#14

Citizens of Photography:

the Camera and the Political Imagination

'Citizens of Photography' engages photographs as political actors and complex agents of change. It approaches images not just as records of what has already happened but as symptoms of what might be yet to come. Researchers funded by an ERC Advanced Grant undertook fieldwork in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Greece, India, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Focusing on the relationship between the camera and the political imagination the research illuminates questions relating to the epidemiology of images, their 'demotic' rather than 'vernacular' identity, their role in instituting revolutionary newness (and conversely in inscribing the repetition of established archetypes), and, finally, the nature of the 'photographic event' and the rather different temporal shape of the 'event of photography'. 'Citizens of Photography' asks what it is that is normally unseen, yet see-able in photography? It also aspires to encourage further ethnographic investigations of what remains the central means through which humans represent their aspirations to themselves and to others.

   'Citizens of Photography' has been provoked by recent work by photographic theorists, including Ariella Azoulay (Azoulay 2008). She has argued that photography makes possible a new form of 'civil imagination' and offers a subjunctive form

of citizenship, because of its inclusiveness and contingency. Azoulay develops her argument in the context of historical images and also in relation to contemporary photojournalism. 'Citizens of Photography' starts with her insights and seeks to explore them at a local level in relation to 'vernacular' or 'demotic' photography. One central aim of the project concerns the relationship between 'representation' through everyday images and 'representation' through politics.

The images presented here reveal that the camera is largely un-colonized by the state. The Foucauldian/Taggian perspective, which claimed that it was, and has weighed so heavily on the theory of photography, fails to explain the diversity of photography in actually existing practices (Tagg 1988). However, whereas the standard anthropological reflex anticipates an endless diversity of appropriation, driven by the creativity of human subjects, this collection highlights a set of recurring tropes and architectures that point to photography's ambivalently determining presence. Difference does not necessarily fragment a practice: it may indeed reveal a complex and constraining 'tensility'. Hence, across regional practices, we can see echoes and commonalities: the recurrent concern with the contingency of the photographic event, the camera's predisposition to imagine futures rather than simply memorialize the past (Strassler 2010:108), and the fusion of performance and the real; in short, the complex dance of opposites that testifies to the 'disturbance' (Barthes 1981:12) that photography brings to human life.

Cambodia

① **Colourized photograph of a Chinese migrant family, c.1930, ancestors of project researcher Sokphea Young.**
Taken in a photographic studio in Phnom Penh during the French colonial period, the photograph was 'upgraded' from black and white in order to reprint and share with relatives (years after the subjects in the image had passed away). To recall Roland Barthes' it exemplifies an elongated 'anterior future'(1981:96) and embodies the ambivalent temporality of photography. It survived through apocalyptic and political calamities, from peace to war, from war to genocidal regime, and to peace again. It is a treasured photograph archived by descendants and is also an indication that photography was not accessible to everyone, especially rural Cambodians.
Re-photographed by Sokphea Young, 2018.

② Children of cadres of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia (from a family photographic archive).
This photograph was taken in the 1970s when the Khmer Rouge took control of the regime and attempted to eliminate all lifestyle and class differences, levelling the populace to peasant status. Every citizen of Khmer Rouge was expected to work in rice fields. The photographing of individual citizens under Khmer Rouge rule was very rare, as the camera was generally only used to document the leaders' activities, and to make propaganda documents. All Cambodians were ordered to wear black shirts and trousers. Variety in colours was believed to create class inequality. The Khmer Rouge cadres imposed the same dress code on their children.
Re-photographed by Sokphea Young, 2018.

③ A family reunion after the Khmer Rouge, Stoung district of Kampong Thom, Cambodia, 1989.
During the Khmer Rouge regime, about two million people died, as a result of starvation, forced labour, illness and execution. Trust within and among family members was fragile, as children were encouraged to spy for the Khmer Rouge, and to report misconduct such as stealing food. Without proper investigation, the accused were routinely executed. Family members were deployed to work in different parts of the country, and they were unable to communicate concerning their livelihoods and conditions until the regime was overthrown by Vietnamese troops in 1979. This photograph records a family reunion of two brothers who lived apart from 1970 to 1988, without knowing that each of them had survived. Photographed just after they met, one part of the family (from the Thai-Cambodia border) had to travel at least five days to reach the Stoung district of Kampong Thom. The colour of the backdrop and the outfits of the children depict a new form of integration, reunion and celebration. Contrasting with the black and white of the Khmer Rouge outfits, the variety of coloured apparel in this photograph can be read as a form of 're-civilization' in the post-genocidal regime, where survivors like those in this photograph liberate themselves from the dark colours (of sadness and terror) imposed by the Khmer Rouge.
Re-photographed by Sokphea Young, 2018.

