week she had a miscarriage and had to bury the baby in a ditch by the side of the road, marking the grave with a small sisal plant. She demonstrated this for a photograph using a bundle of leaves wrapped in a cloth to personify her lifeless baby, which she then delicately placed into the ground and covered with earth.

The invisible presence of objects, props and people produces a fantasmic and imaginary framework for the viewer of the photographs to occupy. The same way some forest fighters use their walking sticks to represent rifles or a former detainee lifts his hat above his head to convey how he forcibly carried buckets filled with soil during hours of forced labor. Reality here becomes elastic. It stretches and bends through time, symbols and memory.

The in-person demonstration can contribute to a form of coming to terms with the past, and might offer a way to help understand memories of traumatic events in the present. They "offer more than just a way to dramatize evidence. They are self-consciously reflexive acts in which embodied testimony evokes a past historical event while simultaneously re-establishing the conditions for how that event should be viewed and understood in the future," writes Kristen Fuhs. Although this process is as much about remembering as it is about forgetting. With factions of competing Mau Mau veteran organizations claiming compensation and recognition, historical accuracy and reliability are impossible to confirm. The 'regimes of memory' centered on the Mau Mau "simultaneously feature 'forgetting', occlusion, absences, contradictions and often a surfeit of memory,"

writes historian Lotte Hughes. “Documents, memoirs, speeches, artworks, photographs, blogs, songs, spaces, absences, and so on have themselves produced their own histories—myths that swirled around the ‘lost’ trial papers, the dramatic recreation of the trial by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Mícere Githae Mũgo, and the mysterious appearance in Nairobi in 2003 of an aged Ethiopian peasant masquerading as long-lost fighter Stanley Mathenge are all key examples of attempts by various players to fill absences” (Hughes 2017, 342). Reenactments thus have the potential to become part of the original event’s own history – an epilogue to the experience. They do not restore history but rather contribute to the equivocal knowledge of the past, potentially eclipsing the formerly dominant ones.

Collaboration as a Way of Unlearning the Imperial Documentary Protocols

Given that free or cheap labor is extracted from others, photographers act as middlepersons between those photographed—the objects of their craft—and other imperial agents. It is in exchange for this that they could benefit from the imperial domination of photographic markets and could claim single authorship of their photographs, even though their production involved many other people.

– Ariella Azoulay, *Unlearning Imperial Rights to Take (Photographs)*, 2018.

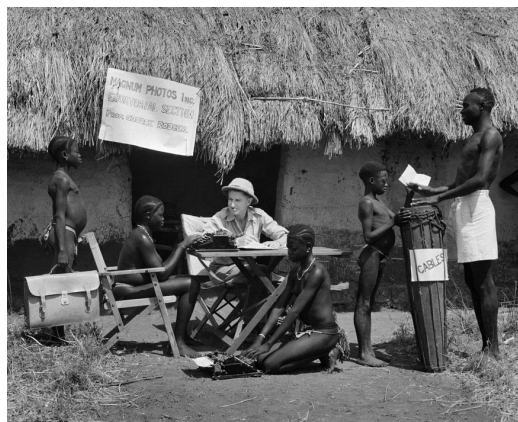
According to postcolonial discourse, socially concerned documentary photography originates in a colonialist privilege acquired by a denial of its involvement in imperialism. The documentarian’s imperial rights are a product of structural denial in which documentary has established itself as a morally concerned vehicle for expression, while at the same time being a consequence of violently fabricated imperial actors.

The most radical thinker requisitioning the position of the concerned photographer and the imperial rights embedded within the documentary protocol is Ariella Azoulay. In her book *Potential History, Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), Azoulay even goes so far as to place the origin of photography in 1492 in an attempt to identify the invention of photography as an extension of the institutionalized practice of imperial violence. “Photography,” claims Azoulay, “was built upon and benefitted from imperial looting, divisions, and rights that were operative in the colonization of the world in which photography was assigned the role of documenting, recording, or contemplating what-is-already-there” (Azoulay 2018a). Her argument is supported by an excerpt from the well-known speech made by Dominique François Arago in 1839 before the Chambre des Deputes in which the new practice of photographic technology was presented. In his speech, Arago makes reference to an earlier expedition to Egypt in which he explains how photography could have been used to document and poses faithful pictorial records that have now been lost. A testament to “the way photography, like other technologies, was rooted in imperial formations of power and legitimization of the use of violence in the form of rights exercised over others” (Azoulay 2018a). Azoulay thus connects photography’s invention and promotion to the ideological motives of colonial expeditions and the large scale imperial enterprise of dominating others’ worlds: “When photography emerged, it did not halt this process of plunder that made others and others’ worlds available to the few, but rather accelerated it and provided further opportunities and modalities for pursuing it” (Azoulay 2018a).

A well-established tendency within news reportage is that people represented in photographs usually remain anonymous, selected for their appearance or dramatic presence, rather than their personal significance. They are symbolic, nameless bodies that stand in for a greater cause, representing a group of people, a problem, or entire social class, but are rarely granted the space to express themselves as individuals. When it comes to iconic images, we mostly only remember the name of the photographer along with some demeaning nickname ascribed to the individual in the image, such as Nick Ut’s “Napalm Girl,” Steve McCurry’s “Afghan

Girl,” or Kevin Carter’s “Vulture and the Little Girl.” In her writing on the imperial rights of photography, Azoulay attempts to shift the ownership and copyright from the photographer to the photographed. Explaining that the figure of the ‘concerned photographer’ grew from a class of expert professionals who “denied their implication in the constitution and perpetuation of the imperial regime and quickly convinced themselves that they were not exercising imperial rights but rather documenting and reporting the wrongs of that regime, acting for the common good” (Azoulay 2018c). The tradition of engaged photography, as Azoulay sharply remarks, is a product of the structural denial that “could invent the protocol of the documentary as a means of accounting for objects that were violently fabricated by imperial actors” and simply as “a mode of being morally concerned among one’s peers” (Azoulay 2018c).

Azoulay recognizes the act of being photographed and existing within an image as a form of labor that is being exploited by large corporations, collections and other institutions that enrich themselves by and through photography. The rights of the photographers themselves can just as easily be evoked and dispensed with. As is the case for most of the publicly available archival photographs relating to the Kenyan Emergency period. “From a very early stage, it was assumed that the people photographed, not the spectators, are to provide the resources and the cheap or free labor for this large-scale photographic enterprise. The many involved in



Christmas card from Magnum Photos' Equatorial Office, Sudan, 1948 © George Rodger/Magnum Photos

photography were considered extras, secondary actors or raw material, while the work of some photographers was singled out to constitute the spine of the history of photography” (Azoulay 2018d). Many authors of the 1950s photographs are unknown, and even less is known about the people depicted in them, yet they are currently owned by Getty Images’ Hulton-Deutsch Archive and cost about €300 on average for reproduction rights. Such image banks often illegally charge for photographs of which they don’t even own the rights to. Images that are freely available in other public archives or license-free collections are nonetheless listed on websites such as Alamy, Corbis Images or Getty Images in another act of colonizing the past, claiming the narrative, profiting from a violent history of oppression. Free visual capital for the privileged ‘imperial economy of photography’, to put it in Azoulay’s terms.

In the photographs and documents retrieved from various archives in the UK and Kenya, Kenyans are “forced to embody imperial categories” such as ‘savage’ or ‘terrorist’, which endow the colonial White dominance onto the oppressed with a “set of imperial rights to keep them in this role” (Azoulay 2018c). The independent photographers that documented the Mau Mau emergency, such as Magnum photographer George Rodger, were practicing their imperial rights as photographers. The subjects of their photographs, sometimes detained and abused Kikuyu, were “made into the unacknowledged participants in photographs: those whose spaces have been invaded through the exercise of imperial rights so that their images can continue to circulate, tagged with imperial categories that photographers often use as if they were spokespersons of imperial regimes” (Azoulay 2018c). The collaborative photographs in *Mau Mau, History Makers* can be seen as a way of “unlearning the documentary protocols” as Azoulay puts it. These images, and their archival counterparts, can “no longer be viewed as a work of art from a bygone age but rather as an object in which non-imperial rights are inscribed that could potentially be restored” (Azoulay 2018b).

The need to make photographs with Mau Mau veterans, the survivors of the detention camps and emergency vil-

lages is urgent. There is an urgency to reconstruct a past that was suppressed, altered and manipulated by the archives of imperial power. The colonial wrongdoings must be documented and told by the witnesses themselves before they pass on. Many have already left us in recent years. By attempting to represent the suffering of others in photographs from a privileged position, it is inevitable to run into a mine-field of ethical, political and moral problems. Yet does this mean it should not be attempted? How can I be critical of colonization without enforcing a colonial discourse? It is evident that the first step to bridging the gap between myself and the Mau Mau is to share authorship of the work. I cannot speak for or about them, but only with them, next to them. In the form of a collaborative co-creation, the Mau Mau veterans and myself begin by sharing authorship and so redistributing conventional roles in the hope of eroding the documentary's objectifying imperialist gaze, without me, a White European, falling into the trap of instrumentalization or saviorism.

Having photographed in many places around the world, I had not been confronted as much with my own Whiteness as in Kenya. Even though I have made two books in India, also a former British colony, it had not occurred to me as a problem in need of addressing at that time. In India, I simply felt less like an outsider than on the African continent (which could also be connected to my upbringing having lived in India as a child for some time). The difference between India and Kenya is perhaps that the African continent is still dominantly perceived within the position of victimhood, whereas India holds the status of world's largest democracy and fourth-biggest economy with a defined progressive identity of 'Indianness'. India is also a country that saw early anti-colonial resistance and movements towards independence and dealt with its postcolonial status in an entirely different way. Many countries in Africa didn't even exist before being divided into neat slices during the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. After the decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was always going to be a struggle for who claimed power, new divisions of land ownership, splintered tribal divisions, unresolved ethnic conflict, and so on. Curator and writer Sunil Shah explained to me that “because most of Africa

was perceived as a failure of decolonization, and a failure in governance, resulting in wars, famine and other disasters, the grand narrative around Africa has been that of turmoil, disorganization, mis-governance, which has brought about its perception of victimhood” (Sunil Shah, email conversation, July 31, 2019). Africa as an ‘uncivilized, dark continent’ in need of help is a view that has also been maintained for the interests of the West in order to keep a hold over the continents’ precious resources. Its material resources, as well as its immaterial resources exploited for the purpose of academic research, saviorism, empathy, pity, charity and spectacle – materials used for study, admiration, appropriation and self-interest.

Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar's works *Searching for Africa in Life* (1996), *From Time to Time* (2006) and *(Untitled)* *Newsweek* (1994) are evidence of the Western media's barbaric indifference to life on the African continent. Not only does the media industry maintain the representation of Africa as a land defined by three main themes; animals, disease and famine; it intentionally and perpetually chooses to ignore unfolding of catastrophic atrocities. *The New York Times* Nairobi Bureau Chief Michael Slackman's job advert seeking a new international editor speaks volumes: “An enormous patch of vibrant, intense and strategically important territory with many vital storylines, including terrorism, the scramble for resources, the global contest with China and the constant push-and-pull of democracy versus authoritarianism” (Dodd 2020).

Not only is *Mau Mau, History Makers* produced within a context of victimhood in terms of the general perception on the African continent, but it's also the first project I embark on that explicitly deals with the suffering of others. This brings along an entirely new set of ethical dynamics, as discussed earlier in this book. When depicting scenes of suffering there is always a tension between the exploitation of that suffering by reliving it through photographs, and the agency photographs provide to the victims expressing their pain. The pain of others cannot be transformed into pleasure for the viewer. Although what happens when those images are consciously performed by the victims themselves to call

attention to their mistreatment? This is how in-person demonstrations create a double effect in their reading, in which the depiction of suffering is presented as a willing and conscious performance by the victims themselves, thus becoming a vehicle for their claims and maintaining their integrity. This strategy underscores the problematic stereotype of Africans as helpless victims (or what Okwui Enwezor condemns as “Afro-pessimism”), yet this time performed by the victims themselves in a claim for recognition. The paradox between aestheticizing suffering and the urgent need to tell the story is a narrative dilemma that can only be overcome by collaborating closely with the people who’s suffering is depicted. In order to be subversive, this collaborative process must be transparent and people must clearly be represented as active agents rather than passive victims (Campbell 2018).

