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Unruliness and Exorbitance

Anthropology, Collaboration and the Photographic Event

Christopher Pinney and Vincent Hasselbach

"This is the ground for the intrinsic and fundamentally collaborative nature of photography: despite the photographer's efforts to exclude, the camera always includes."

This conversation revolves around the relationship between anthropology and photography, and the roles of participation and collaboration in the process of the photographic event. It draws on Christopher Pinney's long-running fieldwork engagements in central India, as well as his seminal contributions to anthropological understandings of global photographies. Focusing on the centrality of the photographic event to the "unruliness" of the resulting images, as well as their ontological exorbitance, the conversation explores tensions and debates in photographic theory from the 20th century through to the present day. Centering the idea of collaboration firmly within the ontology of photography, it also explores broader relationships between photography, colonialism, and agency, as well as key issues around photography as an anthropological fieldwork methodology. Taking a deterritorialised approach, it draws on a range of visual cues, ranging from nineteenthcentury colonial photography to contemporary art and vernacular practices in the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: photography, anthropology, collaboration, participation, agency, profilmic, photographic event, fieldwork, contingency

Conducted via email with Christopher Pinney in Madhya Pradesh, India (where he has been researching intermittently since the early 1980s) and Vincent Hasselbach in Dhaka, Bangladesh (a regular field site since 2015), this conversation explores the interrelationships between photography, anthropology, and collaboration. Thinking with and around some of the key tensions and developments in photographic theory that Pinney has helped to shape over the last thirty years, the conversation engages with images and image-making practices that might be considered unruly or exorbitant, resisting human intentionality. Tracing a genealogy across anthropology, photographic theory and media archaeology, it draws on a range of examples emerging from Pinney's long-running fieldwork engagements and considers different understandings of participation and collaboration as they manifest ethnographically across anthropological, artistic, and demotic practices of both making and studying images.

Perhaps we can begin with the relationship between photography and anthropology more broadly, before delving into more specific examples of collaborative and participatory practices. In this context, how do you view the relationships between anthropology, photography (as a medium and/or practice), and the notions of collaboration or participation?

Well, to start with the relationship between anthropology and photography, I've always resisted the instrumentalization of the camera as simply a "tool" that somehow submitted itself to the interests and ideology of anthropology and anthropologists. This subordinates media entirely to human agency and imagines that what Friedrich Kittler called the "data ratios" of the camera (see Pinney 2008) as being the same as other forms of representation. In my ethnographic and archival research, I was most often drawn to images that didn't do what people hoped they would do. That "unruliness" forced me to think about the ontology of photography, aka "medium specificity". Perhaps this focus was also precipitated by my parallel work on printed images in India. This involved work with artists and publishers (of what is sometimes called "calendar art") who were part of an industry devoted to stripping out any unruliness: the images are very predictable ("arthritic" in the anthropologist Maurice Bloch's sense [1974]), as befits images destined for ritual use.

So I've always worked on two kinds of medium specificity: firstly, painted and printed images which explicitly aim for a kind of ossification and transcendence of accident and contingency, and secondly, photographs which,