Nigeria

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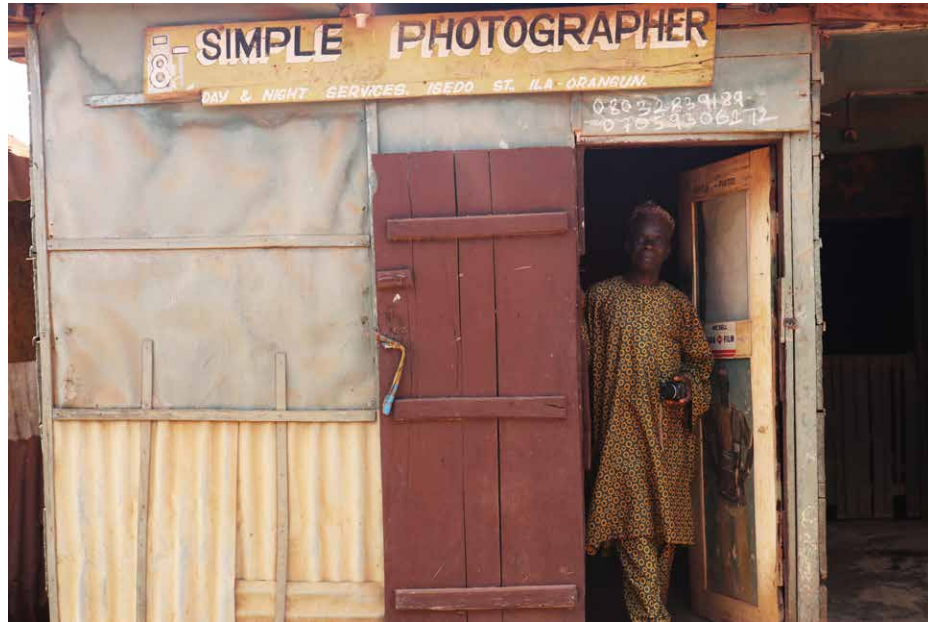
④ Simple Photo stands in the doorway to his studio in Ìlá Òràngún, Nigeria.

Eulogized in Stephen Sprague's seminal 1970s work on Yoruba photography for his excellent *ibeji* twin and triplet portraiture, Simple Photo has a studio close to the royal palace in the centre of this ancient city. He is aware that this photograph will travel to other places and thoughtfully directs the researcher in its composition. The vestibule is a time capsule lined with photographs, which span his career and life. Beyond is the formal studio, now an empty room, its only adornment a simple backdrop of a potted palm frond painted on the wall.
Photograph by Naluwembe Binaisa, 2017.

⑤ Funeral brochure for S.O. Balogun, former Chairman, Ila Area Council.

'PhotoSpeak' in the centre pages depicts the key stages of his life and biography. Across Nigeria most commemoration brochures produced for funerals but also for other landmark anniversaries have a 'PhotoSpeak' or 'PhotoVoice' insert. The studio photographer who compiled this brochure, Hajj Hammed and other local interlocutors remarked that S.O. Balogun's future success was already visible in the first photograph of his 'youthful days.
Re-photographed by Naluwembe Binaisa. 2017
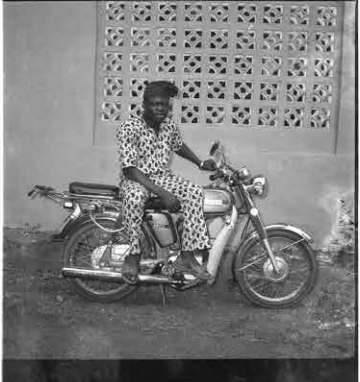
⑥ Imagine, if you can, Simple Photo (image 4) handling these negatives, carefully and creatively rendering them into their final form. Who frames the limits and priorities of political imaginaries? In the context of an exhibition in a land far away the embodied realities, dreams, heritage of Simple Photo studio fade into the background despite foretelling this possibility. The studio serves as a space of collapsed temporalities, past, present, future; where the domination of a white visual regime is subtly decentred through Black African hands. Resistance, persistence and imagination are the hallmarks that link hearts and minds. The studio provides a stage for counter-photographic imaginaries where the mobilities of what is yet to be are nested within grounded cosmologies. Negatives scanned by Naluwembe Binaisa, 2017.

