

Photography in Flux: The Global Contemporary

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Abstract: This essay reflects on the conditions of contemporary art photography as a global phenomenon with an expanding international network of production, dissemination and discourse. The text draws out common trends in the structure and presentation of recent photographic work and identifies shared themes emerging in local and global practices. Anglo-European academic discourse around photography developed in the 1970s-90s placed a strong emphasis on notions of “critique” which are being displaced by a more eclectic paradigm, partly in response to the loss of context produced by globalisation. Out of the seemingly chaotic sea of activities highlighted by international fairs and festivals, publications and online platforms, a number of significant currents emerge. In an art context, photography is challenged as a transparent bearer of documentary truths about the world and is instead being used in more personal, narrative or fictive modes to claim visibility and confront power in local contexts. In many cases, photographers are working performatively with their own bodies or collaborating with participants to produce works that reflect lived experience and comment on social issues affecting the planet such as climate change, migration and the expression of marginalised identities. Artist photographers are now called upon to be the curators of their own work, considering how projects will be presented materially in exhibitions across a range of international contexts, and using the photobook to deepen and disseminate their work. In some cases, materiality and process themselves become important aspects of the work’s content. Multi-lingual artists, writers and curators who work across more than one context are acting as cultural translators, contributing to this set of transnational activities and offering new ways to understand them.

Keywords: Contemporary artistic photography – narration – fiction – visibility

[Resúmenes en español y portugués en la página 124]

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This essay reflects on the conditions of contemporary art photography as a global phenomenon with an expanding international network of production, dissemination and discourse. I describe some common trends in the structure and presentation of recent photographic work and identify shared themes emerging in local and global practices. The ideas shared in this text emerge from my own work as a photography educator, critic and theorist, and also my activities as one of the members of the Global Photographies Network.

As I begin, a few words about my own background may be helpful. A photographic artist and academic, I did my academic study in photography—my Bachelors, Masters of Fine Art and Doctoral Degrees—in the United States of America, but I have worked for my entire academic career in the United Kingdom. Thus, the foundation of my experience is Anglo-American, with some grounding in a broader European context. Since London is a long-established hub for the study of art and photography, the students I have taught have been cosmopolitan; in recent years international students have increasingly outnumbered British students in my classrooms. Over the past decade, my own research has brought me into contact with photography educators, curators, and practitioners from all over the world.

Serial Structure, Conceptual Rationale

While photography is ubiquitous internationally due to the phone camera, the specialist use of photography as an aesthetic and conceptual form within art practice is not as universal. Some countries have had institutions for the education, display, dissemination and preservation of art photography since the 19th century, others have developed them more recently. In some locations, there are individuals or groups interested in the possibilities for photography beyond news and commercial applications, but no structures supporting photography as art. Despite these variations, it is possible to make some generalisations about photography as it is developing in relation to contemporary art. Whether presented in gallery exhibitions, books, online platforms or other formats, it is largely made up of projects, that is bodies of images (rather than single pictures) relating to a central subject, theme or concept. These projects sometimes but not always relate to familiar genres of photography drawn from the history of painting: portraiture, landscape, still-life and abstraction. (Bate, 2016) It is common, though not compulsory, for projects to evolve out of the photographer's research, and to feature text, including titles and often some kind of brief text, introducing the work's concept, especially if the subject of the work is not immediately evident. This serial structure evolved out of modernist photobooks showcasing distinctive styles and subject matter, such as those by Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952) or Diane Arbus (1971) and out of the seriality of mid-20th century fine art practices. Seriality is reinforced by photographic education and by the art market, in that a consistent, recognisable photographic approach acts as a kind of brand. While this project-based approach encourages stylistic consistency, it can also provide the space for photographers to undertake serious aesthetic and conceptual investigations within a body or interlock-

ing bodies of work that may unfold over several years. It is important to note that while some photographic projects offer a clearly delineated subject, others (the work of Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi, for example) foreground layered, ambiguous or affective content that resists description in words. (Soutter, 2018a)

From Critique to Complexity

Photographic discourse has splintered since the turn of the millennium. Internationally, the academic and artistic understanding of contemporary photography has shifted from a model of critique to one of complexity and eclecticism. While photographic education and criticism in the West appeared to be drawing together into a kind of orthodoxy in the 1970s-90s, with an agreed set of histories and theories, (see, for example, Burgin, 1982: Marien, 2014: Trachtenberg, 1980: Wells, 2021) that consensus has now been fractured. The Western histories of photography written by prominent 20th century curators and art historians are increasingly challenged as being too limited by their focus on predominantly white, male, Western photographers. The wave of critical theory writings that shaped late-20th century theories of representation, including writings by Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and Victor Burgin, are still frequently cited, but perhaps no longer regarded as essential for students, who may choose to engage with texts from other sources as appropriate to their personal or topical interests.