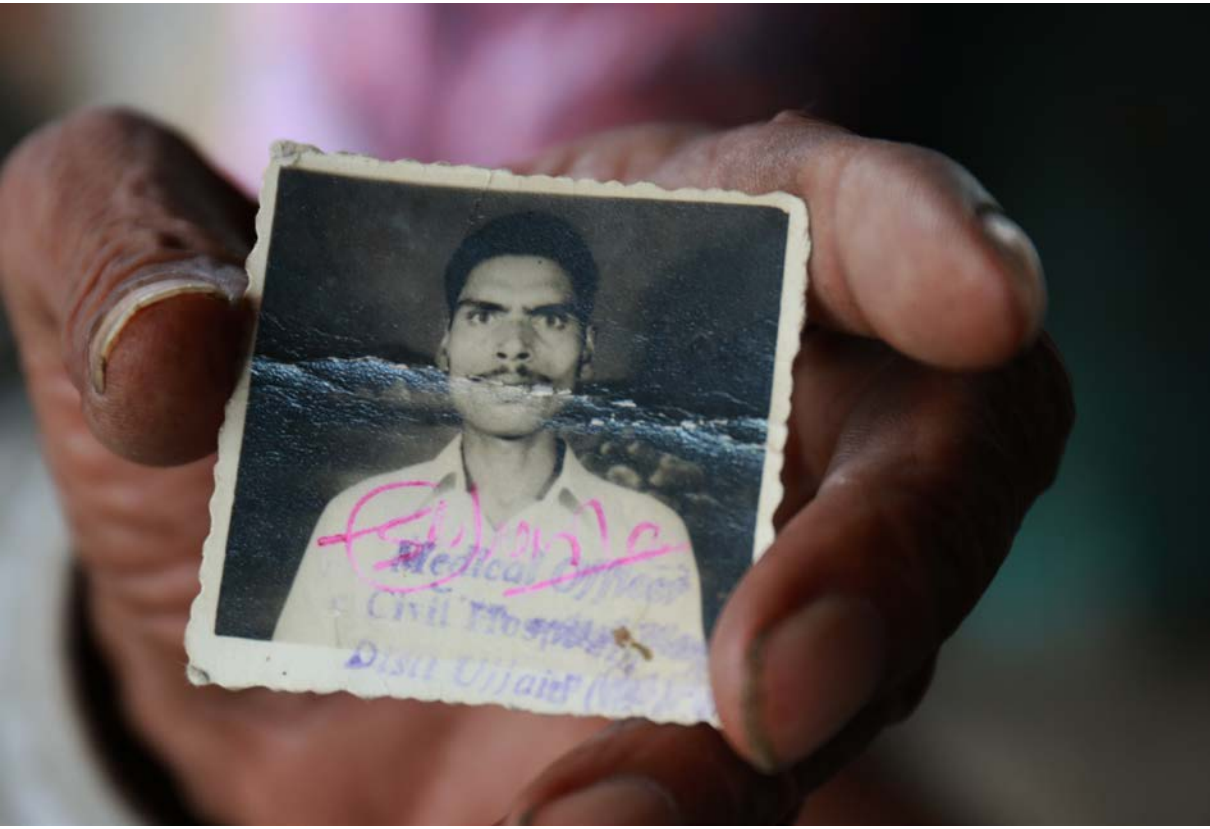

Figure 1. A 1980s identity photograph for rural central India. The image has been countersigned as a true likeness by a local medical practitioner. Courtesy of Christopher Pinney.

because of the ineradicability of the "event" of which they are a record, are ontologically "exorbitant" (i.e. necessarily "collaborative"). "Exorbitant" is a term Barthes uses (1982, 91) alongside "crowded" and "crammed", and for me it resonates with Benjamin's notion of "contingency" ([1931] 1999, 510) and Siegfried Kracauer's idea that photography records a "general inventory" (1993, 435). I think it was this the empirical, research-led landscape that prompted my increasing engagement with photographic theory. There was also a wider frame that emerged from engaging the anthropology of Material Culture, and especially the work of Bruno Latour (1993). But I also engaged key "technomaterial" figures who have been puzzlingly marginalized in material culture, such as Marshall McLuhan and Kittler. This encouraged a skepticism about sovereign human agency and opened up a receptivity to the ability of artefacts, technics and media to derail human intentionality. This in turn led to a re-reading of the canonical texts of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes and the realization that such issues were also central to their thinking.

I should confess that before all this I succumbed to a youthful Foucauldianism, which I now attribute to a conventional anthropological desire to dissolve technics in "culture" (with the minor difference that Foucault denotes this as "power", "discourse", etc.). It is very easy for anthropologists committed to the Geertzian "culture concept" (1973) to subscribe to the Taggian-Foucauldian claim that "photography as such has no identity" (Tagg 1988, 63), because it opens up the space for cultural practice to claim that identity. The overall effect of all this on me was the emergence of what Barthes called an "ontological desire", which has led me to understand photographs as only partially the manifestation of the cameraperson's intentionality. This intentionality is only a small element in the intrinsically collaborative and hybrid conditions for the making of any photograph.

Agency is something quite central to many discussions around participatory and collaborative work (both academic and photographic), and it relates to your point just now about the intentionality on the part of those involved in the photographic process or event. If we think about the agency of the images themselves, and also the agency of those portrayed in the images, this is something your work has also engaged with on several levels. I'm thinking in particular of an image by Hippolyte Arnoux, taken in Egypt or Sudan in the 1880s (Figure 2), which you have spoken of as illustrative of Benjamin's crucial argument about "the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject"

Figure 2. Hippolyte Arnoux. *Tiralleurs Soudanienes*. 1870–80s Albumen print.

(Benjamin 1999 [1931], 510), and the productivity that this can have. Could you elaborate on this? And, if we accept this contingency, do you think there is something inherently participatory about the photographic process, even when the photographic event takes place in the context of colonial image-making, for example?