Although it’s crucial to acknowledge, critically question and problematize my own position in the context of this collaboration – embodying the colonialist privilege of the photographer – I feel that the emphasis of the work must ultimately lie with their cause. Europe must face its past and come to terms with it, but not by overshadowing the other. In the process of making this work, I feel a strong responsibility towards the people I collaborate with and the effect it has on a community and their ongoing political struggles. The main collaborative effort is made with the Mau Mau Veterans Association (MMWVA) of Kenya under the leadership of the National Chairman Elijah Kinyua (aka General Bahati). Other than a direct collaboration with the Mau Mau themselves, various institutional partnerships have been established: a replica of a detention camp was constructed on the Karatina University compound (initially led by Peter Kinyanjui Mwangi and now under the guidance of Dean John Mwaruvie). The Mau Mau Research department at the university hosts a program in which history students work on rebuilding historical structures from the Mau Mau Emergency period, to which this structure has become an addition. The camp is permanently installed on the university grounds and can be visited by the public. Initially built as a set, or photo-decor, in which reenactments could take place, it has now become a space for discussion about Mau Mau history; a space of engage-

ment in which university students and the local community can learn about the country’s decolonization period. The National Museums of Kenya (David Mbutia, Kibaba Muriithi and Antony Maina) are overseeing the collaboration with the MMWVA, and make sure that historical and factual details in the work are correct. They also represent the government and provide advice in terms of ethnic sensitivities expressed in the work. Lead historian David Anderson will be contributing his knowledge and expertise by providing a historical text for the *Mau Mau, History Makers* book, along with two Kenyan writers (still to be confirmed). The Museum of British Colonialism (MBC), an international collective, will be creating 3D renders of former detention camp structures.

Together, we are not attempting to position our documentary work as expert outputs, but to present it as stages in our own individual learning process. We want to show that you don’t have to be an expert to take an interest in this history, or to participate in this work, or to record the testimony of a vanishing generation of witnesses of mass atrocities. This prerequisite of ‘expertise’ has confined studies of decolonization and documentary largely to privileged White academic circles, only accessible behind paywalls (Odugbemi et al. 2019). Therefore, being open about our learning process becomes a strength where we can invite different opinions and different narratives. If something in our visualization is incorrect then we will change it and if we have forgotten something then we will add it. There are still many levels of uncertainty brought about by limitations, such as research sources, barriers in access and lack of funding. Nonetheless, we try to communicate this very uncertainty within the process of documenting itself. Perhaps the essence of true decolonization is not about experts teaching non-experts but in learning to unlearn what we have known to be true. Teaching one another and sharing our lessons, whether you are considered to be an expert in the field or not. We consider this to be restorative and vital history (Maina and Pinckers 2020).

Some Examples of the (In-Person) Reenactment in Photography

Much has been written about the reenactment in documentary film, theater and performance, recently becoming a topic of scholarly debate in documentary critique. But relatively little has been written on the reenactment in documentary photography, even less so on the in-person reenactment. Typically, documentary discourse is dominated by film, and it is not always evident to simply extrapolate these ideas onto photography. Maybe this



A Growler Gang in Session (Robbing a Lush), 1887 © Jacob Riis

is because photography is missing a number of defining components that have laid the foundations of the in-person reenactment: time, first-person narration, bodily movement and emotional temporality. Without time there is no narrative, and without narrative, still

photographs silently bask in ambiguity. Photography is thus more a practice of *showing* rather than *telling* – photographs are not narratives, but poems. This creates a space in which the reenactment functions differently as it does in film, theater or performance. A moment in time becomes an ever-lasting one – singular, still and silent – ever so powerful in its eternal presence, outside of time.

The reenactment was, of course, prevalent in the early days of photography when exposure times were too long to naturally capture people or freeze spontaneous moments. Many images were staged, posed or re-performed for the sake of a photograph. What claims to be the first photograph ever to depict a person, Louis Daguerre's daguerreotype looking out over Boulevard du Temple from 1838, was most likely a performance of a boot shiner at work. However, I will not consider this early period of photography as reenactments were a solution to a technical problem rather than a critical artistic strategy.

The idea of 'doing something again for the camera', can also be considered a reenactment, albeit a spontaneous and relatively unprepared one, that mostly focusses on mundane daily actions. A better term would be 'spontaneous simulation'; actions spontaneously performed and re-performed on the spot for the sake of a photograph. This is often employed by photographers with the motive of making a better photograph than it was in the original moment, or as a way to capture what was missed (a method often discreetly practiced by photojournalists). When Arthur Rothstein was documenting the American Midwest for the Farm Security Administration, he made one of the most iconic pictures representing the Depression Era. Although relatively unknown, *Fleeing A Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* (1936) is, in fact, a simulation in which Rothstein directed the farmer and his sons to act out what a storm would be like (Rothstein 1943 and 1978). Another famous example of what could be defined as a spontaneous simulation in a photojournalistic context took place in the creation of W. Eugene Smith's *Spanish Village* (1950), published in *Life* in 1951. It caused quite a controversy at the time as many of the photographs were spontaneous simulations acted out specifically for Smith's camera, not following

the traditional rules of candid photography as had been long established by then. In an interview, when asked about his images being staged, Smith famously replied “I didn’t write the rules – why should I follow them? Since I put a great deal of time and research to know what I am about? I ask and arrange if I feel it is legitimate. The honesty lies in my – the photographer’s – ability to understand” (Smith, 1956). Although one could argue that as long as you don’t make the practice of staging and manipulation explicitly part of your discourse, and you use the visual codes of photojournalism, you inscribe yourself into those unwritten rules whether you wrote them or not. This comes across as intentionally deceptive because the public asserts that they are produced in a certain way, regardless of their intent. What has changed since the early days of reportage and documentary photography is that now the use of staging, simulating, reenacting, performing or collaborating can be made explicit within the work as part of an artistic strategy. It’s not as big a taboo as it used to be, although many are still afraid to openly use such



A farmer unloads his donkey in front of his home. His wife throws out the dirty dishwater, Extremadura, 1950
© W. Eugene Smith

strategies because they are stuck within the constricting context of (photo)journalism. Rather than applying such techniques ‘secretly’ or out of fear of being ‘caught’, the terms and conditions with which the work is produced

must be made explicit and presented as part of the artistic strategy itself.

Today, the reenactment is well established and explored across many genres of photography. Below I will give some examples of photographic works that put reenactments into practice, not always within documentary photography, but nonetheless important in establishing the reenactment as an artistic strategy.

The most influential is perhaps Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80). A ground-breaking work that postmodernists would hail as a prime example of photographic art in its rejection of originality. The series of sixty-nine black and white self-portraits depict Sherman in a series of archetypal female roles produced in the style of 1950s Hollywood films. She reenacts already existing media-identities by playing those roles herself. Paradoxically, Sherman’s ‘film stills’ are copies of images that have no original source.

Similarly, postmodernism promotes the idea that everything in the world is simply a trace of its original state, diluted through endless loops of copies, to the point that its true essence is lost. In a brilliant follow-up gesture, Polish artist Aneta Grzeszykowska re-stages Sherman’s original film stills, in turn appropriating them once more, this time in color (*Untitled Film Stills*, 2006–07). Sherman’s influence can be traced up to artists like Nikki S. Lee, who appropriates various identities in the forms of self-portraits as a schoolgirl, a stripper, a yuppie and many other generic American subcultures, always photographed by her peers within the cultures she infiltrates. For *Other People’s Feelings Are Also My Own*



Other People’s Feelings Are Also My Own – Soul Drawings, 2004–06 © Marcus Hansen

– *Soul Drawings* (2004–06), Marcus Hansen dresses like his subject, then attempts to assume the emotion, body language and facial expression of that individual. Here, the artist enacts his subject-sitter, with each photograph presenting strikingly convincing different versions of himself. The model to which he references functions as an anchor, as a reference to authenticity, creating an amusing interplay between the photograph and its mimetic performative qualities, as well as the author-photographer supposedly ‘empowering’ or literally representing their subjects with empathy.

In documentary photography, the reenactment is often associated with a simulation carried out in preparation of a possible real-world event, such as ‘active shooter drills’ in schools or police hostage rescue training simulations. By working with simulations, the documentary aspect of the photographs becomes suspect and takes on a critical view, reflecting on photographs in general and their symbolic simulations of reality. Just like the simulations themselves speculate about how something in reality could have been in the past or could turn out in the future. The simulation as a subject matter has become a widely revisited departure point for critically reflecting on documentary’s complex relationship to reality. Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernist theories on simulation and simulacra appear almost literally in the form of documentary photographs depicting artificially simulated events. For example, Arno Roncada’s *The Night Hike Project* (2010, part of the larger series *California Dreaming*), documents a simulation created by migrants for tourists to experience what it’s like to illegally cross the US-Mexico border. Guided by the migrants, who convincingly play both the border patrol agents and people smugglers, the tour takes paying participants over an imaginary border by night. In *Necessary Fictions*, Debi Cornwall documents the state-created realities of US military training grounds in which costumed Afghan and Iraqi civilians, many of whom have fled war, recreate war in the service of military preparations.

Another beautiful example of the simulation as a decisive strategy are the series *Small Wars* (1999–02) and *29 Palms* (2003–04) by Vietnamese-American artist An-My Lê. For *Small Wars*, Lê photographed and partic-

ipated in Vietnam War reenactments in Virginia. In *29 Palms* US Marines play-act scenarios in a virtual Middle Eastern city in the California desert in preparation for deployment. The former a reenactment and the latter a rehearsal. In the tradition of early war photographers such as Mathew Brady, Timothy O’Sullivan and Alexander Gardner, Lê works with a large-format view camera and makes black and white photographs in which the landscape forms a vital backdrop. The photographs are detailed, sharp, made from elevated viewpoints, and depict military action from a distance that make soldiers appear almost toy-like. By placing the viewer at a safe distance, away from the heat of battle, a space is created for the contemplation on the moral and ethical questions of warfare. Having experienced the Vietnam War herself and arriving in the United States as a refugee in 1975, she describes *Small Wars* as “the Vietnam of the mind.” A mental picture of this ‘first television war’ generated from a culmination of media, popular culture (*Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, ...) and personal memory, ultimately questioning how we remember, glorify and imagine war after the fact.

What makes this series truly brilliant is that Lê was often asked by the reenactors to participate, presumably because of her Asian appearance, adding authenticity to



Small Wars, (rescue), 1999–2002, gelatin silver print, 67.3 x 96.5 cm © An-My Lê

their game of make-believe. Next to acting as a translator or war correspondent, in an act of subversive resistance, she stepped into the role of the Viet Cong. She would occasionally include herself in her photographs while playing these roles (Irvine 2007). The simulations rehearsed in *29 Palms* also become pre-enactments of events that would soon rupture into reality, and in turn, be photographed again. In addition, Lê's photographs are critical mirrors to the media's sanitized representation of the Iraq/Afghanistan wars; there are no enemy combatants, no dead soldiers, no blood, open wounds or atrocities. Only rehearsals for the images we would later see in the news, up close, but equally artificial.



Gerald Hughes (a.k.a. Savage Fantasy), about 25 years old; Southern California; \$50, Fuji Crystal Archive print, 51 x 61 cm, 1990–1992 © Philip-Lorca diCorcia

Simulations as the ones described above exist regardless of a photographer being present to document them. The in-person reenactment is different in that it's the result of a collaboration and always expressly performed for the creation of a photograph. Let us now turn to examples that specifically make use of the in-person reenactment in documentary photography. Contrary to the conventional reenactment, simulation or rehearsal, the in-person reenactment is accompanied by a sense of personal agency. In 1887, Jacob Riis was already experiment-

ing with the notion of in-person reenactments when he hired young 'toughs' to reenact a common street crime by having them mug one of their own for one of his photographs. He paid the boys with cigarettes (Curtis 2003).

The in-person reenactment in photography is most used to 'replay' a moment that does not find itself so far away in the past, as illustrated earlier with spontaneous simulations by Smith and Rothstein. It's a speculative process in which a person or group 'play themselves' expressing a general sense of self-identity. Examples in photography where reenactments are performed with a specific referent in time or more profound personal history are scarce. When used in documentary photography, in-person reenactments are often accompanied by a mention of payment, just like Riis' cigarettes. This creates a political dimension in which the collaboration between artist and subject remarks on the participatory process as a form of labor, often shedding light on the social reality of the subjects in question.