India

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⑦ King cobra, or photographic malfunction?
Tejas Dasmi is a festival celebrating the pastoral deity Tejaji, who through the allied figure of Nag Maharaj (King Cobra) provides protection from snake bites. In central India, in 1977 at least, the festival also involved a *matki phod*, a human tower associated with Krishna. Photographs carefully preserved in a village album document the tower being constructed by about 30 persons. It was while this living pyramid struggled to take form that the participants became aware of a mysterious presence, a zone of energy of the kind that someone 15–20 feet high might exert. The final photograph reveals a soaring mottled snake-like stripe on the left side of the image. For the participants and the many excited spectators, the photograph clarified what they had experienced: the King Cobra had been the mysterious presence assisting in its own effervescent celebration. Professional photographers in the nearby town are highly sceptical of this rural ontology of photography. observing that when developing 120 medium-format film the negative can easily get scratched, producing confusing noise on the surface of the image. Deep scratches can also start to 'melt' at high temperatures. Split negatives often produced a mottled pattern on the final printed image.
A photograph taken by Krishna Studio, Nagda, in 1977, re-photographed by Christopher Pinney in 2019.

⑧ Rural *puja* rooms in central India give space to Photoshopped images showing miraculous cobras, images which are sold by local photo studios.
They might be seen as the digital version of the Tejas Dasmi Nag Maharaj image (Image 7). However, whereas the Nag Maharaj image arose from contingencies in the dark room, its digital successors are a more deliberate invention.
Photograph by Christopher Pinney, 2018.

(9)

Nepal

(10)

(9) Gokul's and Narji's outstretched arms hold a memorial photograph of Hira, central India.

The portrait of a young man called Hira featured on the cover of *Camera Indica* (Pinney 1997) in a *mis-en-abyme*, a kind of visual black hole, through which the image fell backwards to an impossible moment of past capture. Pinney had known him when he first conducted field research in the early 1980s in central India and shortly after Hira was killed by a train. The image he encountered of Hira in 2019 in the breakaway Dalit settlement near the village railway station, where his brothers now live, seemed to move in the opposite direction, falling forward into a future to which he served as a guide. Gokul, the son of Hira's brother Naggulal, 'thrashed' with the presence of Hira at least twice a year (during each of the 'nine nights of the goddess') and served as a conduit for an eager audience of Hira's advice on relationships, and medical and employment anxieties. The memorial photograph of Hira directly animated the thrashing, Hira's *pret* (soul) passing from the surface of the photographic image into Gokul's body.
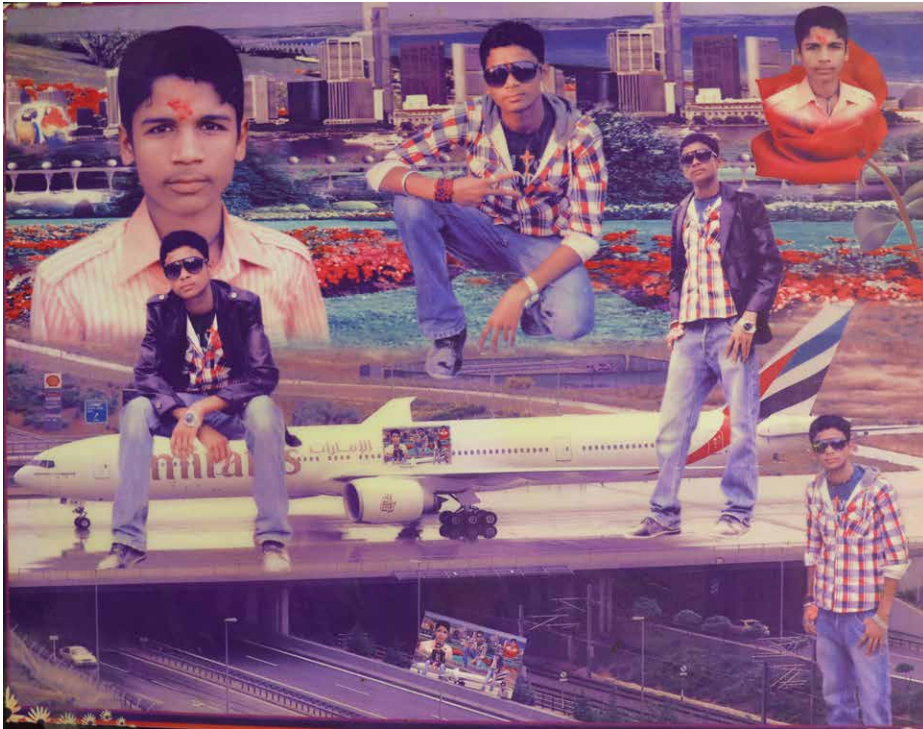
Photograph by Christopher Pinney, 2019.

