

Surface Tension

Navigating Socially Engaged Documentary Photographic Practices

Gemma-Rose Turnbull

Abstract

As Documentary Photographers increasingly introduce the collaborative and participatory methodologies common to socially engaged art practices into their projects (particularly those that are activist in nature, seeking to catalyse social change agendas and policies through image making and sharing), there is an increased tension between the process of production and the photographic representation that is created. Over the course of the last five years I have utilised these methodologies of co-authorship. This article contextualizes this kind of transdisciplinary work, and examines the ways in which the integration of collaborative strategies and co-authored practice in projects that are explicitly designed to be of benefit to a primary audience (the participants, collaborators and producers) might be usefully disseminated to a secondary audience (the general public, the ‘art world’, critics etc.) through analysis of my projects *Red Light Dark Room*; *Sex, lives and stereotypes* made in Melbourne, Australia, and *The King School Portrait Project* made in Portland, Oregon, America.

Keywords: socially engaged art, documentary photography, participatory photography, collaborative photography, Wendy Ewald

Introduction: Are You a Photographer?

Harry Kreisler poses it bluntly in 1998 under television studio lights: “Are you a photographer, or educator, both, or more than just those two things?” He laughs, and his interviewee Wendy Ewald, who has been working on collaborative photographic projects with children for more than 30 years, returns the laughter, before responding. Her tone makes clear that this question about the composition of her practice has been asked many times and that there are no easy answers. “Well,” she pauses, “I used to resist this question a lot...I never studied education, I took one education course in college and dropped out. So I guess you could say by training I’m an artist, or a photographer. I think what I did really, or do, in a sense, was use my practice as a photographer and artist as education...” (1998).

Five years later in a less formal conversation about her collaborative photographic practice with Tom Finkelparl, Ewald ventures that after more than three decades of work she still senses a profound misunderstanding of what she and her peers are doing.

Even after considerable critical writing on artistic cooperation, exchange and artistic participation, she says people still ask if the collaborations are *all* she does, or if she has time for her own work? (Finkelpearl 2013:v).

Ewald has a practice that bridges two worlds; Documentary Photography, and socially engaged art (SEA). This positioning, though complex, has value. She is able to appropriate from both as long as she continues to make work that can be readily understood by her primary audience while retaining communicative value to her secondary audience. In this case the primary audience is the children with whom she collaborate, and the secondary is *everyone* secondary to those involved in the creation of the photographs – family, community members, the art world, and, of course, the people that commission or fund the projects. And perhaps the reason her work performs for both audiences is because her explicit intent is always to make work of the highest aesthetic quality with every collaborative partner. (Ewald 2013; Calisch 2014)

It's important to me to have an audience in the place where the work is made and in the art world. If the work doesn't reach the community where it's made, then it doesn't make sense. But for me, if it doesn't communicate as art or break new visual ground, it isn't effective either. Other people, both artists and teachers, do undertake these projects on their own and that's great. But for me, if I make a model, it has to be right. It has to create a narrative that is true and visually compelling (Ewald in Calisch 2014).

Ewald makes structuring a model that privileges the needs of the people creating the work, while producing a photographic outcome that reveals the social aesthetic (primary relationships, project structures and collaborative decisions), and is also visually compelling to an audience not privy to those processes/relationships, sound straightforward, and easily replicable. My own experience of making these kinds of photo-based projects with participants such as street-based sex workers, elderly people who have suffered abuse, and children has given me an immersive understanding of the benefits and challenges of instituting these kinds of practices. And the challenge to artists to make invisible project structures, relationships, and decisions available to a larger audience, and the challenge to both primary and secondary audiences to evaluate, appreciate and criticise these elements as part of the work itself, not as auxiliary to the work, is, of course, far more complicated to enact (Gregory in Brook et al. 2014:1).

Documentary Photography As Visual Activism

For more than a century, social activists have used Documentary Photography as a powerfully persuasive tool to activate for social change through the use of the photograph as a credible document, which examines and exposes conditions of social inequality (Wells 2009). Over that time socially responsive documentary photographers have worked towards representing the voices of individuals, groups and communities, using visual storytelling to empower and educate toward creating positive social change (Stevenson 2010). Those photographers have utilised increasingly sophisticated techniques to test the parameters of visual language and its communicative properties. This testing has primarily been focused on the production of iconic images (Wells 2009: 18), objects which become something of a charismatic agent (O'Neill and Doherty 2011; Doherty

2013) acting to beguile, or prompt an audience (secondary to the photographed act), into some sort of action. However, that tradition exists within a very definitive structure of authorship, placing the representation of the subject almost entirely at the discretion of the photographer, who is accorded the status of someone endowed with particular sensitivities and vision – viewed as a special kind of seer whose choice of frame lends extra authority and credibility to the picture (Wells 2009:18).