The resulting field of activity is revitalized, if difficult to describe in certain terms. In the 1980s and 90s, under the influences of semiotics and post-structuralism, much Anglo-American photographic discourse centred around theories of representation and ideas of critique. (Wallis, 1991) Photographs were to be regarded as “texts” which accompanied by various words inside or outside the frame would allow them to communicate various messages, to perform intellectual work as well as offering aesthetic experience (Burgin, 1982). This model is still prominent, but the agenda has broadened. Postmodern theories of representation presupposed that photographic art should offer a model of critique or resistance in relation to dominant structures of power under capitalism. Today many photographers continue to work in explicitly political ways, but not necessarily within the logic of representational critique. It is accepted that photographic works are inevitably complicit in aspects of consumer capitalism but that they may nonetheless offer their makers and viewers some limited experience of personal authenticity or political agency (Drucker, 2005). This position—rarely openly articulated in a Western art culture that continues to privilege critique as a mark of seriousness—has opened a space for visually seductive and even spectacular photographic work that might have been dismissed as overly commercial a few years ago.

Everything, All at Once

In his book *Anywhere or Not at All* (2013), Peter Osborne links the eclipse of the paradigm of critical representation to global economic and political changes. Indeed, it sometimes seems like photography has fallen into a state of limitless, chaotic consumer choice and submission to the marketplace, as embodied in international fairs. There is a more positive way to understand the eclecticism that follows from globalisation in photography; photographic artists have unprecedented freedom in relation to the past. Some countries, such as Singapore have well-established art photography cultures that reflect an unbroken trajectory of post-colonial and post-pictorialist practices (Zhuang, 2016). Others, such as China or the nations of the former Soviet Bloc, had very limited access to outside art or theory in the mid-20th century, and experienced a dramatic opening in the 1980s and 90s. Photographers from these contexts may choose to work in a way that reflects, responds to or reacts against the orthodoxies presented by their background—or may choose another frame of reference entirely. For photographers encountering all of photography at the same time, all styles and genres are available, and not burdened with the social or historical context in which they originally emerged. This leads to a great openness and sense of possibility in global photographs, an exuberance which then feeds back to international art centres. Out of the seemingly chaotic sea of activities several significant currents emerge.

Documentary Displaced

In a key trend, the traditional model of documentary truth has been displaced, with new modes allowing photographers to reflect on much of the same subject matter in different ways. A model of “objective” documentary photography as practiced by mid-20th century documentary photographers is being challenged as a transparent representation of social “truth” (Soutter, 2018b). Critiques of documentary representation that emerged in 1980s writings by Martha Rosler (1981) or John Tagg (1988) and that found their visual expression in the conceptual anti-documentary of artists like Alfredo Jaar or Allan Sekula are now almost universally accepted. The lived experience and embodied vision of photographers local to their subject matter provides an antidote to the unwelcome power dynamics of Western photojournalists documenting suffering in developing countries (Diwan, 2020). Against this backdrop, alternative models for documentary are emerging (Bogre, 2020).

Of course, there is still a need for photography that records facts and bears witness to important world events. In some countries, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, the development of local photography cultures has been supported by organisations such as World Press Photography which continue to encourage fairly “straight” visual storytelling. Alongside these activities, photographers are becoming increasingly experimental with their photographic form and content. Even Magnum, the famed documentary agency, has evolved to support photographers who work in imaginative ways with artistic forms of presentation including mixed-media installation. Another way to consider this shift away from documentary would be that the model of realism represented by mid-20th century humanist

documentary now feels outdated, and that photographers are engaged with other forms of realism. Jane Tormey (2013) writes about fictional realism, poetic realism and political realism as modes that might speak to contemporary sensibilities. Such works require an audience open to the idea that photographs need not be understood as purely “objective” in their representation of real-world events.

Personal, Staged, Performative

As an alternative to classic social documentary and photojournalism, artists and photographers are working in more personal, staged and performative modes to claim visibility and confront power in local contexts. For example, Heba Khalifa's series *Homemade* (2016) uses photography to explore the private lives of Egyptian women she had come to know on Facebook. Rather than shooting documentary images of the women in their homes, she worked with them in her own Cairo home, collaborating with them to create painted backdrops and working with costume and pose to express internal states of mind. Images in the series address issues such as body image, motherhood, domestic abuse, and in the case of this image (Fig. 1), the burden of crippling headaches. Particularly in a culture in which the public visibility of women is contested, staged, performative photography provided Khalifa and her subjects a safe space to negotiate the representation of private lives. A constructed, expressive mode of photography makes it possible to visualise real life issues that have been considered taboo for women to articulate within Egyptian culture. Parallel strategies of staging and performance have been used in South Africa by photographers such as Sethembile Msezane and Thandiwe Msebenze to explore historical as well as personal issues.