In diCorcia's *Hustlers* (1990-92), for example, male prostitutes in Hollywood are photographed for the same price as they would usually ask for sexual services. The money diCorcia used to pay these male prostitutes was awarded to him by a government grant. Each photograph is accompanied by the name of the subject, their age, hometown and his corresponding price. This series of portraits, cinematic in their appearance, are in some ways in-person reenactments even though the men are mostly not performing an action or gesticulating anything in particular. The photographer had prepared the locations beforehand (near to where they were hustling), creating compositions and setting up the lighting, in which they could then 'play themselves' as if it were their actual working environment.

In *Mau Mau, History Makers*, people are involved in the flow of capital that the work itself generates. The first income resulting from an article I wrote about the collaboration with the Mau Mau for FOMU Antwerp's *Trigger* paid for General Bahati's wheelchair. Any subsequent profits that the project may generate in the future will be equally split between the MMWVA and myself, with which they plan to buy back the land that was stolen from them during British colonial occupation.

Another example of people being hired to perform their normal working role can be seen in Jeff Wall's *Men Waiting* (2006). Here Wall touches on a humanist dimension by means of its production with and depiction of illegalized workers. Although their hourly wage is not mentioned in the work's title, labor is part of Wall's discourse when talking about it. For the making of *Men Waiting*, Wall went to a place where men wait on a street corner to be hired for work. He didn't like the way that place looked, so he hired the men and invited them to come to a different location. A place with an "ensemble of trees and open spaces," attractive to Wall because of the "rhythm of the openings and the occupancy of the trees and buildings." He brought them there and asked them to wait while he photographed them, and "they waited there just as they were waiting on the other corner" (de Duve and Wall 2015).



Men Waiting, 2006, gelatin silver print, 262 x 388 cm © Jeff Wall

In regards to *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992), Wall explains that there was a real Adrian Walker, who was a draftsman and who made the drawing on his drawing board in that laboratory, but that the photograph is a "reenactment by the artist in the picture, of his own

practice." It's a pictorial reconstruction of a moment that had occurred during the creation of this drawing, which is "probably indistinguishable from the actual moment," explains Wall (Fried 2008, 41). Wall describes this repetition of behavior as 'micro-gestures'. Gestures that seem automatic, mechanical or compulsive, and thus come across as natural to the person executing it. The micro-gesture in *Mimic* (1982), for example, reveals that these often small but incredibly present motions have a definitive impact on the photograph's meaning. A double reenactment is Wall's *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999), in which both the pavilion itself and the action of cleaning it are reenactments. Originally created for the 1929 International Exposition in Spain, the pavilion was destroyed in 1930, but reconstructed between 1983 and 1986 based on black and white photographs and original plans.



Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1992, transparency in light box, 119 x 164 cm © Jeff Wall

The Innocents (2002) is a masterly early work by Taryn Simon. An exceptional example of the in-person reenactment with the hallmark of personal agency. Wrongly accused men that unjustly served time in prison return

to the scene of the non-crime. Simon photographed these men at locations that had particular significance to their retrospective unlawful convictions: the scene of the crime, the scene of the arrest, the place of misidentification or the whereabouts of the alibi. All of these locations mark the beginning of a life in prison based on false or fabricated narratives that sentenced them away for crimes they did not commit but consequently became a reality that defined much of their lives. Many of the photographs in the series are portraits in which the men pose statically. They sit or stand, quietly gazing into the lens at the beholder, surrounded by an environment burdened with anguish. On some occasions, a more compelling engagement is made in returning to the scene of the crime. In one image Larry Mayes, who served eighteen and a half years of an eighty-year sentence, demonstrates how he was hiding beneath a mattress in his room when he was arrested. In another photograph, Vincent Moto places his hands high up against the wall as if being frisked, while his son, who was with him at the time of the arrest and now much older, crouches next to him.



Larry Mayes, scene of arrest, The Royal Inn, Gary, Indiana Police found Mayes hiding beneath a mattress in this room, served 18.5 years of an 80-year sentence for Rape, Robbery and Unlawful Deviate Conduct, from the series The Innocents, 2002, archival inkjet print, 122.6 x 158.1 cm © Taryn Simon

The agency of the men is expanded with a series of straightforward video portraits in which they recount their stories first hand. For some of them a form of heated release, for others an emotionally confronting admission (Simon 2003). With her project, Simon helped create public awareness for the Innocence Project (founded by the civil rights lawyers Barry C. Scheck and Peter J. Neufeld at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law), a program devoted to using DNA evidence to help free wrongfully convicted prisoners. The organization has since exonerated hundreds of wrongly convicted, including dozens on death row (Boxer 2003).

In the foreword of the book *The Innocents*, Simon writes that “this project stresses the cost of ignoring the limitations of photography and minimizing the context in which photographic images are presented. Nowhere are the material effects of ignoring a photograph’s context as profound as in the misidentification that leads to the imprisonment or execution of an innocent person” (Simon 2002, 2). The book opens with a quotation from Jennifer Thompson on the process to identify the man who raped her:

I was asked to come down and look at the photo array of different men. I picked Ron’s photo because in my mind it most closely resembled the man who attacked me. But really what happened was that, because I had made a composite sketch, he actually most closely resembled my sketch as opposed to the actual attacker. By the time we went to do a physical lineup, they asked if I could physically identify the person. I picked out Ronald because, subconsciously, in my mind, he resembled the photo, which resembled the composite, which resembled the attacker. All the images became enmeshed to one image that became Ron, and Ron became my attacker (Simon 2002, 1).

With mistaken identification being the primary cause of wrongful convictions, Simon’s intention with this work was to critically reflect on photography as a credible eyewitness and arbiter of justice. Suspects are usually identified through photographs and lineups, in which a lapse in visual memory occasionally transforms innocent

citizens into criminals. Strikingly, the men pose once again for Simon's camera, just as they may have done for their mugshot. But this time to set things straight. "Photography's ambiguity," writes Simon, "beautiful in one context, can be devastating in another" (Simon 2002, 4). When interpreted as in-person reenactments, these photographs take on a different meaning. They become moments in which these men reclaim the instants that would change their lives forever. They use their bodies to transport themselves back in time to address the onlooker again, now as innocents, but unfortunately, much too late.



*Vincent Moto, center, with his son in a picture that returns Mr. Moto to the scene of his arrest in Philadelphia, from the series *The Innocents*, 2002, archival inkjet print, 122.6 x 158.1 cm © Taryn Simon*

9 LATE PHOTOGRAPHY

Late photography compels us to think of history as something similar to dark matter: the invisible mass in the universe that we can only know through its effect. There can only be a negative image of it, we can see its traces and consequences in the invisible universe, but we can't see it directly. In a similar way, the aftermath landscape in late photography confronts us with a phantom pain—a pain for all the missing bodies which are the dark matter of history.

— Henrik Gustafsson, *War stories, crime stories and ghost stories*, 2011.

Phantom Pain: Reactivating Landscapes

A more common way of calling up the past through photographs is the practice of 'late photography' or 'aftermath photography', sometimes also referred to as 'after-the-fact photography' (Erina Duganne) or 'post-reportage' (Ian Walker). Landscape photographs, devoid of people, made on places where devastating events have occurred, not as 'decisive moments' but 'decisive places'. The idea of the late photograph is centered around an acknowledgment of photography's inherent temporality. It leaves room for emotional projection and a double sense of ambiguity as opposed to photojournalism's marriage to 'the moment'. Most importantly, the late photograph invites projection – the projection of all the other images related to a particular event that one may have stored in the mind's eye – that culminate into the contemplative space of the ordinary landscape. Images that quietly acknowledge all those moments that have led up to it as having passed. Photographs of these places function as a legitimization of the imagination of historical events as some kind of departure point, or anchor, from which to begin imagining. Images made after the event pose questions about photography's role as bearing witness. If being at the right place at the right time is necessary to provide visual documents, or traces, of significant events.

One of the earliest examples of late photography is Roger Fenton's *Shadow of the Valley of Death* (1855). A document of the Crimea war in Ukraine, it depicts a ditch littered with cannonballs in the aftermath of battle. As was already suggested by Susan Sontag, Errol Morris managed to prove that the cannonballs were scattered onto the road for the sake of making a better photograph. By comparing the two glass plate exposures made by Fenton, it becomes clear that the second exposure, the famous photograph that is always reproduced, was altered or 'reenacted' for the sake of dramatic effect (some of the rocks in one photograph have rolled down the slope of the left hill, and can be seen lower down in the other photograph, which must therefore be the

second exposure).³¹

David Company has defined late photography as “not so much the trace of an event as the trace of the trace of an event” (Company, 2003). In the tradition of Walker Evans, these images are particularly static, slow, detailed registrations, and appear somewhat somber when associated with the weight of history. The practice of late photography has become a central trope in documentary photography and is successful within contemporary art photography due to its postmodernist undertone. Company writes that “there is a reticent muteness in these images that leaves them open to interpretation. Moreover their status as traces of traces fulfills for art a certain modernist reflection on the indexicality of the medium. They can also offer an allegorical, distanced reflection on the photograph as evidence and on the claims of mainstream documentary photography” (Company, 2003). Countless examples of works are based on this strategy, and unlike *Shadow of the Valley of Death*, they don’t require the intervention or manipulation of the photographer to emphasize their dramatic effect. They are already charged with significance by the nature of the burdensome events to which they testify.

The documentation of “Ground Zero” by Joel Meyerowitz in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York is a celebrated example of this genre, published as a large-format book appropriately titled *Aftermath* (2006). Meyerowitz makes excessive use of the epic and the sublime in a series that takes on the allure of propaganda and patriotism. The series is populated with American flags, heroic firefighters, pseudo-religious rituals that transform the event into a biblical catastrophe (Conrad 2006).

More interesting examples are where the photograph becomes merely a banal registration of a seemingly plain environment. Joel Sternfeld’s *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam* (1996) documents fifty places in the US where violent crimes took place, described as “ordinary landscapes left behind after tragedies, their hidden stories disturbingly invisible.” Each photograph in the series is accompanied by a text describing the crime. Although Sternfeld, like Meyerowitz, is still lured by formal elements that render those places as rather beautiful, often almost postcard-like (golden hour

³¹ Read a more in-depth analysis by Errol Morris in “Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?” In *Believing is Seeing* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

sunlight, strong diagonal compositions, striking perspectives, a specific color pallet, etc.). Not only do many of the images come across as picturesque, but they also contain excess information that pulls the attention away from the crimes described in the text beneath them. How to take this banality of violence a step further in terms of its aesthetic representation? It becomes truly interesting when landscapes in the tradition of late photography are devoid entirely of clear symbolic markers (no buildings, signs, memorial flower bouquets, ...) and conventional pictorial aesthetics because this maximizes the extent to which the imagination can project itself into the space.

Fait (1992) by Sophie Ristelhueber is a stunning example of landscapes literally bearing scars. At the end of the Gulf War, Ristelhueber made photographs both from the air and on the ground of trenches and tank tracks, bomb craters, oil wells, piles of rubble, and any other topographical traces of violence she encountered. The large prints are installed in a grid form on the wall, creating an abstract landscape as a whole. In an inverted take on the late photograph, Czech photographer Pavel Maria Smejlik removes figures and central motives from iconic war photographs, only leaving behind the surrounding environment, which is nonetheless still recognizable. His series *Fatescapes* (2009–10) proposes a



From the series *Fait (Fact)*, 1992 © Sophie Ristelhueber

different method for unblocking traumatic events, without the initial shock of seeing their positive reinterpretation (Bas 2016).



