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Photography, Perpetratorship and Responsibility

Rabiaâ Benlahbib

> *And when the sitting is over – when the picture is done – there's nothing left except the photograph... the photograph and a kind of embarrassment. They leave... and I don't know them.*
>
> – Richard Avedon[1]

Ever since its invention in 1839, photograph has shaped reality and the way in which we experience it. Photography has authority. An air of neutrality surrounds the medium, stemming from its inherent technological core. Hints of imperfection can be easily considered to be truthful translations from the real context or attributed to characteristics of the apparatus. With authority comes power. Photographs not only support the news, they have the ability to channel them. Frequently referred to in medical, historical and forensic analysis, they are used as plausible evidence to convince and potentially convict. They are, moreover, a useful instrument for surveillance and control.

In their work, photographers make numerous choices, consciously as well as subconsciously, regarding what to focus on, what to exclude, when to shoot, how to edit and what results to share with their audiences. Depending on what the photographer wishes to convey or question, spatial-temporal decisions are made, allowing us to deeply engage with the images and experience the captured situation in the present, from up close – as if we were there in person. One could question how a medium – believed to objectively represent reality – could be subject to such a vast array of options. In other words, can a photograph ever be the objective means of representation that we take it for?

Through their photographed installations, Jojakim Cortis and Adrian Sonderegger appear to address this question, while redesigning the borderlands between reality and fiction. World history in photographic record now turns into a crafted stage and once again into photography, framed with props – functioning both as toolbox and archive. Skilfully pointing out how our perception can be manipulated, the artists invite us to remember and review the original iconic images upon which their series is based and contemplate their historical reception. In this way, they dare us to critically reflect on the daily

1 Cited in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1978]), p.187.

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imagery that we absorb and share, in which the tools of (re)production may not be embedded as evidently.

For decades, psychologists have been researching on the reliability of our memories. Nowadays, we know that recalling the past is a technical operation connecting different flickering dots of sights, smells and sounds we think we remember. But these flickers of memory are easily subverted and susceptible to alteration and reprogramming. Distinguishing real from manipulated imagery can be a difficult task to fulfil. Even when we know that images are doctored, we memorise them as real. Moreover, we often remember them as such. Our childhood photographs, for instance, highly influence the way in which we remember our childhood, making us believe we have recollections of events we couldn't possibly remember. Photographs, in this sense, have the power to change memory as well as history.

Generally, the human brain needs less than 20 milliseconds to identify a photograph, subsequently allowing for ideas, associations and assumptions to arise.[2] By sharing, presenting or archiving images, reality is recycled, reinterpreted and redefined to transform our perception of what should be looked at and how, and what being looked at requires. In the process, ideas, assumptions and ethics become engrained in our minds, memories and lives.

The poster of Cortis and Sonderegger's latest exhibition, *Double Take,* contains a remake of the infamous Abu Ghraib photograph of the 'Hooded Man'.[3] In it, an alleged perpetrator becomes both victim and blinded witness: positioned on a stage in an orchestrated act of perpetration. Attributed to an anonymous prison guard, this picture is distressing not only because of its violent nature or the uncanny notion that it represents reality, but also because the viewer cannot help but become a witness to the atrocity. Our initial reaction may be to look away in horror. By watching, however, we become spectators and witnesses. Despite being technically non-involved and legally non-complicit, seeing photographs of violence may not only lead to anger, fear or distress, but may also evoke a sense of guilt. We could ask ourselves whether it is ethically acceptable to look at such pictures or share them.

Seen in this light, the borders between perpetrator, witness, and accomplice become blurred. If photography has power, then wherein lies the responsibility that comes with this power? Could we say that

2 For more information, see Mary C. Potter and others, 'Detecting Meaning in Rsvp at 13 Ms Per Picture', *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics*, 76.2 (2014), 270–9

3 Jojakim Cortis and Adrian Sonderegger, *Double Take*, 2019, exhibition poster, C/O Berlin.

photography itself can be an act of aggression? If so, on which counts? On the count of violating privacy? Of pretending to be neutral? Of causing insecurity, self-loathing, jealousy, greed, fear, detachment, indifference or numbness? Of stealing souls?

With the passage of time, contexts change, and the meaning of once important photographs is likely to shift. They often lose their urgency and become less emotionally charged. And still, when revisiting the above-mentioned photograph through Cortis and Sonderegger's milder remake, questions are revived about photographer's intent in the original image. Was taking the shot part of a distasteful scene of frolicking and power play? Did it obey a wish to share this scene with the outside world? Also, in the hands of Cortis and Sonderegger, the image seems to diverge from the original slightly more markedly than most of their other images. If that is indeed the case, what is the reasoning behind this choice?