Yes, the Arnoux image caught my attention because at first glance it seems to perfectly embody a colonial vision (orientalizing, primitivizing, etc.). But a longer contemplation, a slower reading of the traces of the event, reveals a different narrative: some of the subjects in the photograph appear to be on message (to have internalized Arnoux's script and to be participating in the colonial fantasy), but others look baffled and disengaged. Arnoux clearly had an agenda, but it was one that was thwarted by the unavoidable centrality of the photographic event. This reflects the ontology of (analogue) photography which always involves the presence of the camera, the cameraperson and the profilmic. Unlike in painting (where you only need the imagination and the medium of painting), you need all three of those to make a photograph. This is the ground for the intrinsic and fundamentally collaborative nature of photography: despite the photographer's efforts to exclude, the camera always includes. This is what I understand Barthes to be gesturing towards when he writes of photography's "exorbitance". This, in turn, was a riff on what Benjamin referred to as "contingency", or what Friedrich Kittler would later term "data ratios" (see Pinney 2008). Photography embodies the "noise" of the *mis-en-scène* or the profilmic, which makes every photograph hybrid. I tried to explore the ontological differences between painting and photography in a short piece on Orientalist imagery "What's Photography Got to Do With It" (Pinney 2013). There, I argued against Malek Alloula's (1986) oft-cited claim that photography steps in where Orientalist painting falters, and re-energizes it. I argued that while Orientalist photographers may well have shared the same ideological drives as their painterly predecessors (the argument is not that oppressive colonial preconceptions changed), they had to contend with a different media ontology. Foucauldian and Taggian eviscerations of media in the unitary swamp of "representation" and "discourse" can't account for differences between media. My "technomaterial" approach makes me skeptical about the desire to bring back human agency under the rubric of "collaboration". I'm put in mind of a key phrase that Latour uses in *We Have Never Been Modern*, where he says that Boyle's air pump is "capable of showing", but "lacks will" (1993, 23). I understand him to be urging us to think about material potentially in ways that avoid anthropomorphism. This

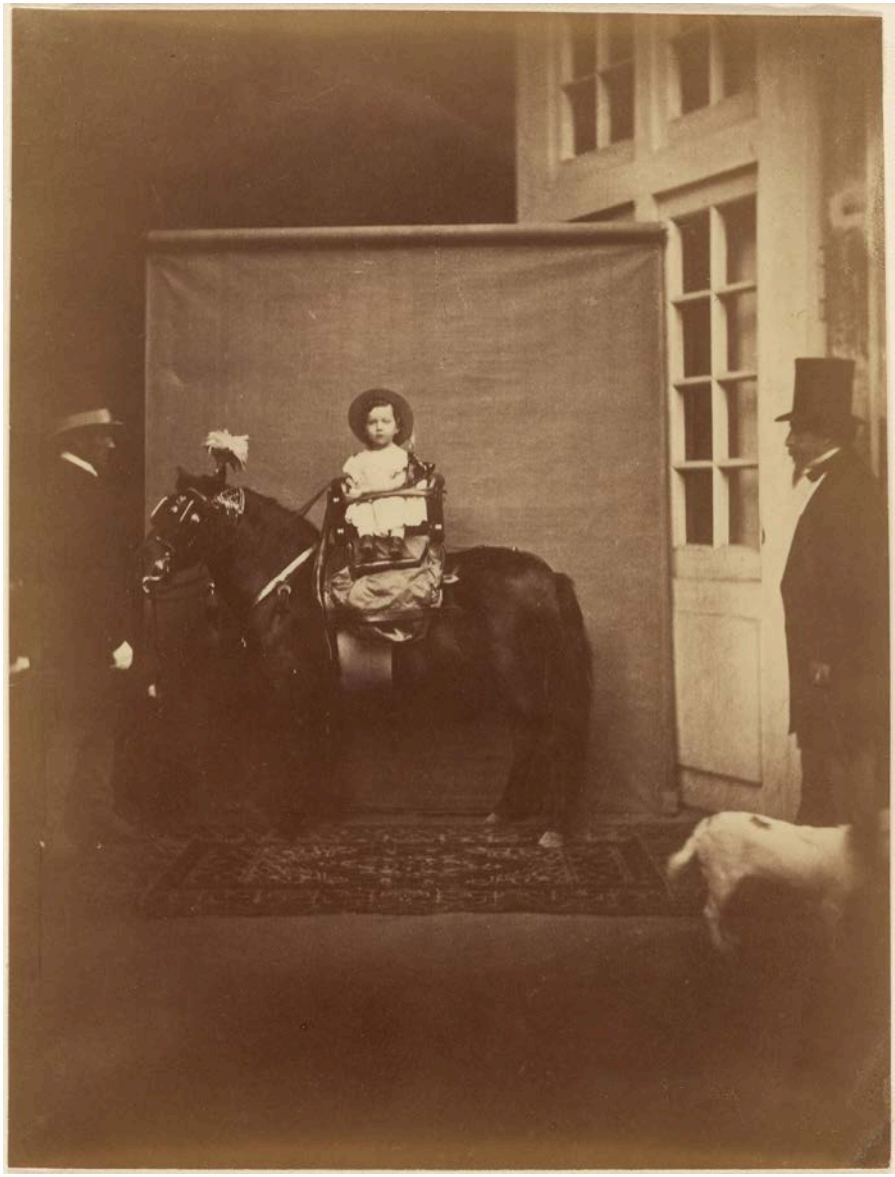

Figure 3. Pierre Louis Pierson, *Napoleon III and the Prince Imperial*, c. 1859. Getty Research Institute.

is the task for photographic theory: to reveal the complex forces that make themselves visible without resorting to discredited models of intentionality of the will. "Agency" is too often conscripted in projects that Latour, I think, would have condemned as "late purification", because they reanimate old-fashioned human intentionality and will. "Collaboration" in some formulations reanimates the same forces.