Soldat Eugène Bouret, Soldat Ernest François Macken, Soldat Benoît Manillier, Soldat Francisque Pitiot, Soldat Claudius Urbain, Soldat Francisque Jean Aimé Ducarre, 06:30 / 7.9.1914, Soldat Jules Berger, Soldat Gilbert Gathier, Soldat Fernand Louis Inclair, 07:45 / 12.9.1914, Vanémont, Vosges, Lorraine, from the series Shot at Dawn, 2014 © Chloe Dewe Mathews

Closer to my own work is the series *Shot at Dawn* (2014) by Chloe Dewe Mathews. The project revisits the forgotten places where British, French and Belgian soldiers were executed during the First World War for cowardice and desertion. Collaborating with academics, military experts, museum curators and local historians, she was able to pinpoint and photograph the precise locations where each man was executed. The photographs are made during the grey misty hours of dawn, keeping with the time that most of the men were executed. She places her tripod around the same spot where the firing squad had stood and gazes upon the place where the victim was shot (O'Hagan 2014a). Mathews also asserts a moral position in how she describes that “by photographing them, I am reinserting the individual into that space, stamping their presence back onto the land, so

that their histories are not forgotten” (Dewe Mathews, n.d.).

Film and photography theorist Henrik Gustafsson describes late photography from a hauntological perspective as photojournalism’s uncanny other: “it doesn’t imagine history as a tale of causes and effects where one event leads to the other, but as a ghost story. The past inhabits the present; memory merges with matter” (Gustafsson 2011, 38). Late photography is not always associated with one particular event. In *Der Baum* (2010) by Erik van der Weijde, trees become the sole remaining witnesses to events that have long passed. Different trees are photographed at places of significance, such as in front of Adolf Hitler’s elementary school in Fishlham, or a tree on the street where Natasha Kampusch was held prisoner for eight and a half years. The series of black



(untitled), mass grave site, Githambo, Murang’a County, 2015 (in collaboration with Michiel Burger), from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing © Max Pinckers/Michiel Burger/MMWVA

and white photographs whose interest seems to reside not in the tree's majestic beauty or its perseverance in urban settings but in its utter ubiquity and banality.

I am particularly interested in late photographs in which there is no longer a visual signifier to what has occurred in the place depicted, but that it can only be imagined or projected onto the landscape. This is achieved when images are escorted by a contextual narrative in which their purpose becomes clear. In *Mau Mau, History Makers*, a series of images in the tradition of late photography documents unmarked mass graves sites and sites of atrocity. They do not reveal much and mostly appear as straightforward images of empty, overgrown plots of land or clearings inside forests. Only the accompanying captions, specifying their location, reveals their status of disquiet. Kenya's central region is littered with them, and the bones are beginning to surface. Local communities respect these sites and do not build on them or cultivate them, even though they are not marked or fenced. The National Museums of Kenya, who help me locate the mass graves, is in the process of gazetting the sites, although it has little support from the government in finding a solution on how to deal with the bones, especially the ones that no one wants to claim. The museum has been in possession of a collection of human skeletons dating from colonial times, which they still do not know how to process or archive because they belong to Africans that collaborated with the British against the independence movement and so remain unclaimed by families in fear of being associated with the wrong side of history (Anderson and Lane 2016).

When I photographed and interviewed Geoffrey Nderitu Gitonga at his home in Gititu, Tetu County, he presented me with bones of former Mau Mau freedom fighters found on his farmland that sits on a mass grave: part of a skull, a jaw with teeth, arm and leg bones. He keeps them buried in the ground where he found them. "They don't disturb me, they are my friends, they are my brothers," he tells me (Pinckers 2021b). He keeps them to show the children in the neighborhood what their forefathers fought for.

Can late photography, in this sense, function as a kind of forensic archaeology, in which the bones, the

ruins, the traces become documents in themselves? Kenya's hero freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi's body has been missing ever since his execution in 1957. There is also no surviving soundtrack bearing Kimathi's own words (Hughes 2017, 360). His lost remains are the ultimate metaphor for the holes in history and the limitations of representation itself, argues postcolonial scholar Simon Gikandi. His 'embodied absence' creates an "image, a fantasy, that will function as a substitute for the real," that is "crucial to understanding the poetics and politics of memory" (Gikandi 2017, 322).



(untitled), Geoffrey Nderitu Gitonga uncovering human bones from a mass grave, Gititu, Tetu County, 2019, from the work in progress *Mau Mau, History Makers*, 2015 – ongoing © Max Pinckers/MMWVA

The intangible human experience of the Mau Mau veterans in the form of in-person demonstrations draws a direct line between the past and present through the lives of those who witnessed this history first-hand. Although much of the human experience is intangible, the physical traces of wounds remain not only on bodies but within the landscape and as repurposed structures, former campsites and unmarked mass graves. This tangible, material experience necessitates a different kind

of confrontation, mediated through digital technology and virtual restorations as proposed by the Museum of British Colonialism (MBC), who I am collaborating with to create virtual three-dimensional reconstructions of detention sites and other structures that no longer exist (Maina and Pinckers 2020).

Visual evidence is collected from a wide variety of sources and used as a basis for the recreations. MBC's primary research sources have been oral histories passed down by generations, which have become crucial personal testimonies, memories and experiences missing from the official archives. Archival sources, including newspapers, video, audio, letters, and photographs, have provided a key insight into the nature of the camps, their locations and the policies instituted during detention. Physical evidence can still be found on some of the repurposed sites today. The decision to use multiple sources stems from the fact that none of the sources are complete on their own. Ultimately, however, using multiple sources has allowed them to expand on the information we use for the visualizations, making them more holistic by incorporating perspectives omitted from state archives and literature of the time.

The virtual three-dimensional models and map are populated with oral histories and first-person testimo-



A three-dimensional visualization of holding cells at Aguthi Works Camp, reconstructed on the basis of present day evidence, 2019 © Museum of British Colonialism

nies of those who experienced the camps. MBC's work situates the process of reconstruction as being equally important as the output itself. Placing as much emphasis on the creation of the models through community co-production and co-design than on the final document by openly communicating about their process on the internet and through various social media channels.

MBC's approach to representing structures of detention mainly consists of virtual reconstructions of detention camp buildings. Using a form of investigative aesthetics that combines different historical sources and present-day evidence to shape the architectural nature of the detention camp structures and where they were situated. The practice of three-dimensional reconstruction presents an alternative for heritage that falls outside the so-called authorized heritage discourse (in which certain heritage sites are seen as more significant than others) by challenging established historical narratives (Smith 2012). Here, lesser-known, underrepresented sites of community interest are visualized and open to public engagement through interactive digital visualization online.

Using multiple historical sources to piece togeth-



A three-dimensional render of the watch tower and entrance to Aguthi Works Camp, reconstructed from archival photographs. The watchtower and gate were brought down after independence while other buildings within this camp were repurposed into a secondary school, 2019 © Museum of British Colonialism

er a visual representation of history presents certain challenges, particularly around the representation of ambiguity, transparency and evidence. Yet as argued by scholar of digital humanities Susan Schreibman, ambiguity within the reconstruction process, just as in traditional research, is an inherent part of the process through the subjective nature of gathering, selecting, and interpreting evidence. Therefore, the challenge is not so much in the ambiguity or lack of conclusive evidence but in how to communicate this in a transparent and evidential way (Jeffrey et al. 2020).

In a collaboration with Chao Tayiana Maina from the MBC, these virtual renders are brought into the framework of *Mau Mau, History Makers*, and contribute another way of reenacting the past. A way of ‘retrieving a lost object’ in an attempt to restore what can no longer be seen, becoming a new original document in itself.

The late photograph is often used as a vehicle for mass mourning or a way of remembering without being confronted by the images of horror themselves. A method of evoking “the vanishing points of history, to allow for a continuous, and also belated, encounter with the traumatic historical event,” argues writer Veronica Tello (Tello 2014). Although the weakness of this approach is its muteness and ambiguity when disconnected from its textual counterpart or conceptual framework – the tension between showing but not being able to tell. As Company rightfully remarks, the danger in this is that it can also “foster an indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as concern” in which “mourning by association becomes merely an aestheticized response” (Company 2003). For this reason, the photographs of mass grave sites are embedded within a narrative, accompanied by first-hand testimonies, portraits, bodily demonstrations, and registrations of architectural remnants relating to the war. They don’t demand to be seen without the weight of this context and can therefore not fall into flattering the “ideological paralysis of those who gaze at it with a lack of social or political will to make sense of its circumstance,” that Company warns us for.



Exclusive Picture: Terrorist at Bay. This picture, believed to be the first ever to be taken of a Mau Mau terrorist actually being shot, is exclusive to Associated Press © Kenya National Archives

The Falling Soldier: Pre-Enacting a Militiaman’s Death?

Everyone is a literalist when it comes to photographs.

– Susan Sontag, *Looking at War*, 2002.

Most iconic photographs are shrouded with controversy that alludes to their mythical powers. The fact that iconic photographs are often known to be staged, manipulated, or mistook in some way (be it reenacted, performed, retouched, misinterpreted, deceptive, ...) means that the public is generally not concerned with placing the authenticity of an image above its emotional and symbolic meaning. We think that the photograph,

especially in documentary or photojournalism, must maintain some kind of integrity towards its authenticity, but the history of iconic photographs proves quite the opposite. Controlling a situation by staging, replaying or manipulating often creates a better, more powerful and symbolic photograph that, at the end of the day, has more social impact than a ‘truthful’ one that may not be as gripping.



Hudson’s photograph was published above the fold on the front page of *The New York Times* on May 4, 1963, along the headline “DOGS AND HOSES REPULSE NEGROES AT BIRMINGHAM” © Bill Hudson/AP

Most photographs stand in for an event that they do not literally represent. They take on an emblematic function, especially when dealing with trauma, in which they often represent an experience in a symbolic manner rather than the actual moment they depict. They are experienced collectively and cannot claim a single meaning or truth. Take one of the most iconic images of the 1960s civil rights movement, for example, Bill Hudson’s 1963 photograph of a White police officer in Birmingham grabbing a young Black man by his shirt while a growling German Shepard lunges at the teenager’s gut. It’s a photograph that changed international perceptions of civil rights in the South and helped shape public opinion, leading to the publication of the civil rights act. What makes the image so powerful is the calm gaze on the young man’s face – he is composed, in

control, firmly holding the police officer’s hand – while the cops are anonymous, hidden behind dark sunglasses, generic.

In his podcast *Revisionist History*, Malcolm Gladwell reveals that this famous photograph is quite the opposite of what it has come to symbolize. The photograph is not of a confrontation between an innocent foot soldier and the snarling face of racial oppression. Based on a 1996 oral history interview of the young man in the photo, Walter Gadsden, it turns out that he wasn’t a foot soldier of the movement, but rather a bystander who had skipped school to watch the protest. Gadsden was never involved in the civil rights movement, nor was his family. The moment the photographer captured was an accident. While walking away from the protest, Gadsden stumbled into the police officer who grabbed him as the startled German Shepherd, Leo, lunged at him in surprise. The police officer is pulling back on the leash,



Ronald S. McDowell, *The Foot Soldier*, Kelly Ingram Park, erected in 1995

enough that the dog’s legs lift off the ground. “The most famous photograph of the civil rights movement is of a startled cop trying desperately to hold his dog back from biting a bystander who wasn’t that much of a fan of the civil rights movement,” concludes Gladwell (Gladwell 2017, 0:21:20).

Like the destiny of many iconic photographs, a bronze monument was later made based on Hudson's photograph for a Birmingham memorial in Kelly Ingram Park titled *The Foot Soldier* (1995). In the sculpture, the myth of the photograph is augmented further by obscenely exaggerating the scene – the boy is smaller and lunging backward with his arms wide open, the police officer is bigger, the dog more vicious and aggressive. Despite the press photograph not actually depicting a police dog attacking a civil rights protestor, it has become it. During the protests, many were violently attacked by police dogs (as can be seen in other photographs). Even though this is not a fact in Hudson's photograph, it is the better photograph, and therefore represents everyone attacked by police dogs during the civil rights movement.

Controversy (2017, in collaboration with Sam Weerdmeester) addresses the polemic of photojournalism's ethical credibility by engaging in the discussion surrounding Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* (full title: *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*) from an aesthetic perspective in the tradition of the late photograph. The authenticity of this image has been questioned since its creation, although the story that accompanies it is simply too compelling not to be believed. The tension between the scientific proof that suggests the image was staged, and the belief in the myth surrounding the image, is what *Controversy* embodies.

