Can photography change the world?

Words by ▪ Noemi Filetti

The conversation on documentary photography often comes with leitmotifs as "giving voice", "raising awareness", and "making a change", which are unquestionably honourable aims, but with minimal effects, if the act is limited to freezing the "decisive moment", suggesting that producing images is the summit of the photographic event. Instead, it is our engagement with pictures through discussion, consumption, and reaction, which defines the power of photography to fuelling change.
This research focuses on the participatory photography potential to set the environment for taking collective action; starting from dismantling the idea of single authorship and leading to the definition of photography as the democratic tool for excellence.

© Henneman, N. The West Façade of Westminster Abbey, before 1945 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

The attribution of authorship to photographs has been problematic from the very origin of the medium. In 1844, one of the first commercially published books entirely illustrated with photographs came out under the name of The Pencil of Nature. In this sense, Geoffrey Batchen addresses the lack of an explicit agreement concerning at which point of the process a photograph is made and, considering the complexity of the photographic apparatus, where should be placed the boundary between the creative moment and the mere "labour"?

The Pencil of Nature represents a perfect terrain for exploring this dilemma. In fact, despite what suggested in the title, the book came out as a collection of Talbot's photographs. Furthermore, the argument becomes even more complicated when we consider that one of the twenty-four pictures illustrating the volume has been taken by Talbot's former valet Nicolaas Henneman, but nowhere is acknowledged his name, and nor are credited the people (which may have been as many as nine) who worked on the print.

Authorship and power are interwoven with each other and collaboration cannot be detached from the political frame. Batchen describes the authorship of individual photographs as "a collective enterprise stretched over a considerable time period".

The origin
Before the critics arisen during Postmodernism, the objectivity of the camera was not put into question and documentary photography was considered a truthful document.
In the 1970s, Postmodernism new theoretical models, as semiotics,

psychoanalysis, feminism and Marxism conducted an undercutting function toward the role of art and the artist in the culture contributing to questioning the indexicality of photography.

The study of semiotics evidenced that the reading of images is inherent to our own experience and shaped by the specific context; consequently, in the same picture are conveyed multiple (and not necessarily congruous) meanings.

In this attack to modernist beliefs, photographs become "signs" to be decoded; things do not "own" their pure meanings and they must be deciphered in order to comprehend their deeper structure.

Martha Rosler
Documentary photography has always arisen controversies; its reporting function claims to represent objective facts and has historically involved privileged professional photographers commissioned to take pictures of particular subject matters. As a Western rooted practice, it traditionally implied the photographer to be an outsider, if not a foreigner, of the community to be documented, "giving voice" to people who could not relate with.

American artist Martha Rosler "raised concerns about the potential unfairness of liberal documentary photography" accusing its original reforming aim to have fallen into "combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting-and careerism". Rosler questioned the disparities that arise in the distribution of agency between the photographer and the subjects, highlighting the problem of "othering" when representing powerless people,

minorities or other subcultures.
In support of her position, she took the example of the world-famous Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange. Despite the fame, forty-two years later the photograph was taken, Florence Thompson (the woman depicted in the picture) was still living in complete poverty, never benefitting from becoming an icon. This, amongst others, is an example of failure in making a positive change for the subject. Although Florence Thompson's photograph may have helped other people in similar condition, it failed in helping her: the woman who gave her face to the iconic image.

As a response to the ethical and indexical issues raised in the Postmodern environment, photographers felt the necessity to move away from the conventional uses of the medium, aiming to achieve concrete social transformation. Some photographers responded to the accuses of subject exploitation and authenticity immersing themselves in the documentation of their own private lives: photographing their family, relationships, and often acknowledging their presence in the scene.

Among these, Rosler's work The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems is

a photo-text piece which questions the "inherent limitations of both photography and language (...) to address a complex social problem". In her piece, alcoholism and homelessness in New York's Bowery are represented by carefully composed photographs paired with typed words describing various states of drunkenness.

Social interaction
In this "metacritical" relation to the documentary genre some practitioners started seeing the camera as a vehicle for social interaction offering opportunities for dialogue and the inclusion of new original perspectives. There is not a single photographer who can be considered the pioneer of participatory photography, but rather a range of practices starting to evolve and spread in the same period of time.
From the 1970s, asking the subjects to self-captioning their own images became a common process amongst both photographers and researchers, allowing the participants to speak out for themselves. One of the former examples of collaboration in documentary photography is 44th Irving Street, a project made by Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas at the very start of her prominent career. In 1971,

"Documentary photography has always arisen controversies.

stewed

boiled

potted

corned

pickled

preserved

canned

fried to the hat

© Martha Rosler | The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems (1974–1975), no 11, Stewed (courtesy of the artist)

during her first photography course, she realised a final project consisting of a series of portraits of her neighbours who decided where and how to pose in their home. Afterwards, she gave them their images and asked to write a caption about how they saw themselves in the pictures.