This stress on contingency, you have argued, also underpins more recent works by theorists such as Ariella Azoulay and anthropologists such as Karen Strassler. Can you elaborate on how you view this genealogy, and how collaborative and participatory practices might be understood in this context?

Well, Azoulay reinforces the Benjaminian assumption about photography's inclusivity in much, though not all, of her writing. This is most evident in her discussion of Mayer and Pierson's 1859 image of Napoleon III's son (**Figure 3**) in *Civil Contract of Photography* (Azoulay 2008). She shows very beautifully how control of the image is not solely in the hands of the photographer or the sovereign. Given her later argument (Azoulay 2019) that there is a larger, more encompassing "event of photography", it is important to recall that here Azoulay echoes Benjamin by declaring that "the photograph bears the seal of the event itself" (2008, 14). This leads her to the great conclusion that "no one is the sole signatory to the event of photography" (2012, 17). In the particular photograph she discusses, we see the son seated on a horse in front of a screen. Additionally, we see Napoleon III standing on one side of the image, and on the other side a figure that could be that of a servant or equerry. The visible presence of the sovereign, whose image Azoulay suggests has been "pilfered", underwrites her explicitly Benjaminian conclusion that "the photograph escapes the authority of anyone who might claim to be its author, refuting anyone's claim to sovereignty" (2008, 106-7). She rather dramatically backtracks on this in much of *Potential Histories* (Azoulay 2019), but seems to reembrace it in the new work on collaboration (Azoulay et. al. 2023). Strassler (2010), I think, provides an important theorization of photography's subjunctive potential (what she calls its "as if" capability) and shows in brilliant detail the productivity of photography's contingent unruliness. Alongside Azoulay and Strassler we should also mention Elizabeth Edwards, whose conceptualization of photographs as sources of "raw history" (2001) also locates them within a field of exorbitance rather than the diminished instrumentality of Foucauldian approaches.

In a more contemporary context, maybe we can also talk about participation/collaboration in the context of image-making practices, specifically in terms of collaborative and/or participatory practices in the Global South, as well as indigenous or demotic media, social media, and photographic practices?

I'm currently in Madhya Pradesh in central India which has always been the site of my field research on photography, printed Hindu imagery (and other topics such as factory work). One of the things I've been doing is collecting written permissions for images in a forthcoming book titled *Photo State*. The need for these largely reflects the anxieties and new legal protocols of publishers in the Global North: it is difficult to imagine Indian publishers wanting this kind of anxious indemnification, and rural subjects and suppliers of images are puzzled by the formalities. So one of the things I've been faced with is thinking about what the signed permissions letter does that the image (as a trace of an event) does not. My sense is that the evidence of consent to be photographed (and conversely the lack of consent) is usually clear in the visual evidence of the photograph. There are some exceptions, but generally the negotiations and facilitations that form the ground for the possibility of the event are visually transparent. In this forthcoming book I've written about the intimacy of rural aesthetics and ethics, from which I'll quote briefly:

> I had always been struck how, when faced with a camera, villagers were determined to eliminate or at least mitigate contingency. I often had the sense (and this was a cause of frustration) that there were two kinds of photographs: those I wanted and those villagers wanted. The frustration was intense in an analogue age when color film was imported, expensive, and scarce. Every success on one side of this visual expectation was a loss for the other. Villagers seemed determined to derail my vision of them and what I wanted to do with the camera in favor of something that I saw as conventional and archaic. The everyday manifestation of this conflict usually went like this: I would produce my camera because something had caught my eye that could somehow be integrated into my thesis (usually some event or ritual whose picturing would contribute to my analysis).
>
> The prospective subjects of the image would then signal that a pause was required and that I should not use my camera until everyone was properly prepared. The 'event' would then immediately unravel as some people disappeared and other family members or friends were called upon to join