As a young twenty-two year old covering his first conflict, Capa took this iconic photograph during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. It supposedly captures the very moment a soldier is shot in the head and is widely celebrated as one of the first photographs of war in action, not to mention the very moment of a man passing from life into death. It's one of the most famous and controversial photos ever made, becoming the ultimate symbol for the struggle against Fascism, and launching Capa's professional career. The only record in which Capa himself talks about the making of the photograph is in an interview on the NBC radio show *Hi! Jinx* (October 22, 1947). He partly refuses the usual idea of author-

ship when he described how he made the photograph without looking through the viewfinder, holding the camera "far above his head" from inside the trench the moment the soldiers were mowed down by a Franco machine-gun. As art critic Lars Kwakkenbos suggests, perhaps this was "an attempt to deny for himself the responsibility of having done it deliberately – composing and authorising it?" (Kwakkenbos 2017). He sent the undeveloped film rolls back to Paris with many other photos. Only when he came back from Spain three months later did he realize that he'd become a very famous photographer (Capa 1947).

The Falling Soldier has been widely discussed ever since its creation and has led to never-ending debates on photography's authenticity. Perhaps it has something to do with the beginning of modernist thinking in photography and art criticism (*The Falling Soldier* was made one year after Walter Benjamin published *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in 1935). Most theories attempting to prove or disprove the photograph's authenticity are based on remarkably little research. They are mostly opinions based on speculation, guesswork, and skewed biographical accounts derived from personal relationships with the photographer (Capa's foremost advocate is his official biographer Richard Whelan). Much of the problem comes from our collective need to endow photographs with intentions. If a photographer chose to stage an image, why did they do so? What did he or she want to achieve by it? And so on. This is a speculative exercise of projecting onto a photograph the imagined intentions of its maker, which leads nowhere, but is, of course, part of our reading of images, especially contested ones. Whether or not the picture was posed was first raised by journalist Phillip Knightley in his 1975 book *The First Casualty*, and has been an object of discussion ever since. Knightly provokingly demonstrated his views by proposing a different caption for *The Falling Soldier*: "A militiaman slips and falls while training for action." Adding to the mystery is the fact that the original negatives are missing or lost, with only two original vintage prints in existence.

The photograph was first published in the French magazine *Vu* in September 1936. Just like Fenton's *Shadow of the Valley of Death*, there are originally two versions

of *The Falling Soldier*, both with identical framing but with two different soldiers. The lesser-known of the two was also initially published in *Vu*. It features another soldier falling at exactly the same spot (this can be seen by the two upstanding stalks of grass in the foreground that appear intact in both photographs). In spite of a soldier collapsing in one frame, there's no dead body to be seen in the second frame. The second soldier would no longer reappear after its initial publication in *Vu* and eventually be forgotten in the shadow of its celebrated twin. *The Falling Soldier* was published next in the US magazine *Life* in July 1937.³² Notably, the two photographs in *Vu* are in an aspect ratio of 2 x 3, the traditional 35mm format, but in *Life*, the photograph appears in a more squarish 3 x 4 format. Either sky was added to the image for the sake of the page layout (as was a common practice at the time), or the 2 x 3 images in *Vu* were cropped so they could fit together on a single page. This seems somewhat trivial information, although it has caused some to speculate that if the image was not made with a 35mm camera such as the Leica or Contax used by Capa, and that it may have been made by his companion Gerda Taro, who worked on a medium format 6 x 6 Old Standard Rolleiflex TLR camera. It was no secret that many pictures attributed to Capa had actually been made by Taro. Capa and Taro worked as a team, and they would frequently credit the images to Capa in order to sell more because of his celebrity and commercial success (Taro is also the one that came up with Endre Ernő Friedmann's brand name 'Robert Capa'). Some have gone so far as to analyze Capa's habitual ten-degree camera tilt to the left as an element potentially ruling Taro out as the author of the photograph. In order to prove the photograph's authenticity, some researchers have even performed simulations with the expertise of forensic scientists to try and prove that the soldier's body posture and clenching hand corresponds with that of a dying man (Kriebel and Zervigón 2017). The list of arguments and experiments is endless to the point of ridicule.

Much of the photograph's meaning, as is always the case when they appear in the context of magazines and newspapers, has been defined by the captions that came

³² Susan Sontag pointed out that Capa's photograph "occupied the whole of the right page; facing it on the left was a full-page advertisement for Vitalis, a men's hair cream, with a small picture of someone exerting himself at tennis and a large portrait of the same man in a white dinner jacket sporting a head of neatly parted, slicked-down, lustrous hair. The double spread – with each use of the camera implying the invisibility of the other – seems not just bizarre but curiously dated now" (Sontag 2003, 29).



Vu, September 23, 1936 [left] and *Life*, July 12, 1937 [right]



along with it. The initial caption that accompanied the two photographs in *Vu* was “*Comment ils sont tombés*” (how they fell), which is unusual for images of such significance and comes across as deliberately vague. It also makes one think about the poetic lightness of surrealism from that time and its playful, subversive spirit. When later published in *Life*, the caption read, “Robert Capa’s camera catches a Spanish soldier the instant he is dropped by a bullet in his head in front of Cordoba.” The caption writer had apparently mistaken the soldier’s cap tassel for a shard of exploding skull (MacSwan 2008). From then on, the photograph’s meaning had been set and there was no going back to the poetry of ‘how they fell’, in what Fred Ritchin has defined as a ‘quantum collapse’ of an image into a one-dimensional meaning as a consequence of its caption. This is the natural life of a press photograph, and its transient nature opens itself up to bend and change meaning depending on the context in which it appears. The intervention in the caption is telling for the life of a photograph and reveals much about the chain of production images go through before eventually taking on the meanings etched into them.

A 2009 study by Spanish historian José Manuel Susperregui led Dutch artist Sam Weerdmeester and myself back

to the location where Capa made *The Falling Soldier*.³³ Based on an orographic analysis (the topographic study of how the contours of mountain ranges overlap from a particular viewpoint), Susperregui was able to irrefutably prove that *The Falling Soldier* was photographed at Cerro del Cuco (Cuckoo Hill) near the town of Espejo, and not in Córdoba as had initially been claimed (Susperregui 2016). This would place Capa fifty-five kilometers south of the front lines, proving it unlikely that the soldiers he was accompanying met any resistance, thus making a strong argument that the photograph was indeed staged. According to the research of historian Francisco Moreno Gómez, historical sources and oral accounts of local inhabitants, Espejo did not come under attack until 22 September, a day before the publication of the photograph in *Vu* and nearly three weeks after Capa and Taro left the town (Moreno Gómez 1985, 202–215). Records show that Federico Borrell García, the man believed to be *The Falling Soldier*, did die in battle, only probably not in front of Capa's lens.

The landscape in the background of *The Falling Soldier* is blurry and reveals little detail, making it impossible to locate through visual analysis. But in 2007, three old suitcases miraculously turned up in Mexico containing 4,500 negatives made by David “Chim” Seymour, Robert Capa and Gerda Taro that were considered lost since 1939 (Young 2010). The newly discovered negatives did not contain the originals of *The Falling Soldier* but did reveal forty frames of other photographs made on the same day with the same group of militiamen. In the photographs, the men can be seen posing for a group photo, identifying *The Falling Soldier* as Federico Borrell García by his outfit. Other photos show the men leaping over a gully and taking aim with their rifles. They are clearly not in the heat of battle, and the scenes bear all the indications of a playful game performed for the camera.

Nonetheless, Willis E. Hartshorn, the director of the International Center of Photography (ICP) that holds the Robert Capa archives, has argued against the claims that the photograph is inauthentic. He suggested that the soldier in the photograph had been killed by a sniper firing from a distance while posing for a picture. Similarly, historian John Mraz wrote in *Zone Zero* that “republican militiamen were pretending to be in combat for Capa's

³³ *Controversy* was photographed while artists in residence at arteventura, Spain, June 2016.

camera, when a fascist machine gun killed this soldier just as he was posing. It is the coincidence between the fact that the photojournalist had focused on this individual at precisely the second before he was shot that makes this the most famous of war photographs” (Mraz 2004).

When a selection of these previously unpublished images appeared in the 2008 ICP catalog *War! Robert Capa at Work*, Susperregui made a connection that would allow him to discern an exact location. Three photographs in particular printed on pages 59, 77, and 85 respectively, when placed alongside each other in a different order, revealed a clear continuation in the landscape. Based on the mountain range clearly visible in the background of the sharper third photo in the sequence, Susperregui was able to pinpoint the location near Espejo. He did so by sending the photo to various town councils throughout Spain. Juan Molleja Martínez, a teacher at the Instituto de Educación Secundaria Vicente Núñez, a high school in Aguilar de la Frontera, showed the photo to his students. One of them, Antonio Aguilera, immediately located the landscape in Llano de Batán, also known as Llano de Vanda, near Montilla, where he grew up. When this newly suggested region was explored, the mountain range near Espejo, which is located thirteen kilometers from Montilla, was eventually identified as the one seen in Capa's photographs.

Capa had experience in orchestrating reenactments. One year after *The Falling Soldier*, he would be involved in staging large-scale reenactments of Republican attacks on Fascist positions in Spain for the monthly newsreel *The March of Time*, led by American magazine magnate and founder of *Life* Henry Luce (Knightley 2002). In documentary films with a propagandist undertone, staging was encouraged and eagerly anticipated by the public of the time. Luce defined it as “fakery in allegiance to the truth” (Franklin 2016, 180). In his book, *The Documentary Impulse* (2016), Magnum photographer Stuart Franklin writes that “no one batted an eyelid on 24 June 1937, when Capa staged an entire attack scene in Peñarroya, northwest of Córdoba, where according to diaries written by the general in charge of the garrison, “an imaginary fascist position was stormed as men, with



The reordering of two previously unpublished images reveals a continuation in the landscape from *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman* [left], *Dead Militiaman* [center] to *Militiamen Firing Into the Distance* [right], Córdoba front, Spain, early September, 1936 © Robert Capa/Magnum Photos/ICP New York

terrifying roars and passionate battle-lust, leaped and bounded double-time into victory” (Kershaw 1982, 55).³⁴ According to the same diary, Capa was pleased with the staged attack and said that “an actual attack wouldn’t look as real as this” (Franklin 2016, 180-181).³⁵ Not long after, Capa would preach the famous lines: “no tricks are necessary to take pictures in Spain. You don’t have to pose your camera. The pictures are there, and you just take them. The truth is the best picture, the best propaganda” (Capa 1937).

Allow me to delve into my own speculative theory for a moment: did Capa pre-enact the death of Federico Borrell García, the loyalist militiaman from Alcoy? Were Capa and the group of militiamen, maybe, just fooling around out of boredom, and decided to enjoy themselves in making spectacular photographs of a simulated battle situation? I like to believe that Capa was confronted with the speculative, self-fulfilling prophecy of his own photographs when he created an image that foretold the death of the soldier he had playfully collaborated with. Torn between the weight of the soldier’s death and maintaining the myth of this image along with the fame it brought him, he felt a deep sense of guilt and responsibility for the soldier’s death. Before he had a chance to admit that the photograph was staged, it was already too late, and it would have cost him his career as a photojournalist. The secret burdened him throughout life. Hence, his reticence to discuss the photo, as well as a certain confusion in recounting the circumstances surrounding the photograph’s making, and perhaps his

³⁴ For the original account of the military diary entry see Alfred Kantorowicz, *Spanisches Kriegstagebuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982), 327.

³⁵ Capa also made photographs on 24 and 25 June 1937, the day of the reenactment film, that were uncovered in one of the three suitcases that turned up in Mexico in 2007 containing 4,500 35mm negatives from David ‘Chim’ Seymour, Robert Capa and Gerda Taro. See: Cynthia Young, *The Mexican Suitcase: The Rediscovered Spanish Civil War Negatives of Capa, Chim and Taro*. Vol. I (New York and Göttingen: ICP & Steidl, 2010).

subsequent attraction to reenactments. I think Capa had good intentions as an ambitious young war photographer, with sympathy for the fight against Fascism, and was perhaps a victim of his own success.

Controversy: A High-Resolution Void

The discussion surrounding *The Falling Soldier* was the ideal context in which to approach the problematics of iconography, manipulation and staging in photojournalism. Without taking sides in an endless and rather dull discussion, we let an image fill the void by expressing an aesthetic, formal position. Perhaps we could consider photographs as arguments in their own right?