It is possible to see the development of a range of alternate approaches towards documentary photographic practice since the 1970s, including subject participation, as both a general move away from modernist photographic practice and its tendency to accept the evidential nature of the medium (Luvera 2010; Palmer 2013; Robinson 2011). So, this method of working is not new per se – Ewald’s photographs made by and with a group of children in the Appalachian mountains (Figure 1, 1a, 1b, 1c) are

Figures 1, 1a, 1b, 1c. *Dixon and Shepherd in Ewald, W. (1985). Photographs copyright Wendy Ewald, courtesy the artist*



Top left: Dixon, D. *Reaching for the Red Star Sky*. **Top right:** Shepherd, A. *I dreamed I killed my best friend, Ricky Dixon*. **Bottom left:** Dixon, D. *I am the girl with the snake around her neck*. **Bottom right:** Dixon, D. *Philip and Jaime are creatures from outer space in their spaceship*.

among the best-known collaborative art works of the 1980's (Finkelppearl 2013: 219) – but the turn towards greater use of these practices is evidenced by an increase in the number of contemporary photographic works that forefront the “social aesthetic” (the social interactions that led to its production, exhibition, distribution) (Ritchin 2013:128; Strandquist 2013). This move away from traditional one-directional active/passive authorship recognises the selective, interpretative nature of a medium, which, despite its aura of implied authenticity (Wheeler 2002), will always remain a mediated representation of the reality that it depicts (Rosler 2004:219). Transitioning towards collaborative multi-authored photographic practice is seen as a critical strategy that addresses problematic issues of subjectivity by facilitating access to tools, sharing skills, and equalizing voice – all which lead to increased agency in the visual story-telling process, and challenges the historical notion of the veracity of single-authored photographic images (Wells 2009).

These methodologies have begun to transform the existing focus and visual tropes of Documentary Photography. And, as it becomes increasingly common for photographers to integrate participatory and collaborative practices into their documentary projects (Robinson 2011), a tension develops between the collaborative process of production and the photographic representation that is created. This shift is primarily due to the engagement of people who were previously “subjects” of photographs as co-creators of the work (Luvera 2010; Palmer 2013; Robinson 2011). The tension arises directly out of dichotomous characteristics that are inherent to the two modes of practice: process and outcome (Gregory 2013).

It is in this tension between the collaborative process of production, and the photographic representation that is the outcome, that this kind of expanded documentary practice can come to claim affinity with SEA. Although these practices are not new phenomena in the area of Documentary Photography (Evans 1997), previous outcomes have not necessarily born visible traces of this co-authored process. Instead, they have tended to present as individualised artifacts that (literally) display a single viewpoint and thereby imply the agency of a single auteur (Wells 2009).

The Double Ontology of Socially Engaged Practices

SEA focuses on the interaction between the audience, social systems and the artist through topics such as aesthetics, ethics, collaboration, persona, media strategies, and social activism. The social interaction component inspires, drives, or in some instances completes the project. Although projects may incorporate traditional studio media, they are realised in a variety of visual or social forms (depending on variable contexts and participant demographics) such as performance, social activism, or mobilizing communities towards a common goal (Davis 2013). Indeed, there may be no outcome in the form of tangible artifacts because a central purpose of this kind of art practice is often the relationships that are developed between the co-author participants (Thompson 2012).

Though divergent in medium, formation and methodologies, a common thread of SEA is an emphasis on process over a single end product, and of collaboration over the artist as the sole producer. In this context the photograph is often simply “evidence,” as it is with performance art for example, documenting ephemeral or situational practices.

This methodology of simply recording the residue of action commonly fails to address how the secondary audience can be invited to “re-live” the primary experience (through intentionally evocative photo-media).