Collective labour

To conclude this part, dismantling the process of photography reveals an inherent "collective labour" in which no one can claim absolute authorship, ownership, and credits over the outcomes. Furthermore, the camera itself (or any other light-recording medium) is not a passive tool; images are the product from a combination of the photographer's intentions, the medium's recording abilities, and the actions of what stands in front of the lens." However, for approximately 150 years, photography has been conceived under the logic of individualism, an act attributed to single authors: the photographers.

Azoulay's concept of "civil contract of photography" offers a frame for understanding the development of participatory photography not as an "alternative", but as a deeply embedded civil practice. In fact, from the first worker photography movements, cameras have made people equipped with simple and available instruments able to denounce injustice and claim the right of self-representation, producing images with incredible social, cultural, and political effects.

Photography as a research tool
Photography has a long history within the social sciences. Both sociology and anthropology have seen the potential of photography to "bridge communication gaps" and it is not clear which discipline used it first.

Already in the 1960s, anthropologists John and Malcolm Collier theorised the method of photo- elicitation in their book Visual Anthropology (1967). However, some argue

that visual sociology can be traced back to work of photographers like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, who worked between the 19th and 20th century.

The born of Photovoice

In the early 1990s, Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris developed the "photo novella": a theoretical and practical methodology underpinned by empowerment education, feminist theory, and documentary photography.

Wang and Burris used this participatory action research strategy with rural Chinese women living in two counties of China's Yunnan province, the goal was incentivising political action at a provincial level for improving their health status and living conditions in their communities. However, the aim of the project has been wider than catalysing political action towards the community's needs from the outset. It was also envisioned as a collective empowering activity, enabling women to meet, discuss and organise.

In their publication Empowerment through Photo Novella: Portraits of Participation (1994), Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris wrote: "Photo novella does not entrust cameras to health specialists, policymakers, or professional photographers, but puts them in the hands of children, rural women, grassroots workers, and other constituents with little access to those who make decisions over their lives."

Photo novella

The term "photo novella" denotes "picture stories" and aims to use people's photographic documentation of their everyday lives as an empowering tool and a catalyst for social change.

This interdisciplinary approach aims to challenge the conventional model of research and documentary photography in which subjects are passive elements studied and represented by outsiders. Photovoice encourages participants to self-represent their own lives, rejecting the notion of the professional photographer "giving voice" to the subjects and reinventing the role of the professional figure (the photographer or researcher) as a facilitator "making space" for the participants to speak for themselves. Usually, the participants of photovoice projects come from marginalised social groups who are otherwise hardly listened from who is in a position of decision-making power. The so-called "others" have been historically obsessively (mis) represented in the Western culture, making them even more distant and undermining our empathy towards them. Photovoice brings the "others" to the centre and aims to create a bridge towards the authorities and the public opinion.

Empowerment

Individual and community empowerment is a key goal of participatory photography strategies. According to Wang and Burris, "empowerment includes at least four kinds of access: access to knowledge, access to decisions, access to networks, and access to resources".

The process of talking about their own pictures with others engages the group to participate in a discussion, allowing to identify and share the community's realities. The collective recognition and critical dialogue of shared issues is an essential step to move toward action and social change.

Photography fulfils a dual role for those involved: to rebuild identity by a process of "auto-reconocimiento" (self-recognition) and to speak out to the people outside the community. In order to understand the empowering process in participatory photography is essential to define what empowerment is.

According to Marc A. Zimmerman "participation, control, and critical awareness are essential aspects of empowerment". In his theory, he identifies three different levels of empowerment: individual, organizational, and community. The individual-level involves learning decision-making skills, managing resources, and working with other; the organisational level provides individuals with opportunities to exercise control, sharing leadership and responsibilities; finally, the community-level extends these skills to a group environment, allowing individuals to collaborate together on a common goal.

Common activities as photo-elicitation, dialogue, and sharing of personal experiences, contribute to community building and enhance a sense of "social identity", which is fundamental to move towards political action and social change. Photovoice dialogical approach is grounded in Paulo Freire's "problem-posing education". Freire believed that "education is never neutral" and knowledge is collectively produced by re-framing reality in social exchange with others.