(10) A mobile phone generated montage bringing together ritually important Nepali structures, gods, and family members.

One might read Krishnaprasad's smartphone generated 'tree of life' as expressing a yearning for place and family. Krishnaprasad started the series of which this is a part in Qatar where he worked as a security guard. He then opened a shop in Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu Valley on his return. The shop and his home were very badly damaged in the earthquake of 2015. In the tree template a statue depicts the Buddha underneath Gaya's Bodhi Tree and is surrounded by key religious structures in Bhaktapur, including the Nyatapola Pagoda, the Bhairavnath Temple and two smaller temples in the city's Durbar Square. These images of his home town are interspersed with images of his wife and daughter.

Courtesy of Krishnaprasad, Bhaktapur, 2018

⑫ A family of pilgrims pose in the Mahakali Digital Photo Studio at Dakshinkali, Nepal.
Photography is prohibited in the shrine at this popular pilgrimage site and 20 nearby photo studios provide mementoes. Some such as Mahakali also sell chickens to be sacrificed at the shrine. Philippe Despoix has noted that Siegfried Kracauer, in his writing on photography, focused on the manner in which 'the definitive fixing of an *ephemeral* moment' became one of 'the sharpest indicators of the crisis in the modern relation to transcendence and to eternal time that religion promised' (Despoix 2014:8). The crisis at the heart of photography's intersection with the sacred concerned the secularizing potential of contingency. Modern Dakshinkali might be viewed as a machine for the suppression of contingency: the photographic practices evident there can be seen to seek to recuperate 'eternal' time through the minimization of a dangerous contingency.
Video screenshot by Christopher Pinney, 2018.

⑪ Elaborate photomontage of a prospective migrant from Birgunj, Nepal, visualizing a future in the Arabian Gulf.
Photography is frequently used to record or imagine mobility. Historically, bicycles were frequently brought into the studio. Then studios started to use motorbikes as a prop. In turn, the studio itself became a staging space for travels in airplanes and automobiles. Frequently, this was tied to the desire and/or necessity of transnational migration. Such images speak to the aspirational and subjunctive space of photography, actualizing what-is-yet-to-be.
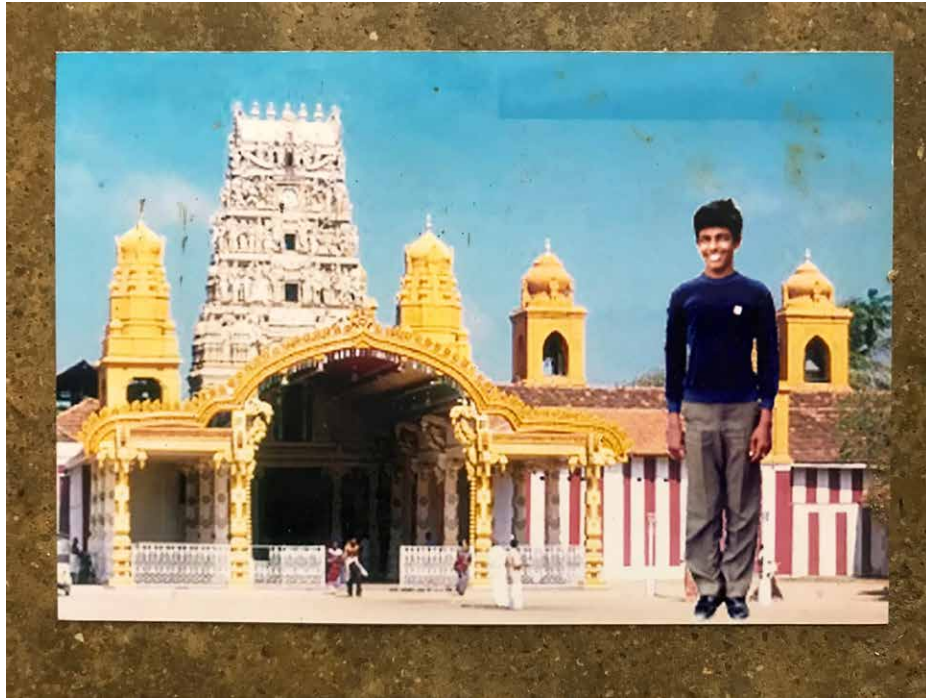Re-photographed by Christopher Pinney, 2019.