In her book, *Artificial Hells* (2012) art historian and critic Claire Bishop contends that the question of how to communicate SEA practices to an external audience is not just a pressing and ongoing dilemma, but that the need to communicate the primary experience to the secondary audience is crucial to the form and substance of participatory art:

In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one removed from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels – *to participants and to spectators* – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term – *an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle* – that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary. (my emphasis, Bishop 2012: 284)

Photo-based SEA then particularly treads the line of a dual horizon – addressing both its immediate participants and subsequent audiences – because the mediating third term is present in both the process and as the outcome. Its attempts to be successful within both art and the social field ideally tests and revises the criteria we apply to both domains (Bishop 2010). This duality *has* to lead to the invention of new methods of documentation that serve not only to transmit the work, but also contribute to formal innovation within the disciplinary fields in which they are located (Jickling et al. 2013). Certainly, if we fail to innovate in this process of translation we run the risk of diluting the value of both Documentary Photography and SEA: tokenistic collaboration with participants so the photographer can claim co-authored processes but that retain a visual outcome that is acceptable to a photo world aesthetic, or an outcome (images) that lack charismatic agency, (O’Neill and Doherty 2011; Doherty 2013) and are then unable to use the platforms of advocacy available to documentary photographers. Fortuitously though, collaborative projects have a great opportunity to reveal ways forward specifically *because* they arise from a critique of modes and forums of exchange, and attempt to realize or suggest alternatives.

Transdisciplinary Practice

There are obvious parallels in the concerns of both modes: Documentary Photography and SEA. Specifically, these are a focus on social justice, the use of art as a tool for activism, and the willingness to wrestle with the complex ethical questions that arise when you explicitly seek to work *with* people (Davis 2013). As neither field easily homes an expanded practice in photography that focuses on process in equal measure to the photographic product, we must look to innovating both disciplinary fields, addressing questions like: What are the structures and methods that allow a contemporary ethos of self-awareness and human connection to blend with traditional photographic approaches? When does photography become a socially engaged act? When does photography create real social change? (Gregory in Brook et al. 2014:1-3). But the

question most pertinent to addressing the tension between process and outcome is: How do you articulate your expanded photographic process? How do you describe your collaborations? (Gregory in Brook et al. 2014:1-3).

Shannon Jackson calls collaborative authorship in SEA “not simply a rejection of aesthetic form, but its own kind of formal experiment” (2011: 70). And introducing collaborative and participatory methodologies to my own practice over the last five years has produced an immersive understanding of the benefits and challenges of instituting these kinds of practices: the agency value in forefronting the social aesthetic of the image (the social interactions that led to its production, exhibition, distribution) (Ritchin 2013: 128; Strandquist 2013); the difficulty of locating a critical reception and platform for work that no longer fits well within the Documentary Photography and is as yet underexplored within socially engaged contemporary art practices (the photo world particularly lacks the capacity to evaluate complex, process-based works that do not resolve into refined, evocative, affective images); and the tension between the need to fulfill the needs of the primary audience and secondary audiences.

The projects I am discussing here, for the purposes of examining how I have come to address some of the questions that are inevitably raised when creating this kind of work, are *Red Light Dark Room; Sex, lives & stereotypes* (2011) created with street based sex workers, via an Australia Council for the Arts residency that supported a partnership with non-profit organisation St Kilda Gatehouse¹, in St Kilda, Victoria, Australia, and *The King School Portrait Project* (2014), made in collaboration with photographer Emily Fitzgerald and a group of students from Martin Luther King Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, United States.

As my experience of investigating and evaluating the efficacy of these methodologies has developed, I have become primarily interested in examining the spectrum of participation and collaboration in photo-based projects. And, additionally, the role the photographer plays in these collectively authored works. This is to ascertain whether the positioning of photographer (as catalyst, collaborator, curator or a combination of any or all) can play a pivotal role in determining the success of the process and of the outcome (Gregory in Brook et al. 2014). The spectrum runs from projects that involve collaboration but retain the artist as the primary author of the work, to projects that are so collaborative that the artist’s role becomes that of catalyst, rather than author, and the project is carried out collectively by the participants (Gregory 2013).

The methodologies I have used to try to renegotiate the terms of the documentary photography structure, have included asking participants to photograph their own lives, using existing photographs to stimulate participant stories, collaborative portraiture, the use of photography as an archival tool for artifacts, and devices intended to demonstrate authorship such as accompanying text, and handwriting. But methodologies have also included distribution strategies and reimagining where and how these works are shown. Showcasing the workings of each phase of these projects – their design, production, exhibition, distribution, and critical/community reaction – can reveal the ways forward for this kind of transdisciplinary practice. If every choice made in these projects carries a socio-political statement, emphasizing the process will necessarily include criticisms of the medium and problematic modes of exchange. This will meaningfully showcase alternative models of producing, exhibiting and distributing images/information for others to engage with and build upon (Strandquist, December 2013).