Controversy is a registration of the newly defined location by professor Susperregui. Bearing much resemblance to a conventional postcard of a landscape, its appearance is intentionally banal as an antithesis for the photojournalistic photograph made within the heat of battle. An example that film theorist Peter Wollen has described as ‘cool photography’ as opposed to the dramatic ‘hot photography’ of events. It consists of a photomontage produced with scanning technology that is normally applied to the reproduction of paintings. This specific digital camera technology renders incredibly high-resolution images in which the camera sensor does not invent any new pixel-information through interpolation, as would an ordinary digital camera, but records every detail in a one-to-one ratio. Hypothetically, it’s the most accurate possible reproduction of what is registered through the lens. The camera functions as a scanner, a 4 x 5 inch camera-back that moves from left to right, and therefore also contains a temporal element in its recording process. The photograph was created by compositing forty-six different scans, nine of which formed a grid across the image plane, in which the sky, trees and ground were considered separate sections. Each of these sections then contained more scans in order to achieve a larger depth of field, quantitatively



Controversy, 2017, LightJet print mounted on dibond in steel frame, 180 x 243.1 cm © Max Pinckers & Sam Weerdmeester. Permanent collection FOMU Antwerp, Belgium

varying from the grass in the very foreground to the minute farmhouses in the distance. The total scanning time for the image was about four hours, which implies that the sunlight has moved across the image plane over time. Due to the scanning motion during the registration process, maximum sharpness can only be achieved when the subject is absolutely still and consistently illuminated. This was, of course, impossible to achieve in a situation that is not fully under control, with wind affecting the olive tree leaves and clouds often obscuring the sunlight. This resulted in unexpected, surprising anomalies, “small instants of a pictorial madness,” as Kwakkenbos described them (Kwakkenbos 2017). When we look closely at the printed image (a LightJet print mounted on dibond in a steel frame, 180 x 243.1 cm), we notice abrupt rainbow-like strokes created when the RGB components of the scanner are refracted and revealed by movement.

The beauty of these small instants of pictorial madness lies in their uncontrollability. They break through

the rigid, rational and precise workflow needed to operate such technology and achieve the desired details. Here, the intended naive approach towards merely representing reality in scrupulous detail – as if this would render a more truthful depiction – is ruptured. This photograph’s descriptive power is disobeyed by the life and movement of the landscape itself. In his introduction to the *Controversy* catalog, Kwakkenbos asks: “are we looking at a guilty landscape? This landscape might not be guilty due to a war event that Capa documented, but exactly the opposite: the absence of such an event, as he might have staged it. The scenery with those same hills at the horizon where olive trees are now growing, has become guilty in a different sense. This landscape carries a burden that photography has projected on itself: a story of a truthful technology and practice. If the thesis of Susperregui is correct, we can only speculate on a sense of guilt that Capa might have felt afterwards, embodied by his medium and its capacity of making things up and fictionalising them” (Kwakkenbos 2017).



Detail of what Lars Kwakkenbos has described as “pictorial madness” in *Controversy*
© Max Pinckers & Sam Weerdmeester

The use of high-resolution technology paraphrases the empirical methodology of drawing conclusions from a vast amount of collected data while also expressing the naive attempt of a photograph to convey reality as

‘truthful’ by depicting as much detail as possible. Does a scientific debunking of a photographic icon ultimately change its meaning, or does its social relevance surpass its authenticity? Does the power to confirm what we already believe, or what we expect to see, transcend our visual perception? Do we desire the better story, even when facts disprove them? In the concluding essay to the catalog, philosopher Hans Durrer writes that “our interpretation of a picture is based on the presumptions we bring to the act of seeing it,” and that this is an iconic picture “not because of the composition, or the light, or the framing but solely because we want to believe the famous story that accompanies this shot – for we want photos to be authentic, and true, and we want them to capture moments and scenes that our eyes often only register but do not see” (Durrer 2017). We are made to believe that war is heroic and want to believe that this is what death looks like.

Once the general consensus has been established over a photograph’s meaning, it becomes almost impossible to have this acceptance rescinded. The persistent interestingness and symbolic usefulness override any lack of factuality. Durrer insists that “we continue to see in this photo what is simply not there. What is there is a man in a soldier’s uniform falling on a slope, that’s it, and that is a fact” (Durrer 2017). A series of well-known psychological studies in the 1970s by researchers at Stanford University already established that people have a tendency to deny what they know is true in order to protect their already engrained beliefs, also known as ‘confirmation bias’ (Kolbert 2017). The phenomenon that one’s beliefs get stronger when their deepest convictions are challenged by contradictory evidence is known as the ‘backfire effect’, first described by a group of researchers in 2006 (Craig 2011). It suggests that people who are entirely convinced by a statement, regardless of how incorrect it might be, cannot be persuaded to change their minds by facts that prove the contrary (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Such evidence only reinforces their belief in the fallacy (think Trump and his supporters) (Tillmans 2018). The intention behind *Controversy* is rooted in this friction between truth and belief, where the only thing *The Falling Soldier* truly proves is that iconic photographs

touch our beliefs and emotions more so than what they really depict.

Controversy, a large scale print depicting where Capa made his iconic *The Falling Soldier*, is a postmodernist impasse. It’s a reaction against scientific attempts to explain reality with objective certainty, yet also rejects the beliefs imposed onto photographs. Is it still a late photograph if the only historical event was a man posing for a camera? All that remains is an olive grove. There is no more spectacle, no more shock, simply a high-resolution void. *Controversy* is permanently installed in the Espejo Town Hall as a monumental wall-mounted print, where visitors and local farmers can be heard commenting on the growth of the olive trees.



Installation view of *Controversy*, M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Antwerp, 2017 © Max Pinckers & Sam Weerdmeester



Professor Jose Manuel Susperregui inaugurating the permanent installation of *Controversy* in Espejo's Town Hall, Spain, 2017 © Max Pinckers & Sam Weerdmeester

10 SPECULATIVE DOCUMENTARY

I once wrote or read (I can't remember which) that in 1994 a German firm specializing in geological archaeology set out to prove that the monolithic Easter Island figures known as moai came from neighboring Peru. To demonstrate this claim the Germans constructed a Kon-Tiki-esque raft using materials and methods available only to ancient Polynesian craftsmen and ferried a three-ton concrete moai they had sculpted from the Peruvian mainland to Easter Island. However, due to choppy surf the Germans lost their load mid journey. Undaunted, they attempted to dredge the sunken freight with the aid of a mini-sub. They discovered, buried in the silt of the ocean floor, their concrete sculpture among sixty-three ancient sunken moai figures.

— Robert Blackson, *Once More... With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture*, 2007.

THE SCHOOL OF SPECULATIVE DOCUMENTARY

October 2018

A Manifesto
An Invitation

Dear Gentleperson,

It is our great pleasure to extend to you an invitation to join us as a visiting artist, researcher, scholar, dramaturge, critic, etc. at the School of Speculative Documentary.

The School of Speculative Documentary is a meeting place dedicated to critically questioning the documentary gesture, cutting across the boundaries that traditionally pigeonhole the documentary into rigid genres. As theatre and film makers, installation artists and photographers, we wonder which strategies we can develop to subvert and unravel the market-driven taxidermic and forensic formats of a mainstream documentary industry. We worry that, despite the socially committed attitude of many artists, documentaries often end up underpinning a large-scale epistemological enterprise that is closely linked to such projects as colonialism, global capitalism and anthropocentrism. How can we rethink the documentary attitude conceptually, formally and methodologically? How can we make decentralized, deformatted and polycentric documentaries, even if we assume that we will never fully succeed?

Rather than via this invitation, we had initially planned to address you in the form of a manifesto. But the genre's modernist speed, loudness, determination and clarity proved to be at odds with the essence of our approach. The documentary that we practice is based on conjecture rather than knowledge. It is unfinished business. We openly embrace perpetual uncertainty, contamination, contestation, befoggedness and messiness in our engagement with, and our creation of, multiple and mutable realities. In doing so, we hail the paradox at the heart of documentary practices: from the very moment we attempt to capture reality, it escapes, mutates and vanishes into thin air.

The School of Speculative Documentary welcomes a myriad of views in which there seems to be no clear distinction between fact and fiction, artifice and realism, imagination and observation, representation and experience. We notice a volatility between those categories and – through a layered approach in which multiple realisms are poetically intertwined – we attempt to navigate around the subjective and fabricated nature of their boundaries.

Through our work, we hope to undermine documentary's authoritative stance and its claim to knowledge and truth. But even though our practice is not based on some presumed omniscience, at times we do employ the same codes and conventions that historically have come to imply this very omniscience. Scrutinizing the power-structures inherent in documentary making, we keep searching for ways to deal with our own blind spots and power positions, as we ourselves manoeuvre within and around institutional boundaries. How can we shoulder the responsibility for the selection mechanisms that define what can and should be perceived, seen, heard, said, thought, made or done?

Sometimes we wonder about the fine line between self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. Sometimes we wonder when speculation slips into arbitrariness. Sometimes we wonder whether we actually make documentaries at all. Sometimes we are aware of the paradoxical nature of all of the above. Sometimes we quarrel over all of the above. At all times we warmly welcome the awkwardness of our attempting to define the documentary gesture, along with the clumsiness of our practicing of it. And we would be delighted if you were willing to share this awkwardness and clumsiness with us.

Please let us know if you wish to learn more about the School of Speculative Documentary and join the conversation. Submit your letter of interest to admin@schoolofspeculativedocumentary.org. We will get in touch with you as soon as possible in order to inform you about our activities and explore possible ways to collaborate. Please accept our apologies for the somewhat administrative tone, which should not disguise our genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for your interest in the School of Speculative Documentary. To conclude, allow us to express our gratitude to Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg, Hito Steyerl and all those whose work has helped us articulate what it is we are undertaking.

On behalf of the School of Speculative Documentary, we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

An van. Dienderen
Max Pinckers
Michiel De Cleene
Thomas Bellinck

A Manifesto: An Invitation from the School of Speculative Documentary, first published in *Critical Arts*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2019 © An van Dienderen, Michiel De Cleene, Max Pinckers, and Thomas Bellinck

Staying with the Trouble: Speculation as a Way of Engaging with the Present

Proposed by The School of Speculative Documentary (Thomas Bellinck, Michiel De Cleene, An van Dienderen, Rosine Mbakam, Max Pinckers, et al.) as a documentary attitude or gesture, speculative documentary is based on conjecture rather than knowledge. It is an experimental proposal that openly embraces perpetual uncertainty, contamination, contestation, befoggedness and messiness in an engagement with, and creation of, multiple and mutable realities – a way of coming to terms with our own blind spots (van Dienderen et al. 2019). A way of objectifying the imagination and revealing its critical potential.

Originating from the late sixteenth century Latin *speculat-* ‘observed from a vantage point’, from the verb *speculari*, from *specula* ‘watchtower’, from *specere* ‘to look’, the term ‘speculate’ means to form a theory or conjecture about a subject without any firm evidence, yet this theory is based on elements derived from reality and is not purely a figment of the imagination. To speculate financially means to invest in stocks, property, equity in the hope of making quick profit but with high risks of loss. Speculative design is a design method that addresses major societal problems and tries to find a solution for them by making products and services for those future scenarios. Speculative urbanism imagines future city spaces by way of 3D renderings and visual projections. Speculative narration is a construction that resists probability in order to create a new world. Speculative documentary is an already existing term popularly associated with a genre of mainstream television documentaries departing from a ‘what if’ premise, often wildly speculating about ‘end-of-the-world’ scenarios that are presented as spectacular and sensational *shockumentary*’s: “WHAT IF an F5 Tornado Hit Dallas? It Could Happen Tomorrow!” Speculative fire is a military tactic in which forces attempt to reveal enemy positions by blindly firing at possible locations in order to provoke a reaction. Like speculative fire, we can only attempt to

poke at our own blind spots in order to reveal them.

Speculation forms an important part of our world today, applied by thinkers and innovators in economy, technology, anthropology, ecology, art, literature and philosophy (accelerationism, speculative realism, science fiction, speculative fiction, afro-futurism, insurance, probability, ...). To speculate means not only to guess or postulate certain conceptions about a current reality, but it also requires the use of the imagination to contemplate about the possibilities of tomorrow, a way to understand the present and create space for discussion about where we would want to go from here collectively. To allow the “past’s fugitive moments” to resurface, as Rebecca Schneider writes in her book *Performing Remains* (2011).