Sri Lanka

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(13) **A studio-made composite image shows a figure of a young boy placed in front of the Nallur Kandasamy Temple in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.**
The temple is one of the most significant Hindu sacred sites in Jaffna and the island and is dedicated to the god Skanda. The photograph was recovered from a picture framer where it had been abandoned for a number of years since the war. The studio owner, Sivanesan, keeps a small suitcase of images such as these which have remained uncollected in the 20 years he has owned the shop. Date of original image unknown.
Re-photographed by Vindhya Buthpitiya 2018.

(14) **Maaveerar Naal (Great Heroes Day), London, 2019.**
The LTTE's iconography, steeped in yellow and red of the national flower of Tamil Eelam, karthigai, draws heavily on stylized portraiture. The poisonous Gloriosa superba or karthigai flower also has an association with suicide due to the plant's toxic root. The flower's resemblance to a flame served as a symbol of the 'flame of sacrifice' that features in the Maaveerar Naal ceremony. Martyrs' shrines adorned with honour rolls, god-like depictions and cinematic cut-outs were integrated into local neighbourhoods, encouraging memorialization, civic devotion and voluntary enlistment. Such image-making was undertaken by studio photographers and those involved in painting cinema hoardings for the South Indian Tamil films screened in Jaffna before the beginning of the war. Following the destruction of the cemeteries and the prohibition on mourning as well as any visible hints of the LTTE, commemorations took place in secret. In contrast, grand memorial events, centred around these martyrs' pictures, were organized overseas where migrant Tamils could openly pay their respects to those who had sacrificed themselves for the nation. These events also functioned as fundraisers for the war effort.
Photographs by Vindhya Buthpitiya, 2019.

⑮ A Tamil family mourns before a portrait at Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day that marks the end of the war.

In the postwar, these humble everyday photographs, made for the most part by local photography studios during the course of the conflict, from ID portraits to family snaps, feature in a vibrant political re-routing. The mobilisation of personal and official photographs within spaces of defiant commemoration where the state's unease about Tamil nationalism endures, have underscored the state's prevarications on reconciliation and transitional justice. For the Sri Lankan Tamil community, photographs underpin their political claims. The use of these photographs has also itself become a genre for photo/journalists as they place such acts within a globalised aesthetic and lineage of resistance against state atrocities ranging from Argentina to Kashmir.

Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya, 2018.

Nicaragua

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16 **Margarita Montealegre, from the series 'Sajonia' (2021).**
In her series 'Sajonia', photographer Margarita Montealegre appropriates pictures from her family album. Managua was almost entirely destroyed during an earthquake in 1972. Only a few historic buildings and sites have survived, Sajonia is one such area. Montealegre's family album was rescued by her mother from the ruins of their home. Through juxtapositions with contemporary views of her childhood neighbourhood, she reflects on the passage of time, and the workings of memory.

17 **Portrait of Jorge Alberto Avendaño López holding hand-made collages of historic photographs from the port city of Corinto at his barber shop.**
Avendaño López spoke proudly of Corinto's historic significance as Nicaragua's first major port, one of the largest in the Central American region. At the same time, he expressed disappointment that in the absence of a formal museum, this history was largely unknown by fellow citizens. An avid collector of photographic reproductions from magazines, tourist brochures, and advertisements, throughout the years he created numerous large-scale collages, which he displayed in his barber shop. Clients and passers-by will frequently stop by, picking up conversations about and around these images.
Photograph by Ileana L. Selejan, 2018.