Figura 1. Heba Khalifa (2016) from the series *Homemade*. Image: courtesy of Heba Khalifa.

Materiality, Curation, Publication

Artist photographers are now called upon to be the curators of their own work, working in series and considering how their work will be presented materially in exhibitions across a range of international contexts (Groys, 2009). In some contexts, materiality and process themselves become important aspects of the work's content. Many photographers regard conventional formats and frames as insufficient, turning to specialist photographic papers, printing processes and custom mounting or framing to present their projects in the form of gallery installations that fit the concept of their work. This phenomenon is less evident in countries with less developed markets and institutions (and hence a less developed audience for artistic photography). In much of Southeast Asia, for example, photography is experienced on screen rather than on the wall. Photobooks, or cheap self-printed magazines known as "zines," provide alternate platforms for photographers to curate their own work and to explore original and beautifully designed forms that can circulate around the world (Lederman & Yatskevich, 2021). In the most successful examples, the format and presentation of the work are well-resolved in relationship to its content, adding additional layers of meaning.

Indian photographer Soumya Sankar Bose's *Where the Birds Never Sing* (2020, Fig. 2) is another example of a photographic project that side-steps a traditional documentary mode. Different versions of the project—as a gallery exhibition, outdoor site-specific installation or book—allow the project to explore its content in different ways and to reach different audiences. This body of work tells the story of a largely overlooked incident from the aftermath of Partition and the formation of Bangladesh: the 1979 Marichjhapi Massacre in which lower caste Bengali refugees were violently evicted by Indian police from Marchjhapi Island in the Sunderban forest of West Bengal, with many subsequently dying of starvation and disease. Bose's working process involved archival research, travelling to photograph the forest and working with survivors, gathering their oral histories and staging re-enactments of their memories. The darkly lyrical images have been exhibited in galleries. They have also been exhibited with text as a large outdoor installation in a field across from Marchjhapi Island. The most complete version of the project, which allows its layers to be read most fully is a photographic book (Bose, 2020), with a unique bespoke design that includes photographs, reproductions of some of the few documents remaining from the period, archival photographs and an essay. The book format allows Kolkata-based Bose to draw international attention to the important social justice message of the project. It also allows him to disseminate his work to an international audience; it was shortlisted for prestigious competitions such as the Lucie Foundation's annual Photo Book prize (2021) and the Paris Photo Aperture Foundation First Photobook Award (2020). In work like this we can see photographers are combining research with their own imagery, producing new knowledge that is shaped by their artistic sensibility. Different forms of presentation allow *Where the Birds Never Sing* to unfold over time in a variety of contexts, both in public exhibition and in the privacy of viewers' own homes.

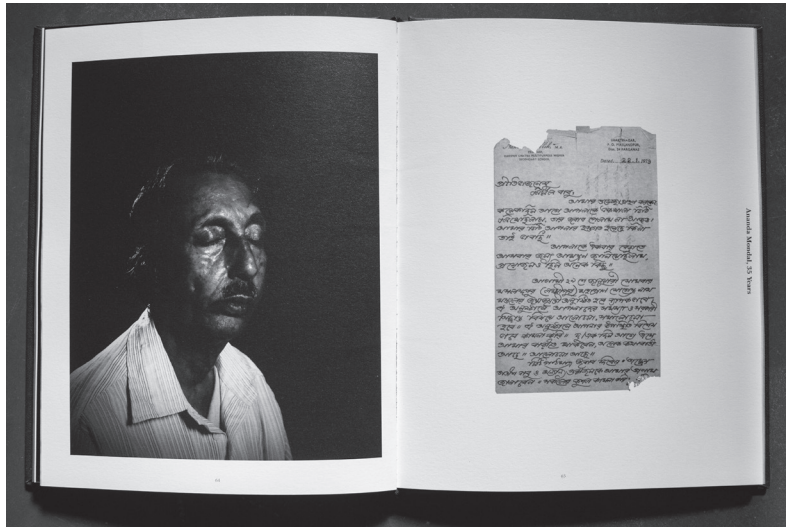


Fig. 2. Soumya Sankar Bose (2020) spread from the book *Where the Birds Don't Sing*. Kolkata: Red Turtle Books. Image: courtesy of Soumya Sankar Bose.