> the emergent restructured happening that would soon be photographed. Women who had disappeared would reappear with different smarter saris or *ghagra cholis*, and men would discard dirty work clothes in favor, if they were available, of crisp white *kurtas*. They would then arrange themselves in hieratic formal poses demanding that their full body appear in the photograph. In the process I could feel the event slipping from my control. Although hardly rivalling the existential crisis that Orwell famously faced when forced (by an expectant Burmese crowd) to shoot an elephant, there was no doubting who was in control in these encounters. In the imaginary binary of 'mine' and 'their' photographs, 'they' seemed to be winning almost every time.
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> Susan Sontag (whose *On Photography* has done so much to feed a thousand student essay denunciations of photography's supposedly predatory nature) provided an illuminating fragment of an ethnography of photography in China that sheds useful light on these encounters. Sontag notes how images of 'loved ones' renounce informality – 'none is a candid photograph'. Sontag underlines that this is also an *ethics* for 'in China taking pictures is always a ritual; it always involves posing and necessarily, *consent*'. This reflects a collaborative and consensual dynamic, on which my central Indian interlocutors insisted. (Pinney, forthcoming)

The general moral here, as Azoulay puts it, is that sovereignty is not in the possession of any single participant, least of all is it located entirely in the photographer.

I'm also thinking here of two aspects of your long-running engagement with photographic practices on the Indian subcontinent. You have argued that the artists Cop Shiva and Ketaki Sheth both share an interest in how subjects present themselves performatively. I would add artists like Gauri Gill or Samsul Alam Helal, amongst others, into that mix. Or Taslima Akhter's work with the Garments Sramik Sangathan and their memorial quilts. Could you talk about the ways in which such photographic practices are underpinned by certain principles of collaboration and participation?

I think that the photographers you list all share a concern with collaboration, but in rather different ways. Ketaki Sheth's *Photo Studio* explores the tenacity of the studio in the age of the mobile phone, and I think one of its conclusions is that its appeal to clients is aesthetic and ethical in the way I've tried to outline above. It offers a stable, symmetrical and hieratic environment that favors

the client's own aspirations. It is a reflexive and controlled space, what André Bazin referred to as a "frame" rather than a "screen" (2005, 105). Gauri Gill's *Fields of Sight,* produced in collaboration with the Warli "tribal" artist Rajesh Vangad, aims for a kind of "resynchronization" of the archaic and the modern (Gill's photographs of factories are overlain with Vangad's "enchanted" designs). Taslima Akhter's *Memorial Quilt* project is different still: studio portraits of the victims of the Rana Plaza collapse are the starting point for an overtly solidary building project in which the victims' relatives participate. Gill and Akhter's work involves an extra-photographic "supplement", the superimposition of drawn designs by Rajesh Vangad and the integration of images into textile Bengali *kantha*, as if to acknowledge that these particular collaborations exist outside the space of the photograph itself.

The second area I want to pick up here is your work on Dalit image-making in contemporary India. Here, certain everyday, demotic, photographic practices are entangled with fraught and urgent struggles for social and political representation, visibility, and belonging. How do you view this particular kind of photographic participation alongside those practices and theories that have been predominantly developed in the space of the 20th century Euro-American space of art and academia? And would you consider this generally a phenomenon of decolonizing representation?

Well, Dalit demands are essentially for visibility *per se*, rather than for a particular kind of representation. I got embroiled in this accidentally when I took my first video camera to central India in 2004 (I have been there almost every year since 1982). I took the camera because I was attending the *Simhastha Mela* at Ujjain, part of the twelve-yearly cycle of the *Kumbh Mela* which alternates with Nasik, Haridwar and Allahabad. I had attended the previous festival in 1992 and had found the surging crowds of seven million pilgrims that obliterated a town of 400,000 compulsive and debilitating. I imagined that the 2004 event might be the last one I would attend, and thought that in the interests of a personal salvage I should shoot some film. My Canon XM2 was large enough, especially with its additional projecting microphone, to persuade most renouncers, pilgrims, and policemen that I was the conduit to CNN or the BBC. Whereas in 1992 I had been lost in bewildering, thirsty crowds, in 2004 I found myself consistently ushered to vantage points, visually obstructive pilgrims were removed from my line of sight, and initiation rituals were delayed until my equipment was in place.