Perpetratorship in photography seems hard to avoid. This goes not only for the photographer, but also for the viewer. When do photography and photojournalism turn into sensationalism? When does looking at a photograph become voyeurism? And could sharing photographs be seen as incitement? Analysing or judging photography is difficult, if not impossible, without fully understanding the photographer's intent and reasoning as well as the work's geographical, historical and ethical context.

A case in point is the iconic photo by photojournalist David Scherman and former model-turned-war-photographer Lee Miller, in which she is portrayed sitting in Adolf Hitler's bathtub on 30 April 1945.[4] The photo was taken after they had discovered Hitler's apartment in Munich. Hitler's framed photo is displayed in a corner. The dirt from Dachau on Miller's combat boots has stained the mat on the tiled bathroom floor. The photographers have never fully explained the circumstances surrounding the photograph, which has been interpreted as provocative and expressing contained victory. What we do know is that on that same day, Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun killed themselves in a bunker.

A further example of a potentially aggressive photograph is Nadav Kander's 2016 cover photo of Donald Trump for *Time* Magazine.[5] After publication, the atypical pose of the president, the vintage colours, the lighting that seems to cast a large shadow in the background, the Louis XV chair showing a rip and a stain and the visible fragility of Trump's hair gave rise to a great deal of speculation about the photographer's

4 Lee Miller with David E. Scherman, *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub: Hitler's Apartment*, 1945, photograph, Lee Miller Archives.

5 Nadav Kander, *President-elect Donald Trump I*, 7 December 2016, photograph, Time Magazine.

motives. So far, Kander has not spoken about his original intent in public. We only know that beauty and destruction are recurrent themes in his work. Looking back on the commission in an interview with the British Journal of Photography, he mentions: 'I was really divided about how I should do it – how to do this *Time* cover justice without putting my political views out there.' In the same interview, he states: 'I've never been a photographer who has left much to chance. I don't hunt my portraits, I set them up.'[6] But without Kander giving clarity on the matter, we can only keep speculating about his exact intentions.

Lastly, let me to tap into 'Rwanda 20 Years: Portraits of Reconciliation', a photography project conducted by my own organisation, Creative Court, in which we sought to understand forgiveness in a post-genocide context, and looked for ways in which to visualise it. In doing so, we invited two very different photographers, Pieter Hugo from South-Africa and Croation-Dutch photographer Lana Mesić, to capture genocide survivors and 'their' perpetrators, 20 years after the genocide, side by side, in what according to the New York Times was 'a series of unlikely, almost unthinkable tableaus'.[7] We had a local producer on the team, bringing invaluable knowledge into our decision-making process. Also, we collaborated with Association Modeste et Innocent (AMI), a Rwandan organisation that runs reconciliation programs for survivors and offenders. AMI assisted us in finding participants for our project, accompanied the photographers to the participants' residencies and, with their cultural and psychological expertise, helped create a trusting environment.

In answer to the many questions raised by the photographs, I often find myself contextualising the work and shedding light on the process and its ethical, artistic and practical underpinnings. I unravel how we made sure the project fed into the participants' needs; how we closely collaborated with Rwandan people and organisations in its production; how we prepared the participants for what to expect; how they consented to share their photographs, stories and names; how we knew that they were ready to take part; how we made sure that there was psychological assistance; how we expressed our gratitude; how we in-

6 'How Do You Speak Nadav Kander? The Man Himself on Mastering your Creative Language', *British Journal of Photography*, 9 March 2017, <https://www.bjp-online.com/2017/03/how-do-you-speak-nadav-kander-the-man-himself-on-mastering-your-creative-language> [accessed 24 July 2019].

7 Susan Dominus, 'My Conscience Was not Quiet', *International New York Times*, 5 April 2014, pp. 1–2; Dominus, 'Portraits of Reconciliation', *New York Times Magazine*, 4 April 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/magazine/06-pieter-hugo-rwanda-portraits.html> [accessed 24 July 2019].

Figure 1. © Lana Mesić, Fainah & Camille, courtesy Creative Court.

formed the participants about the audience reactions; how they told us they finally felt recognised by the international community; how the exhibition was presented in Rwanda and how the participants came to visit, standing face to face with their own portraits of reconciliation.

The photograph displayed here slightly resembles Cortis and Sonderegger's photograph. It has a similar yellow background by means of which a stage is created – the black tape holding it together being clearly visible. The scene captured in the image is preceded by an initial question: 'What does your moment of forgiveness look like?' The participants are then invited to use the stage to design their collaborative answer, which I see as an act of responsibility by the photographer.

In the end, we must ask ourselves: How do we do justice to our responsibilities in interpreting, contextualising and redefining photography when we commission, look at, share or take a photo?

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Rabiaâ Benlahbib is the founder and director of Creative Court, a Hague-based organisation that develops art and education projects reflecting on peace and global justice.