Speculation and imagination are inseparably linked to each other. Although speculation has the effect of being functional with the intent of having an impact on reality, imagination doesn’t necessarily require an intervention into reality. Imagination is less *in* the world, whereas speculation deals with its direct possible effects and outcomes *on* the world. To speculate is to make an informed guess based on things which are known to us in order to try to predict what might become. To imagine is to make something out of nothing. Bringing speculation into documentary practice creates room for the imagination within the documentary construct that generally departs from ‘the empirical world’ or ‘historical world’. It creates the freedom of interpretation, emotion, feeling and intersubjective relationships that slide through time. More so than dealing with future outcomes, speculation is a way of engaging with the present or ‘staying with the trouble’, as Donna Haraway advocates. “Staying with the trouble,” she writes, “does not require such a relationship to times called the future. It requires learning to be truly present” (Haraway 2016, 1).

The speculative documentary proposes an alternative to the standardized formatted documentary and journalism in a tradition where “most journalism does not acknowledge that people live at least as much in their heads as they do in the world,” to put it in the words of Adam Curtis (Curtis 2016a). According to the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, speculation is not

a lack of truth but the first step in the process of knowledge. We can never claim absolute truth as documentarians, but we can think about what it means to represent different forms of truth and knowledge. As the philosopher Richard Rorty said: “stop worrying about whether what you believe is true. Stop worrying about whether it can be proved. Worry about whether you have been imaginative enough to think up good alternatives” (Sentilles 2017, 255). The reality we so tirelessly attempt to set in stone, burn into emulsion, distill into numerics, measure and quantify, eventually evaporates, only leaving behind its essence: that of self-inquiry.

Images as Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: We Are Responsible for Our Dreams

The sum of all photographs is the ruin of the world.
– Victor Burgin, *Architecture and Image*, 2019.

Maybe speculative documentary is like Morpheus’ ‘third pill’ in *The Matrix*. The documentary does not need to be stuck in a binary opposition between fiction and nonfiction, reality and illusion. In *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006), Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) offers Slavoj Žižek the choice between the blue pill (“the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe”) or the red pill (“you stay in wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes”), to which Žižek responds with the demand for a third pill. The choice here is not between illusion and reality because “if you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself,” he explains. Žižek’s third pill is therefore a pill that would enable him “not to perceive the reality behind the illusion, but the reality in illusion itself” (Fiennes 2006). In Platonic terms, we are stuck in the cave and must do with the world of shadows.

We are responsible for our dreams and the ‘symbolic fictions’ that regulate our world. With nonfiction comes

the responsibility that what is asserted must be true, and therefore influences how people directly relate to reality. With fiction comes the responsibility that what is proposed *could* be true in the future or in another potential version of a reality *yet to be defined*. In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), Žižek expands on this idea by arguing that we are not simply submitted to our dreams as if they arise from some unfathomable depths within ourselves that we cannot control. We are responsible for our dreams: “Our dreams stage our desires, and our desires are not objective facts. We created them, we sustain them and we are responsible for them.” The first step to freedom, he continues, “is not just to change reality to fit our dreams, but to change the way we dream. This hurts, because all satisfactions we have come from our dreams” (Fiennes 2012).

We should not underestimate the effect our dreams and desires have on reality and their potential as self-fulfilling prophecies. I would like to extend this further onto images – documentary photographs – and see them as possible *self-fulfilling images*. Images as precursors. The images that we choose to dream and materialize have the potential to eventually become real. Traditional modes of documentary that only try to reflect the world have failed in truly grasping the reality we live in and how imagination and speculation are key to understanding it.

We do not mistake photographs for reality, but *prefer* them to reality. The attack on the World Trade Center in New York marked the beginning of a heightened consciousness about images transgressing into reality. We can all agree that the images of the burning and collapsing towers on the morning of 11 September 2001 were reminiscent of the most sensational scenes in big Hollywood blockbusters. The attacks had already happened in the collective imagination before they ruptured into reality – the image entered and shattered a collective illusionary sphere: “The unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise,” remarks Žižek (Žižek 2002b). Not only did the live broadcasting of the event make us think about countless films and TV series, from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*, it also happened at the height of reality

television: *Idol*, *Star Academy*, *The X Factor*, *Survivor/Expedition Robinson*, *Big Brother*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Got Talent*, *Top Model*, *MasterChef*, and *Dancing with the Stars* were all top-rated shows leading up to and after 9/11. During the 2000s, television channels became exclusively devoted to reality TV programming, often derivatives of large news corporations, such as Fox Reality in the US and CBS Reality in the UK. The self-fulfilling prophecy became even more apparent when the years following the attacks people began identifying uncanny premonitions of the event in popular culture, such as on *The Simpsons*, in the writings by Nostradamus, hidden in folded US currency bills, early video games and rap lyrics. Furthermore, “a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, had been established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them” as part of the resolution against the ‘global war on terrorism’.³⁶ Consulting also flowed in the other direction in which White House advisers and Hollywood executives discussed the “aim of co-ordinating the war effort and establishing how Hollywood could help in the ‘war against terrorism’ by getting the right ideological message across, not only to Americans, but also to the Hollywood public around the globe” (Žižek 2002a, 16). Important is not that we mistake fiction for reality, as we usually say, but that we do not mistake reality for fiction – “we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it” (Žižek 2002a, 19).

Maybe speculative documentary functions on the level of ‘unknown knowns’ – subconscious intuition – bringing about instances of life imitating art. During a White House press conference in March 2003, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld engaged in a bit of amateur philosophizing when a reporter asked him about the missing link between Iraq and terrorist organizations. Rumsfeld responded that there are ‘known knowns’ (things that we know that we know), that there are ‘known unknowns’ (things that we know we don’t know), and that there are ‘unknown unknowns’ (things that we don’t know that we don’t know) (Rumsfeld 2002). Žižek reveals the tragedy of today’s American

³⁶ During a documentary workshop in 2018, a participant disclosed to me in confidence that they were in charge of taking notes at those meetings.

politics by pointing out that Rumsfeld omitted the crucial fourth configuration – the ‘unknown knowns’ – the Freudian unconscious, the “knowledge which doesn’t know itself” and which is out of one’s control. Such as the Abu Ghraib scandal, in which the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the grounds of our public values, emerge to the surface (Žižek 2006).



“Stop—that Trump cartoon you came up with this morning just happened.”

“Stop – that Trump cartoon you came up with this morning just happened.” © Robert Leighton/*The New Yorker*, April 25, 2016

Possible Futures

The real seems nothing but a heap of broken images.

– McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 2007.

Maybe speculative documentary is a form of radical imagination. In their book *The Radical Imagination* (2014), scholar-activist Alex Khasnabish and sociologist Max Haiven propose the idea of radical imagination as a way to imagine the world, life, and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. Beyond merely

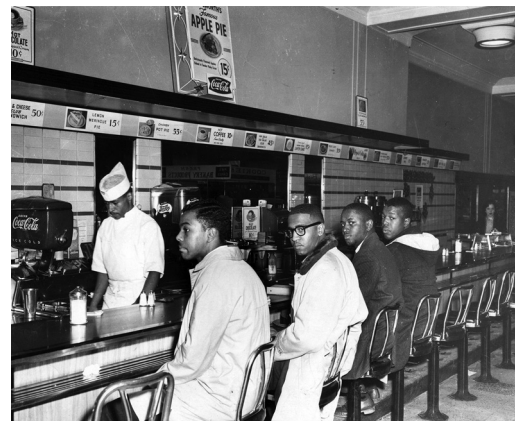
dreaming of different positive futures, it strives to bring those possibilities back from the future to work on the present. To inspire action and new forms of solidarity today based on the power and importance of yesterday’s struggles and honoring the way they live on in the present while looking out for tomorrow. “Without the radical imagination, we are left only with the residual dreams of the powerful, and for the vast majority, they are experienced not as dreams but as nightmares of insecurity, precarity, violence, and hopelessness,” they justify (Khasnabish and Haiven 2014). Speculative documentary creates solidarity. The possibility to imagine and make common cause with the experiences of other people, real or imagined, without asserting egocentric, authoritative or absolute truth claims – a collective and collaborative attitude that attempts to transcend boundaries of time and authority.

Maybe speculative documentary leans towards the idea of a potential history. Ariella Azoulay proposes a new model for writing history in which photographs “extract from the past its unrealized possibilities as a necessary condition for imagining a different future” (Azoulay 2013, 565). To imagine how things could have turned out differently in the past, allowing us to make a difference in the present and possible futures. The people depicted in photographs and what they represent, will thus continue to have an impact and generate agency for future generations to claim responsibility toward what is made visible. She defines this as a “reconstruction of unrealized possibilities, practices, and dreams that motivated and directed the actions of various actors in the past,” thereby also transforming the past into an unending event “in which our deeds in the present allow us to read the violently constituted achievements of the past in ways that historicize the sovereign power of the past and render it potentially reversible” (Azoulay 2013, 565). A way of extracting oneself from the past’s alternative outcomes as a necessary condition for imagining a different future.

Maybe speculative documentary is similar to critical fabulation. In her essay *Venus in Two Acts* (2008), American writer Saidiya Hartman introduced this term in order to

make sense of the gaps and silences of the archive. She does so by combining historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narratives in her writing by “advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)” (Hartman 2008, 11). This is not to be confused with what Donna Haraway calls ‘speculative fabulation’; the little made-up stories we spontaneously tell each other – ‘wild facts’ or ‘speculative possibilities’. Like speculation, fabulation is another way through which we can try to understand the world we live in by expressing a sense of a shared imagination. Speculation actively fabulates the future by mapping “vectors of the future upon the present” (Rutgeerts and Scholts 2020, 189).

Maybe speculative documentary is like a pre-enactment. According to political philosopher Oliver Marchart, the pre-enactment can be described as an “artistic anticipation of a political event to come” (Marchart 2015, 149). This anticipation, however, should not be understood as an analytical tool through which we “critically extrapolate from contemporary developments an image of our social and political future,” but as a ‘pre-performance’, an act through which we pre-figure, or pre-form the future (Marchart 2015, 146). The pre-enactment actively



African American students (from left: Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, William Smith, and Clarence Henderson) holding a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, February 2, 1960 © Jack Moebes/News & Record, Greensboro

shapes the future instead of simply attempting to predict it. Thus, the artistic pre-enactment itself becomes a prophecy – a prefiguration of a political moment that will occur in the future or may have occurred already. Colleague and theater maker Thomas Bellinck writes about his own documentary use of the pre-enactment: “We believe in the imaginative power of the utopian potential mood, in ‘what if’, rather than the mimetic ‘as if’: I am not saying something is true, real or possible, but what if it were?” (Bellinck and van Dienderen 2019). One example of a speculative action was the Greensboro sit-ins during the 1960s civil rights movement. Risking their lives, young Black students staged sit-ins at a segregated lunch counter in North Carolina and refused to leave. Although not intended as art performances, they were performative in nature and resonated throughout the US, making an immediate and lasting impact, eventually leading to many establishments changing their racist policies.

Maybe speculative documentary is a form of culture jamming. A way of disrupting and subverting media culture and its mainstream cultural institutions. An attempt at making a desired outcome real in the form of a performance or artistic gesture, and while doing so, provoking a space for discussion that may eventually lead to that desired change. Performing what they called ‘corrective surgery’ to challenge gender stereotypes in 1993, the Barbie Liberation Organization switched the voice boxes of five hundred talking Barbie dolls and G.I. Joes and placed them back in stores. Little girls opening their new *Teen Talk Barbie* would suddenly hear the command “troops, attack!” and the boys’ G.I. Joes ask, “wanna go shopping?”

As an alternative to documentaries that focus on the victimization and irredeemable suffering instead of its causes – as it so often does in its conventionalized form – speculative documentary attempts to instrumentalize itself as part of a possible outcome by putting itself on the line, risking its own skin. The Yes Men’s attack on Dow Chemicals and Union Carbide in handling the Bhopal disaster, for example, could be seen as a speculative pre-performance and form of culture jamming.