Back in rural Madhya Pradesh, I enjoyed a similar opening of doors. Villagers I thought I knew well – including Ambaram – started insisting that I come and film them "thrashing" while goddesses occupied their bodies. Ambaram is one of a number of Dalit mediums who make essentially political claims that it is Dalits who are the custodians of the Gods; Dalit society as a locus in which Gods choose to manifest themselves is a powerful theme in Dalit ideology. In making this claim, they invoke a radical empiricism. They also face opposition from higher castes who suggest that the gods who appear in Dalit bodies are deceptive impersonations. It is the Dalit "counter-priests" who serve as the main conduits for the extramundane. Their power stems from performance and affect, the outward signs of manifestation that serve as an index of the divine presence. The *ghorla* thrashes – teeth chattering and body swaying, holding a bowl of burning coals and a sword – and enfleshes the printed chromolithographic images in front of which this performance occurs (**Figure 4**). But these performances are hotly contested. Higher castes strongly disparage Chamar patterns of hereditary mediumship, claiming that this is a form of traditional castework and refer to *ghorlas* as the *halis* of specific deities. A *hali* is a ploughman, a bonded laborer tied to a household of higher status, on whom the *hali* is economically dependent. The suggestion here is that *ghorlas* have entered into self-interested economic relationships with those above them, unlike higher caste mediums (more commonly female) who are liable to thrash unpredictably. Just as one can order a *hali* to plough a field for you, so *ghorlas* – if they are remunerated – will thrash to order.

The Canon XM2, which first led me to encounter Ambaram and others in their shamanistic incarnations, brings us back to the question of the event – to the profilmic (**Figure 6**). In photography, as Barthes observed, "I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (1981, 76). The event – what Barthes also refers to as photography's "sovereign Contingency" (1981, 4) – is marked by the particularity and specificity of what he calls the "body" (*corps*) whose singularity he contrasted with the generality of the "*corpus*" (1981, 4). The camera records what is placed in front of it and on its own is incapable of making distinctions about the relationship of its visual trace to psychic, social or historical normativity. It never knows and can never judge whether what it records is "typical", "normal" or "true". It is the camera's "sovereign contingency" (Barthes 1981, 4) that appealed to Ambaram: it can make a claim to an ineluctable presence and refute higher-caste critiques. He understood very well the difference between photography's "micro-event" and that "something else" (the "corpus") that it can never become, except through

Figure 4. Ambaram "thrashing" for the camera. Ambaram is a *ghorla* or medium who embodies the goddess Kali. Courtesy of Christopher Pinney.

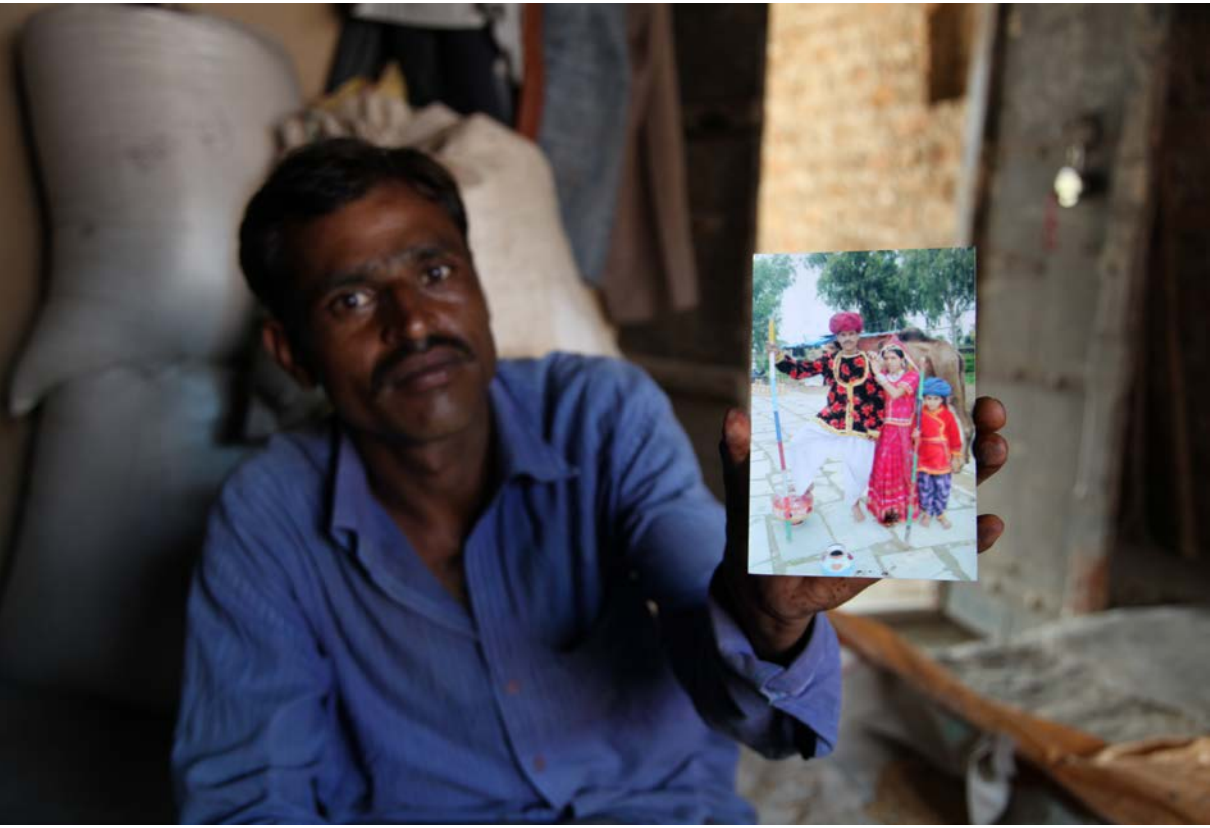

Figure 5. A villager shares an image from the pilgrimage centre of Samvaliyaji, central India. Courtesy of Christopher Pinney.

a category error or some other parallel confusion. Ambaram grasped what Barthes referred to as the "absolute Particular", "the *This* (this photograph and not photography)" (1981, 4).