18 **One of the largest marches organized during the 2018 large-scale anti-governmental protests in Nicaragua, started on the 9th of May in Plaza de las Victorias (Victory Square) in the capital city Managua.**
People gathered around the monumental statue of Alexis Argüello, a famous boxer, former mayor of Managua and vocal opponent of current president Daniel Ortega. His death, still un-explained, has in recent years become symbolic of the regime's impunity. For many hours that day, people scaled the monument, holding flags, signs and pictures of the victims of government repression.
Photograph by Ileana L. Selejan, 2018.

Greece

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19 **Giannis Psaros photographing with his mobile phone a black-and-white portrait of himself taken by Kalantzis in 2007, in Crete.**
The scene unfolded at a coffee house in a highland Sfakian village, where he has been doing intermittent fieldwork since 2006. During his visits, he has been returning photographs to interlocutors. Giannis' gesture speaks to scarcity and asymmetry: locals are historically the sitters rather than the photographers of their life-worlds, and they are in constant search of the few available early images of themselves and their ancestors. The gratifying sense of contribution that emanates from giving back images warrants reflection on the political and affective roles of visitors with cameras in Sfakia. When discussing such images, Sfakian interlocutors often stress the shock of encountering a purer, younger self.
Photograph by Konstantinos Kalantzis, 2017.

20 **The original Facebook.**
Photographs and other objects 'curated' by Sfakian men at a kiosk inside a gorge. The kiosk started as a municipal policy of offering assistance to hikers and became a space of cross-cultural encounters and the performance of hospitality involving tourists and two local men who were employed to oversee it. Over the decades, many images and objects were left in the area by passing travelers. The artifacts are carefully curated by the locals (one graffiti, describes the kiosk as 'the old Facebook'). Some images encapsulate Westerners' pursuit of the notion of rugged tradition. Photos also capture the affective interactions between the two parties and feed locals' understanding of tourists' expectations. One genre of photography found at the site is specifically related to a notion of recreational travel as a return. Years after their original visit, some returning tourists search for the original images they left at the kiosk walls and proceed to leave new ones of themselves alongside the old ones.
Photograph by Konstantinos Kalantzis, 2017.
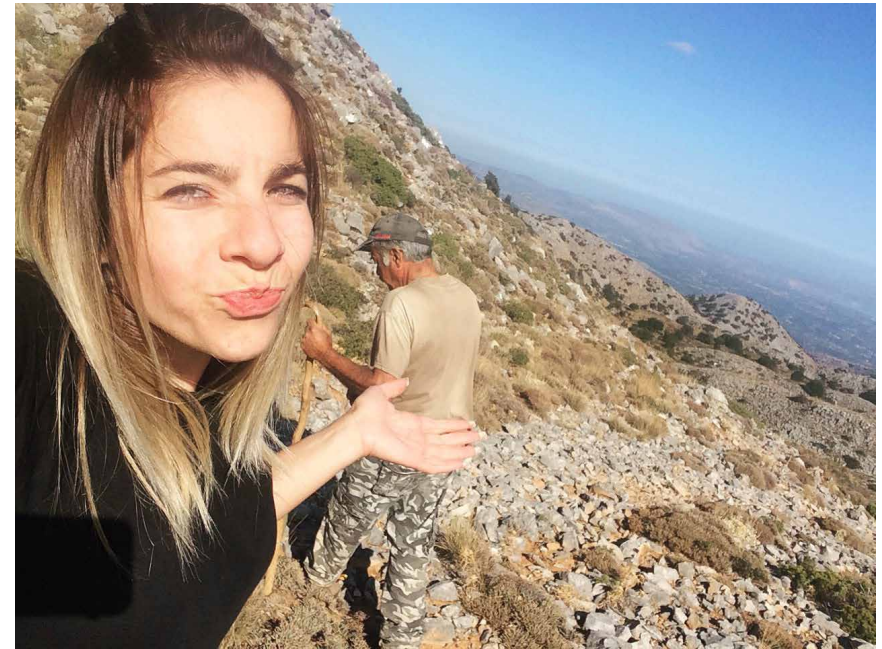
21 **'Since Dad doesn't have a son'.**
This photograph, with its humorous caption chosen by the photographer for the exhibition 'The Sfakian Screen', curated by Kalantzis in 2018, speaks to a new way of approaching the mountain in Sfakia, Crete. It represents an emergent genre of imagery in Sfakians' social-media pages, in which young women highlight the locally perceived contradiction of a subject posing on the mountain, and yet not being a man. Sfakia, a pastoral and tourist area, invokes a myth of highland purity, and the mountain is its idealized realm of (male) ruggedness and warriorhood. Since 2010, there has been an explosion of digital photographs taken by locals. In many digital photos, women publicly comment on the dominant androcentric iconography of the region, and supply other visions of what village life could look like. At the same time, far from uniformly embracing digital photography as emancipation, many Sfakian interlocutors question social-media visual practices and express preference for historical analogue photographs often depicting male ancestors.
Photograph by Iosifina Lefaki, 2017.