Power dynamics

Talking about power dynamics with the participants represents a pivotal aspect of Photovoice. Wang and Burris conceived power as three different abilities: the ability
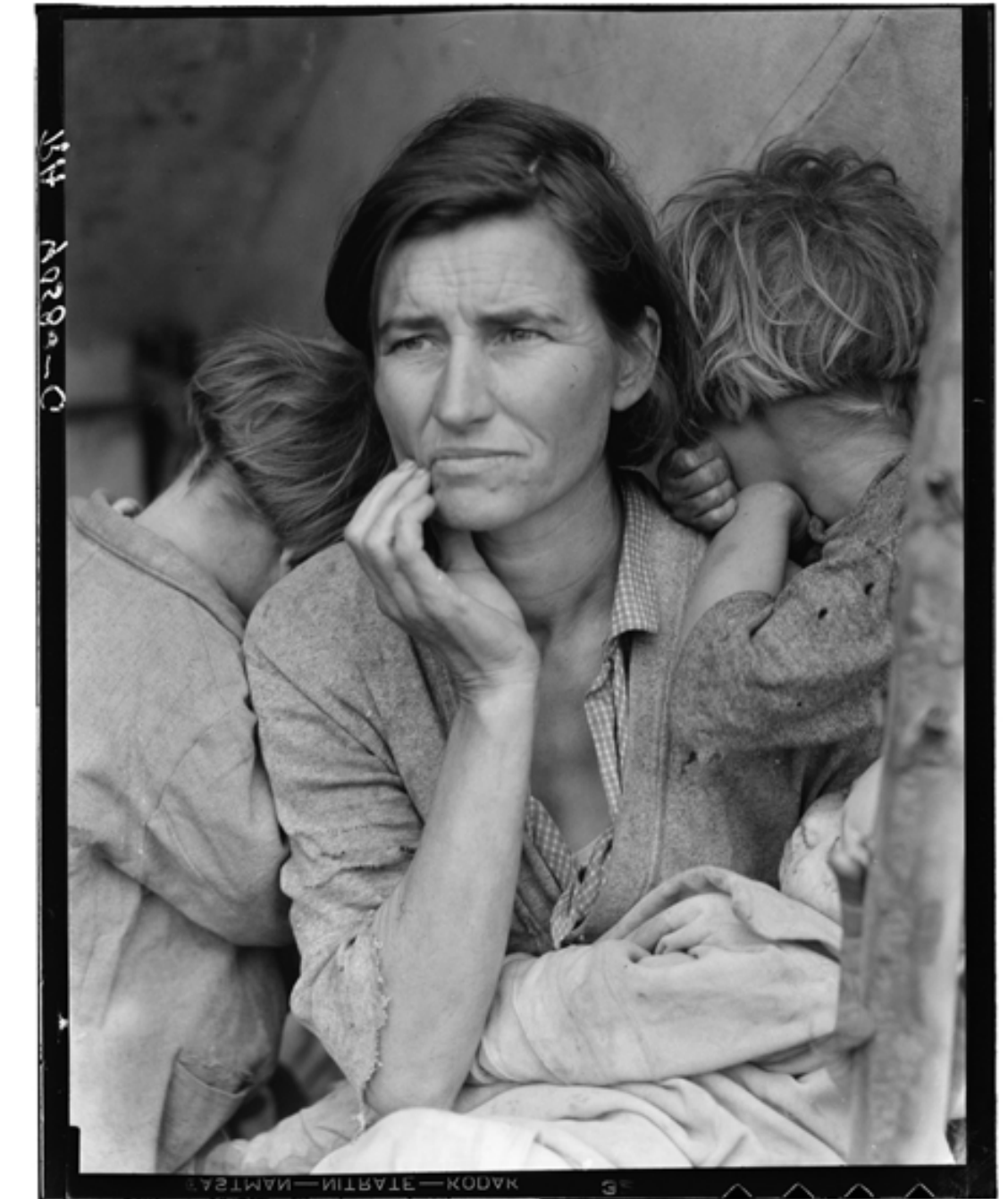
to achieve things; the ability to work with others toward accomplish a mutual goal; and the ability to influence others and have an impact. They summarised these three skills as "power to, power with, and power over".