In 1984, tons of lethal gases leaked from a Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal, India. Seven thousand people lost their lives within days, and fifteen thousand more died in the years following. More than one hundred thousand others are still suffering from chronic and debilitating illnesses. On 3 December 2004, the twenty-year anniversary of the tragedy, the *BBC* aired a live interview with Jude Finisterra, who claimed to be a representative of Dow Chemical. He eagerly announced the following news: “Dow will accept full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster, and has a twelve billion dollar plan to compensate the victims and remediate the site (Dow will raise the twelve billion dollars by liquidating Union Carbide, which cost them that much to acquire.) Also, to provide a sense of closure to the victims, Dow will push for the extradition of Warren Anderson, former Union Carbide CEO, to India, which he fled following his arrest twenty years ago on multiple homicide charges” (The Yes Men 2004). The full interview runs twice and remains top item on news.google.com for two hours before the *BBC* figures out that Mr. Finisterra (a made-up name meaning ‘the end of the world’) is actually The Yes Men’s Andy Bichlbaum. The impact of *Dow Does the Right Thing* was measured in the Bhopal anniversary becoming a top news story in the US when it’s usually ignored, together with a loss of two billion dollars of Dow stock on the German exchange (before recovering all the day’s losses three hours later). The activist group describes



A facsimile of *The Washington Post* that announces the resignation of president Donald Trump. The front page headline reads “UNPRESIDENTED: Trump Hastily Departs White House, Ending Crisis,” May 1, 2019 © The Yes Men

their work as ‘identity correction’ through ‘laughtivism’ in which they ‘laugh bloodsuckers into oblivion’ and thus save the world.

When George Orwell wrote the iconic slogan “who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past,” he had a hunch that the dystopian world he imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was going to turn into reality (Orwell 1949). When Johan Grimonprez made the film *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* in 1997, on the history of airplane hijacking, did he know it would turn out to be a premonition for the most spectacular event of the twenty-first century just a few years later? Grimonprez’s film shows how hijackers, in turn, were hijacked by television news media, interrupted by commercial breaks and TV dinners ushering in the Global War on Terror. No theory or any kind of rational explanation can be given for such synchronicity, or coincidence, for lack of better terms (coincidence ought not to be confused with metaphors because those are deliberately created, although both fuse unrelated entities to power a revelation). It isn’t a testable science but lives in the realm of storytelling and meaning. Carl Jung’s belief was that, just as events may be connected by causality, they may also be connected by meaning. A kind of governing dynamic that underlays the whole of human experience in the form of a ‘collective unconscious’. Research has shown that people who notice coincidences often tend to be more confident and at ease with life, with each surprising occurrence confirming their optimism. Documentary artists are passionately in tune with their subjects, their artistic language, and the current status of the world in which they operate. They seem routinely alert to coincidence and recognize events loaded with poignant significance. Having resonance with myth and fairy tale, the ritualistic quality of coincidence strokes with the attempt of conveying a deeper sense of how reality – and humanity – are intertwined and interconnected. And although coincidence is commonplace and everywhere, it is through artworks that they often reveal themselves to us. An extraordinary example of pre-science is the story of infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar reading about his own death minutes before he is killed:

Tom Clancy, the author of Clear and Present Danger—which later became a Hollywood box-office success—based his fictitious drug baron on Escobar. Clancy describes how his drug baron is shot dead by the Colombian national police as a result of an intercepted cell phone call he makes to his family. In real life the police used a computer that identified Escobar’s voice on the phone and within minutes located him and moved in for the kill. A heavily annotated copy of Clancy’s novel was later found in Escobar’s apartment, with the scene relating to the phone call underlined. On the day Escobar was killed, the same scene was being filmed.

— Martin Plimmer & Brian King, *Beyond Coincidence*, 2006.

Some of us, especially the younger generation, have the feeling that our future is being highjacked. “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009, 2). Philosopher and cultural theorist Mark Fisher’s concept of ‘capitalist realism’ despairingly proclaimed that “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2). More perversely, we enjoyed imagining the end of the world — *Armageddon*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Melancholia*, *Black Mirror*, *The Road*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* — feeding into the idea that however bad things are now, they were at least not that bad, encouraging “an appreciation of our lot, and with this appreciation came a further withering away of our imaginations,” as expressed by political organizer and academic Kai Heron (Heron 2020). “If there are to be new ways of imagining ourselves in the world,” writes visual activist Nicholas Mirzoeff, “there will need to be a new visual way of thinking for the Anthropocene era” (Mirzoeff 2015, 244). Visual Activism, he maintains, is a way to “actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world” (Mirzoeff 2015, 297). I still have hope in our imagination to speculate about different possible prospects. Adam Curtis recently nominated *South Park* as one of the most innovative documentary forms of reporting about the world today. In particular, he makes reference to the

three-part episode *Imaginationland*, in which terrorists hijack our imagination with dark horror, to which the US government responds by deciding to nuke our collective imaginations (*South Park* 2007). But Kyle eventually saves the day by convincing everyone how important our imagination is and that it has had more effect on the world throughout history than us as just physical beings. Curtis reads the core message of the episode as: “you can make the world anything you want it to be,” and that “despite their absurdities and flaws, people have the capacity to create a better world. In our conservative times that is the most radical message of all” (Curtis 2016b).

In an age in which increasingly speculative modes of thought are thriving, there seems to be an emergence of a palpable collective desire for change, for something beyond the prematurely proclaimed ‘End of History’, beyond the unresolvable tension between modernism and realism. It is perhaps a kind of ‘metamodernism’ that I yearn for as a documentarian. First proposed by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, the metamodern sensibility “can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism,” in which the postmodern condition has been put to an abrupt end by cultural responses to recent global events such as climate change, the financial crisis, political instability, and digital revolutions (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). They assert that “the postmodern culture of relativism, irony, and pastiche” is over, having been replaced by a post-ideological condition that stresses engagement, affect, and storytelling. Artist Luke Turner has described this as “a moderate fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect, attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position, as if such a thing were within our grasp. The metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other” (Turner 2012). A kind of neo-romantic sensibility that oscillates between attempt and failure, between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. A condition between and beyond naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, always pursuing a horizon that is forever receding.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you Steven Jacobs and Johan Grimonprez for your guidance, Bart Verschaffel and Annelies De Mey for your support as members of the doctoral advisory committee, Radha Kenis and Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras for taking the time to read and review this text, Hans Theys for your everlasting mentorship, Rudy Latoir for your generous graphic design contributions, The School of Speculative Documentary for the incredible insights and exchange, Dries Depoorter, Sam Weerdmeester and Gauthier Oushoorn for the valuable artistic collaborations, and UGent, KASK & Conservatory, the school of arts of HOGENT and howest for the opportunity, support and experience.

I am indebted to all those who have helped me over the years with their insights, generosity, support, collaboration and friendship, including but not only my colleagues at KASK Mathieu Asselin, Michiel De Cleene, Wim De Temmerman, An van Dienderen, Thomas Bellinck, Jan Kempnaers, Lars Kwakkenbos, Renzo Martens and Rosine Mbakam; friends and family Bence Bakker, Quinten De Bruyn, Joeri Bultheel, Alexis Gautier, Margarita Maximova, Frank Pinckers, Wiet Lengeler and Ingel Vaikla; The Archive of Modern Conflict, Kaley Erickson and Timothy Prus, BOZAR – Centre for Fine Arts, The Incite Project and Tristan Lund, Claxton Projects and Tom Claxton, Sofie Van de Velde, De Bedoeling vzw, Kunstendecreet Vlaamse Regering Kunsten & Erfgoed, and The MurthyNAYAK Foundation and Vasant Nayak for the structural support. Atelier KZG, David Marlé and Arnold Lebovics; European Eyes on Japan / Japan Today and Mikiko Kikuta; Françoise Poos and the Edward Steichen Award Luxembourg; the staff and photographers at Magnum Photos Martin Parr, Alec Soth, Sohrab Hura, Diana Markosian, Jérôme Sessini, Peter van Agtmael, Susan Meiselas, Lorenzo Meloni, Stuart Franklin, Bieke Depoorter and Carl De Keyzer; Genevieve Fussell and The New Yorker; the Leica Oskar Barnack Award and the Leica team; arteventura and Hilde Van Gorp; FOMU Antwerp, Joachim Naudts and Rein Deslé; Fotomuseum Winterthur and Nadine Wietlisbach; discussion partners, fellow artists and researchers Laia Abril, David Anderson, Michiel Burger, Edmund Clark, Tim Clark, Nicolò Degiorgis, Hans Durrer, Sergio Valenzuela Escobedo, Brad Feuerhelm, Joan Fontcuberta, Jens Jäger, Stijn Van der Linden, the Museum of British Colonialism and Chao Tayiana Maina, Guy Martin, Evan Osnos, Sébastien Reuzé, Fred Ritchin, Thomas Sauvin, Sunil Shah, Jose Manuel Susperregui, Colin Pantall, Anna Stemmler, Stefan Vanthuyne, Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, Lars Willumeit, and all the students I've had the privilege to share a classroom with these past six years; the people who have made my work possible, Munemasa Takahashi, Ai Matsumoto, Yajima Kazuhiro in Japan; Ali Alqaisi, Jay J. Armes, Susan Burke, Sally Butler, Rachel Doležal, the Heene Family, Valeria Gonzalez, Jaden Kauhale, Arielle Beth Klein, Bryan Lewis, Darius McCollum, Reuel Pendleton, Neil Redfield, Herman Rosenblat and Leah Serinsky in the US; Joseph Gachina, Michael Gatundu, Githiga Gikonyo, Muchiri Githigi, Agnes Muthoni Kenjua, Julius Gilbert Kimari, P. G. Kamau, Elijah Kinyua and the Mau Mau War Veterans Association of Kenya, Johanna C. Kabuchu, Beninah Wanjugu Kamujeru, Maureen Ng'ayu, Christopher Njaguera, Ken Njoroge, Kibaba Muriithi, David Mbutia and the National Museums of Kenya, Peter Kinyanjui Mwangi, John Mwaruvie and Karatina University,

Godfrey Muturi Kagiri, Kimunya Kamana, Charles Ngaragari Karuitha, Taracisio Waweru Kihia, Muthoni wa Kirima, Stanley Manyara, James Mwangi, Paul Mwangi Mwenja, Geoffrey Nderitu, Ndungu Ngondi, Maina Njathi, Samuel Wambugu Nyingi, Charles Wambugu Mathenge, Githai Matheri, Nehemiah Kirenga Muchinji, Eliud Mwai Munyiri, Veronica Muringi, Paul Mukia Muthuu, Gladwell Njoki Ndegwa, Mwangi Njega, Peter Irungu Njuguna, Susan Nyareri, Simon and Esther Gachigi Riitho, John Ndegwa Ruita, Terry Wairimu, Lawrence Wambugu, James Wachira Wambugu, Mwai Wamuthigi, Mwangi Wangai, Alice Wanjiru and Esther Kagure Wanjoti in Kenya.

About Max Pinckers

Max Pinckers (° Brussels, 1988) grew up in Indonesia, India, Australia and Singapore. In 2007 he returned to his native country Belgium to study photography at the School of Arts /KASK in Ghent, where he attained a BA and MA, and is currently a lecturer and doctoral researcher in the arts. His work explores the critical, technological, and ideological structures that surround the production and consumption of documentary images. For Pinckers, documentary involves more than the representation of an external reality: it's a speculative process that approaches reality and truth as plural, malleable notions open to articulation in different ways. His installations and books are exhibited internationally, having received the Edward Steichen Award Luxembourg and the Leica Oskar Barnack Award, amongst others. Pinckers is co-founder of the independent publishing house Lyre Press and The School of Speculative Documentary. He is represented by Gallery Sofie Van de Velde in Antwerp, Tristan Lund in London and Claxton Projects in New York.

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Colophon

Max Pinckers

Speculative Documentary Photography

This book was submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in the Arts: Fine Arts. Ghent University – Faculty of Arts and Philosophy – KASK & Conservatorium, the school of arts of HOGENT and howest.

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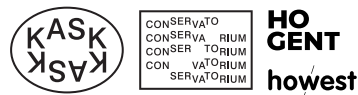
Design: Rudy Latoir

Open edition, self-published by Max Pinckers, April 2021

Max Pinckers is affiliated as an artistic researcher to KASK & Conservatorium, the school of arts of HOGENT and howest. The research project was financed by the HOGENT Arts Research Fund.

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Cover Image: *Members of the anti-apartheid movement commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre with a re-enactment outside South Africa House in Trafalgar Square, London, March 21, 1970* © Roger Jackson.



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