Pakistan

22 **Pashtun transnationalism: imagining a different nation with the help of photography.** A photoshopped image from a studio in Quetta, Baluchistan, Pakistan. The boy on the left is wrapped in the flag of Afghanistan. The map shows the whole of Afghanistan and the Pashtun-speaking population of western Pakistan. The Durand Line (established in 1893) in the middle, marking the border, is shown with barbed wire. A bloody raised fist tries to get rid of the border: the blood symbolizes the pain of this arbitrary line. At the top of the image, there is text in Pashto declaring 'Pashtun love', while on the map are the two slogans of 'Revolution' and 'Freedom'. Like images 23 and 24, this is the work of Mehdi Hassan of *Sajjad Shah Mehdi Hassan Color Photographer*. Mehdi learnt analogue techniques from his father as a child, using physical props such as wooden guns, fake flowerpots, and cut-outs of Bollywood film celebrities. Mehdi took over the studio after his father's retirement, and moved to digital, learning Adobe Photoshop in which he is as skilled as he is in understanding his Pashtun client's political imagination. Re-photographed by Danial Shah, 2021.



23 **War, sport and women.**
24 Montages expressing young Pashtun male aspiration by Mehdi Hassan of *Sajjad Shah Mehdi Hassan Color Photographer*, Quetta, Pakistan. Mehdi's work draws upon a repertoire of images that invoke a mix of regional and national politics, admiration for the Taliban, religion, guns, and women. Mehdi explained that the customers who want to be photographed with an unveiled woman do so because they want to suggest to their friends that they have a girlfriend. The visual metaphors are sophisticated (eg. The Taliban as an eagle, its victims are depicted as sheep). Mehdi explains that most of his customers are not native to Quetta city, but are incomers from rural areas. Some are from Afghanistan, many are labourers seeking work in coal mines in Baluchistan. The photo samples displayed in Quetta studios index the political currents that flow through Baluchistan.
Rephotographed by Danial Shah, 2021.

Bangladesh

(25)

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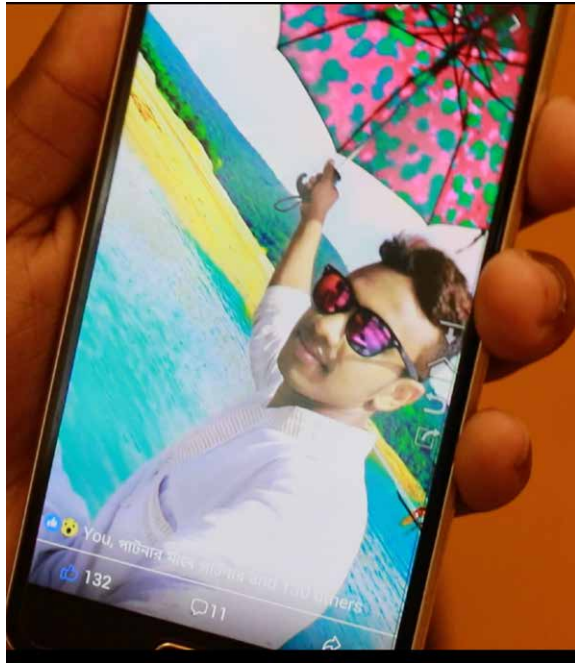
(25) **Looking beyond Bangladesh.**
The Instagram profile of an 18-year-old Bangladeshi student, revealing images recording one of his several visits to Jaflong in northern Bangladesh. The River Piyain, which separates Bangladesh and the Indian state of Meghalaya, is a popular tourist destination for younger Bangladeshis, many of whom avail of the services of one of the dozens of photographers who use printers on floating barges to produce images for their clients. Tourists sit on rocks in the middle of the river and exchange Whatsapp details with Indian tourists who flock from the Meghalaya side. Photography is deeply entangled in this fantasy of transnational border crossing and escape to a 'beyond'. Pinney first met the student on a train from Sylhet to Dhaka: subsequently, after many tribulations, the student emigrated to Saudi Arabia, where he worked in a McDonalds outlet. Photograph by Christopher Pinney, 2018.