In fact, even if an actual policy change may not be achieved in the immediate, the development of these skills positively conditions participants lives. The social engagement provided by the activities allows participants to improve their abilities in communication and decision-making, developing a sense of empowerment and strengthen their feeling of social identity within their community. It is important to understand that even the most successful project cannot solve deeply-rooted problems, such as poverty

and discrimination; however, it has the potential to influence decisions that affect participants' lives and facilitates the conditions for taking action towards policy change.

In conclusion, photography is a natural inquiring medium, which renders our encounter with images never passive: they make us reflect, understand, and react. The advent of the camera radically changed the way we see and experience the world, making pictures an integral part of our society, culture, identity, and personal life. Photographs are by definition, signs, collections of data, making them not only a means to tell stories, but also a valid tool for supporting social sciences in qualitative researches. In the participatory practice, the indexical nature of photography combined with the inquiring quality of pictures has grown the interest toward its potential for promoting social change, leading to the attempt to define a "model".

Governability
Since participatory photography is based on "interweaving dynamics of power, truth claims and politics" analysing the practice under the lens of governability offers a critical framework to help understanding its most problematic aspects.

Power, truth, and politics, are inevitable in the participatory photography discussion. They are interwoven in the practice and they cannot be isolated from each other. This forms a complex paradoxical apparatus in which arguments do not lead to single or general answers, but rather raise further open-ended questions that need to be analysed in their specific context.

The negotiation of power
In participatory photography, power relations permeate every aspect of the practice: from the negotiation of leadership and authorship between the facilitator and the participants to the choice of founders and use of the material produced. Critics of participatory practices argue that there is a "fine line between collaboration and exploitation" In fact, the negligence of power dynamics reduces participatory photography to a romantic practice promising positive outcomes. Indeed, the process is complex and problematic, and a naive execution can potentially lead to ineffective outcomes, or even be harmful to the participants.

In the participatory photography context, the relationship between participants and the facilitator is a crucial aspect of the practice. Finding a balance between the control undertaken by the stakeholders is essential for accomplishing a successful outcome. The facilitator has the delicate task to run the project without overcoming with his or her own ideas; however, an equally balanced distribution of power is utopian and not inherently beneficial. Retaining the agency for certain aspects crucial to reach or engage the audience, and consequently moving toward the realisation of social change, is essential to be maintained by the facilitator or other professional figures.

Participatory photography should be understood as an organic process that needs to be adapted accordingly for every different scenario and cannot rely on a "ready-made" portable model. According to Felshin, collaboration it is not a matter of hierarchy, everybody brings something to the work;

the beauty of the approach lays on "losing oneself in other people" and what has been given to the participant should be valued more than what has been taken from them.

Neo-colonialism
The use of participatory projects with marginalised communities has been accused to represent a form of Neo-colonialism. The usually white photographer, going to start a project with a group of people labelled as "marginalised, vulnerable, and without voice" raises the question about who has the power to label and how the selected group actually perceive itself. It is argued that traces of imperialist traditions and "othering" tendencies are carried by naive executed participatory practices and the polarity between the "West and the rest" has still not been resolved.

In conclusion, the question of leadership, institutionalisation, and neo-colonialism cannot be eviscerated from the participatory discussion. Undertaking a project without considering the potential risks of overlooking power dynamics derived from economic interest, historical facts, and cultural traditions may lead to controversial outcomes.

Participatory photography is not "more authentic" than "conventional" photography and "it would be a mistake to replace professionalized communication practices with participatory ones". The importance of participatory photography should

be understood as its contribution to developing "a more complex representation through diversity" enriching the "bigger conversation" with its variety of viewpoints.

Reframing the concept
In order to understand the value of participatory photography, we need to re-frame photography as an ongoing event in which protagonists are the interactions and connections it promotes.

Participatory photography projects cannot be reduced as one "kind", which either produce positive outcomes or not therefore, the question whether it represents a "better" practice cannot take place. We need to fuel "more complex representation through diversity" including both professional and civic made images, and engaging with it. To conclude, in order to adequately answer the initial question of this dissertation: "Is Participatory Photography the Promise for Social Change?" we need to start with re-framing the concept of participation in photography and disconnecting it to the idea of a "model". Participatory photography needs to be re-considered as the social engagement offered by the ongoing conversation on representation, promoting dialogue between individuals and communities. With this premise, making change does not represent a possibility, but the very experience of the photographic event.

Notes
All notes and references have been left out. In the original thesis the reader can find these and the complete bibliography. The complete thesis can be found here:

https://www.artdoc.photo/articles/is-participatory-photography-the-promise-for-social-change