The Global Contemporary

Bose's thoughtful work and its positive reception in the United States and Europe brings us to the contentious subject of "global contemporary" art, which art historians such as Jonathan Harris have characterised as produced by artists from outside Western centres, with a conscious awareness of its address to a global audience (Harris, 2011). This has been an area of increasing interest in contemporary art and photography, especially for curators. Such work is now a staple of the thriving international circuit of art fairs and museum exhibitions. While it is surely positive that more diverse practice are represented within these institutions, there is also risk involved. When appropriated by the international art market, works produced within local contexts may lose their intended meanings and be reduced to tokens of the identity and nationality of the artist (Hacking, 2015). To a large extent, the Western art market with its appetite for the new and the exotic encourages the stripping away of subtlety and the celebration of spectacular difference (Charlesworth, 2014). It is important that curators and scholars work against this potential flattening of the meaning of global practices, so that photographers working outside Western centres can share their work internationally without being subject to a form of capitalist neo-colonialism.

Cultural Translation

Part of the solution to this problem lies with a new generation of cultural translators—committed individuals who have dual fluencies and are willing to stretch themselves to work outside of their culture of origin (Soutter, 2018b). Critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha proposed that cultural translation is led by subjects rather than objects (Bhabha, 1994). In other words, people who travel carry their experience and understanding with them, while texts, images or artefacts that are sent to another location may easily be mis-read. Photography is rarely transparent or universal in its meanings; it requires constant contextualisation and interpretation. Multi-lingual photographers and writers who work across more than one context are able to bridge cultural gaps, contributing to transnational activities and offering new ways to understand them. International travel requires certain financial resources, so in many cases photographers who study or exhibit abroad are particularly affluent. It is important as the global contemporary evolves to make sure that we are not only seeing through the eyes or hearing the stories of the most privileged. The internet creates new possibilities for genuine cross-cultural dialogue, and in some cases opens opportunities that do not require flights, hotels or visas. Those in positions to do so should reach out to extend global networks and provide platforms for more diverse practitioners. The Global Photographies Network was established in 2020 to address many of these concerns. It links photography educators, photographers, curators and students from around the world to exchange ideas and develop a deeper understanding of how photography is understood in different local and global contexts. The programme includes a shared series of talks by artists, curators, historians and photography professionals. The informal discussions before and after these talks are an important part of the work of cultural translation. We also come together around international online workshops and writing projects. We are currently working towards an anthology of texts reflecting the ways we consider contemporary photography in our various contexts. From our discussions over two years, we have emerged with a set of shared themes that cut across our diverse contexts. These include postcolonial histories of photography and possibilities for decolonial practices; the formation of new networks locally and internationally, new manifestations of materiality in photography, uses of the photobook and publishing, questions around gender and identity, and concerns about the man-made environmental crisis. We hope that our publication will contribute meaningfully to the advancement of these debates in global contemporary photography.

In this brief essay, I have provided a broad-brush survey of some important developments in contemporary art photography, not only as it is projected outward from Western art institutions and markets, but also as it is evolving in nodes of practice around the world. I have argued that these global practices in turn shift how art photography is practiced and understood in established centres. While necessarily general, I hope that my remarks will open some doors to further study in the areas that I have described.

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Resumen: Este ensayo reflexiona sobre las condiciones de la fotografía artística contemporánea como fenómeno global de una red internacional en expansión tanto de producción, difusión como de discurso. El texto muestra tendencias comunes en la estructura y presentación del trabajo fotográfico reciente e identifica temas compartidos que surgen en las prácticas locales y globales. El discurso académico anglo-europeo en torno a la fotografía desarrollado en las décadas de 1970 y 90 puso un fuerte énfasis en las nociones de “crítica” que están siendo desplazadas por un paradigma más ecléctico, en parte en respuesta a la pérdida de contexto producida por la globalización. En un contexto artístico, la fotografía es desafiada como portadora transparente de verdades documentales sobre el mundo y, se está utilizando de un modo más personal, narrativo o ficcional para reclamar visibilidad y enfrentar el poder en diversos contextos.

Palabras clave: Fotografía artística contemporánea – narración - ficción - visibilidad

Resumo: Este ensaio reflete sobre as condições da fotografia artística contemporânea como fenômeno global de uma rede internacional em expansão de produção, difusão e discurso. O texto mostra tendências comuns na estrutura e apresentação de trabalhos fotográficos recentes e identifica temas compartilhados que surgem em práticas locais e globais. O discurso acadêmico anglo-europeu em torno da fotografia desenvolvido nas décadas de 1970 e 90 colocou uma forte ênfase nas noções de “crítica” que estão sendo substituídas por um paradigma mais eclético, em parte em resposta à perda de contexto produzida pela globalização. Em um contexto artístico, a fotografia é desafiada como portadora transparente de verdades documentais sobre o mundo e está sendo usada de forma mais pessoal, narrativa ou ficcional para reivindicar visibilidade e confrontar o poder em diversos contextos.

Palavras chave: Fotografia artística contemporânea – narração – ficção – visibilidade

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