I should add that I was only able to understand the complexity of Barthes' text through my interaction with Ambaram: before that, I had been persuaded by the Taggian critique that *Camera Lucida* was simply melancholic essentialism. For Ambaram, the allure of the camera lay in its ability (or better still, *its inability*) to avoid capturing the *thing that has been there* that can never be denied, the thing which in this local political context so many people *do* attempt to deny. Ambaram understood, I think, that the profilmic is wholly different from what Barthes called the "*optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers" (1981, 76). This is the distinction between the "body" and a "corpus" (Barthes 1981, 4). Ambaram clearly shared this concern with the "body", with what we might think of as the *autonomy* of everything that is placed in front of the camera. Ambaram could see uses of my camera that helped him in his political project, and he also helped me make sense of Barthes.

This last area, I think, opens up space for a broader discussion around photography and participation, not just in terms of image-making, but also in terms of photography allowing alternative modes of participation in larger political processes, and the ways in which participation in photographic practices (or events) can be a means of participating in political practices and imaginaries. I'm thinking here of your PhotoDemos work, which you write focuses on "how different groups of people actually use photography and what they have to say (and what they do) about politics" (Pinney et al. 2023, 5). Karen Strassler's work on studio photography, political identity, belonging and modernity in Indonesia, which we briefly mentioned earlier, also comes to mind. And, going back a bit further, also Stuart Hall's concept of "reconstruction work" (1984), which he discusses in the context of studio photography in post-war black settlement in the UK. There are intersections here between aesthetics and politics. So perhaps you could comment on this relationship?

The PhotoDemos Collective (Vindhya Buthpitiya, Ileana L. Selejan, Konstantinos Kalantzis, Naluwembe Binaisa, Sokphea Young and myself) tried to embrace a photographic "political unconscious" that echoed Benjamin's idea of the "optical unconscious" ([1931] 1999, 512) and the sense that photography, rather than simply confirming our vision and view of the world, *extends* and