(26) **Dreams of the future from the past.**
A selection of medium format negatives scanned in a studio in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, 2019. The iconic riverine landscape of 'Golden Bengal' (*sonar bangla*) is central to the Bangladeshi imagination. Scenery, mainly devoted to trees and water, also foregrounds elaborate balustrades or lamp-posts; river scenes depicted at sunset always include a country boat near the horizon and newly constructed tall buildings – signs of the remittance economy - nestling in the surrounding forest. The entanglement of the rural with the infrastructure of modernity is nowhere more apparent than in a beautiful image in which two young women pose with clay water pots. They are both backed into the corner of the studio, pictured against the wide expanse of the Brahmaputra which abuts another studio backdrop of a modern house whose further rural landscape with palm tree and towering monsoon clouds is completely en-framed by the modern window through which we glimpse it.
Negatives scanned by Christopher Pinney, 2019.

②⑦ Group studio portrait of Ready Made Garment Workers.
Akhi Akhter (aged 18), shown centre of back row, worked on the 6th floor of the Rana Plaza building at New Wave Style Ltd factory. She and her friends were photographed in a local studio on Bangla New Year (Pohela Boishakh 1420), 14 April 2013. Akhi and six of the friends in this photograph died in the Rana Plaza collapse. A copy of the photograph was given by Akhi's family to the activist and photographer Taslima Akhter after the disaster in which more than one thousand workers died. Discussions with a Dhaka activist about the collective nature of the portrait pointed to a double injustice: destruction, through what was seen as an act of corporate murder of so many people; and the denial of the kind of individual visual representation that was every worker's right. 'Her relatives only had the group photo,' the activist lamented, 'there wasn't even a photo of her on her own.' This regret in part reflected the assumption that the lack of other ID photos that could have been used was a symptom of further disempowerment: she would not have had a bank account, or any voter ID. In other words, not only did the absence of any individuated image index a life destroyed at a cruelly young age; the absence of representation also indexed itself, the lack of the visibility to which she was entitled, *tout court*. This establishes the ubiquity of photography, even (or perhaps, especially) where it is absent or incomplete.
Courtesy of Taslima Akhter.

②⑧ Roy Studio, in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, impresses with its peeling lettering, the red surface of the Bengali characters of 'Digital' flaking away from the columns on which they were painted.
Photoruma Digital Studio, adjacent to Roy Studio, is adorned with the mysterious slogan 'Photography: A Silent Music'. This illuminates Jacques Attali's argument that music acts in advance of social reality, its code being quicker and more supple. If this is true, Photoruma presents a paradox, being a snapshot of what was once cutting-edge and subversive, a snapshot now faded and crumbling. Many studios displayed whole walls covered with enlargements that mixed images of local customers with promotional images of film actors. The *filmi* images – largely of actresses – are displayed to attract customers who want modelling portfolios. The actresses serve as archetypes for others' emulative behaviour. Perhaps this is the 'silent music' of photography: the performative opportunities it offers beckon to Mymensingh's customers who are willing to enact their desires in front of the camera. It is part pied-piper effect: photography's music beguiles and seduces with its sound of another, more glamorous, world. It also, to recall Attali, 'makes audible [what will] gradually become visible' (Attali 1985:11). Photograph by Christopher Pinney, 2019.

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Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between "representation" through everyday images and "representation" through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:
Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

More information on
https://citizensofphotography.org

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