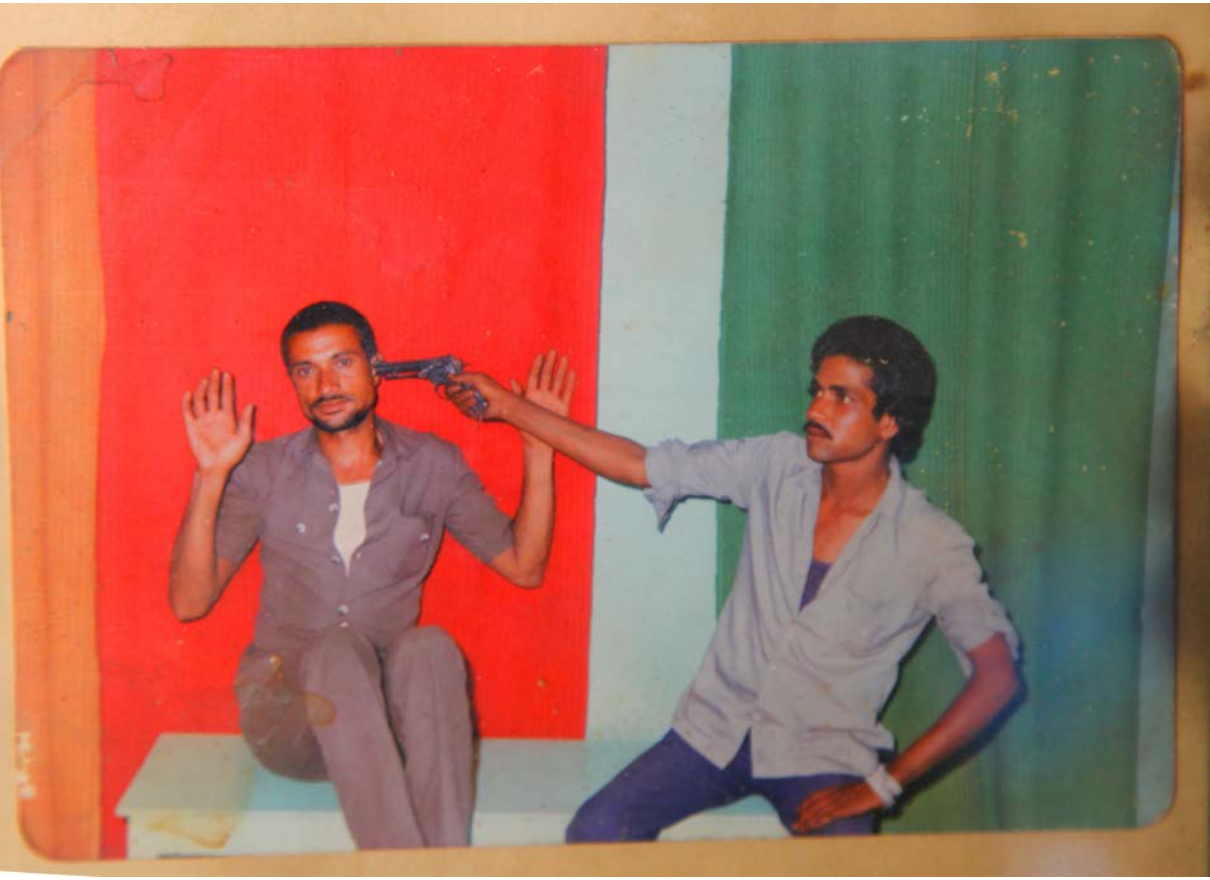

Figure 6. Two central Indian Dalits performing for the camera in a travelling photo studio at a local fair. Courtesy of Christopher Pinney.

subverts it. For us, the political unconscious directs our attention to the manner in which "subjunctive" performances in front of the camera find a place in "waking dreams", to recall Benjamin's wonderful description. Photographs, as Vilém Flusser (2000) argues, are images of the future that encourage covert explorations of what, once made conscious, we would readily recognize as conventionally "political". This very much resonates with Azoulay's arguments about the "citizenship" of photography that exists in advance of conventional citizenship. There is already ample ethnographic evidence of this, perhaps most notably through Karen Strassler's work on photography in Indonesia (2010), which has explored the role of affect and visuality in nationalism, the relationship between intimate and public spheres, and the "messianic" potential of photography. Strassler emphasizes the subjunctive nature of photography, what she terms the "as if" quality of the image. This involves photography's *inability* to do anything other than capture the proleptic future-made-present of the performative self-presentation so commonly found in popular images. I'm sorry if that's a bit of a mouthful. Strassler's *Refracted Visions* (2010) is packed with insights into the political identifications, projections, fluidities and erasures that photography facilitates. In the process it delivers a subtle analysis of the role of visual practices in political imaginaries. The covert dimension of the political unconscious speaks in part to the problem identified by Judith Butler of how different behaviors and issues come to be framed as "perceptible reality" (2009, 64) or, conversely, how they may never enter the field of visibility. Strassler provides tangible evidence that the study of photographs can give us access to the political unconscious, and in the process make visible what would otherwise be occluded.

Photography's political unconscious realizes what would otherwise remain latent. Latency is an important metaphor here, I think. It is through photography that images of "imagined" social entities such as nations become visible and tangible. Photography is central to emerging identities and identifications, to selves in the process of being forged. This subjunctive and unconscious modality suggested to the PhotoDemos Collective that the gerund *photographing* might better capture this processual and emergent quality than the noun *photograph* or the abstract noun *photography*. For the PhotoDemos Collective (2023), Kalantzis's work in Greece provided a powerful documentation of the way in which photography allows access to a level of the social imagination, a kind of political unconscious, in which Greeks (specifically Cretans) mobilize affects that are in tension with a formal political rhetoric. In other works, he further shows how Cretan Sfakian men

use photography to both perform and deform nineteenth-century warrior archetypes, reanimating motifs and identifications that have the potential to reorient the terms of conventional political debate. Kalantzis's Sfakian research reveals a long history of asymmetry in the area's representation: Sfakians have always been the subjects of others' photographs and texts – never, until very recently, the producers. However, out of this asymmetry is forged a dialogical mediation in which outsiders drawn to local idioms encounter locals posing in ways that fit their own sense of self, and outsiders further inflate this local sense through their presence and through their images which locals re-import. This echoes the negotiations through which Sfakians ameliorate an unequal image economy by partially erasing the role of photographers through their emphasis on the aura of ancestors as in some sense the authors of photographs. This provides another way of thinking about the hybrid and collaborative spaces that photography opens up. In my own research in Nepal, I was struck by how photographs acted as intermediaries, moving underneath and beyond conventionally opposed political identifications. Photographs could act as subtle messengers of conciliation, escaping the simplistic political boundaries of the everyday.

Thank you.

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Short biographies

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