Red Light Dark Room; Sex, Lives and Stereotypes 2011

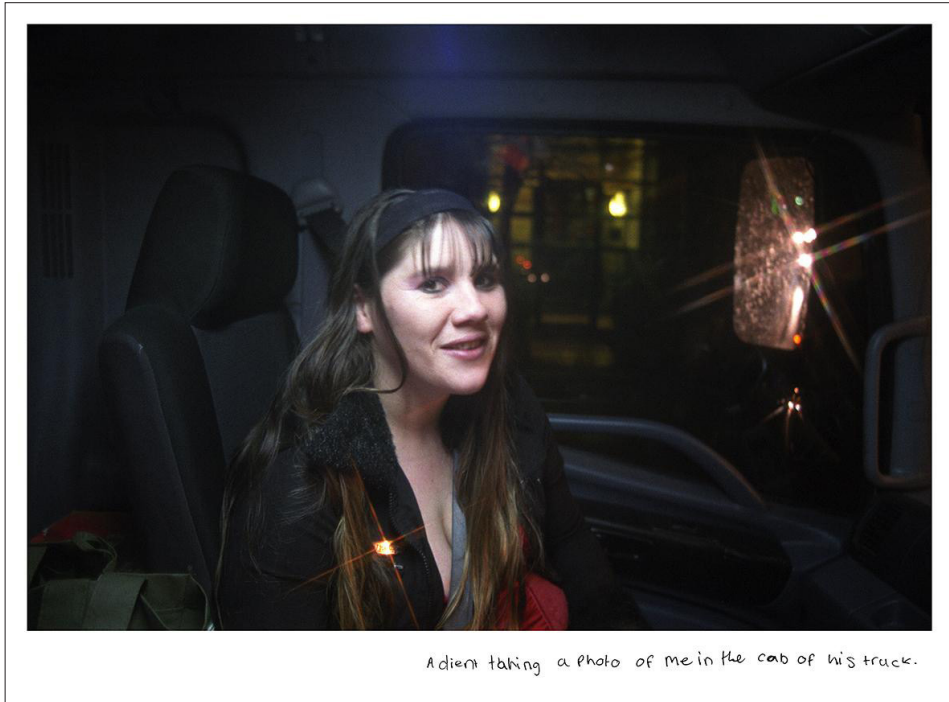


Figure 2. Dani in A. et al. (2011).

I start with this project, because after working for many years as a photographer, making my own documentary projects and as a photojournalist, *Red Light Dark Room* (A. et al. 2011) is the place my work made a distinct transition from traditional practice. While not setting out to deliberately re-frame my practice, I realised I was no longer satisfied to “speak” on behalf of my subjects. What I know now is that the discomfort that prompted me to move away from the traditional authorship structure of photo making is common to other photographers who have made a transition of practice. Photographers (like colleagues whose writing I have cited in this article, Eliza Gregory and Mark Strandquist) often cite the reason for incorporating participatory methodologies as going some way to addressing the concerns regarding the authenticity of documentary material and the democratisation of “voice” (Robinson 2011:119). Photo-blogger Colin Pantall notes in a series of interviews with collaborative practitioners, that what came across most strongly “...was a lack of certainty about what they were doing, a refreshing questioning not just of what others do in photography but what they were doing as well” (2011).

No longer satisfied with the formulaic rigidity of traditional practice that calls on them to act as the eyepiece for communicating social reform agendas, practitioners also gain a greater understanding of the changed structure of their practice during the process of collaboration. This leads to at least a layperson understanding that social aesthetics are more than a tokenistic component; they become as important to the evaluative notions of “success,” or critical understanding, as the photograph is. That is, the process and the product are intrinsically connected, and both need to be accounted for.

There were two initial motivations for me introducing collaborative structures into the project: to share the workload of image-making to allow a more comprehensive picture of the participants lives to emerge; and to challenge the concept of who is “allowed” to make visual representations. So, in addition to photographing the lives of the sex workers myself, and interviewing them as I usually would in a documentary project, I distributed SLR cameras and film to the participants, and taught basic visual communication skills, developed their films, and worked with them (with a regularity that varied from participant to participant) to edit and caption the images they produced (Figures 2-2f). The book produced from the collaboration was an amalgamation of my own and participant photographs, interviews, and written reflections.

While the initial overall goal of the collaborative work, to break down stereotypes about street-based sex workers, remained consistent over the course of the project, the process proved to be a profound experience in both personal and practice-based flexibility and adaptation. It raised valuable questions about the challenges and value of participation, the necessity to produce work that remained true to the visual aesthetic and notions of veracity that inform Documentary Photography, authorship, tactics of distribution, and the measures of success, or ways in which collaboratively produced photographic projects can be evaluated.

1. Challenges of Participation

As a stranger to the community, and having never worked with people who experience transience and social marginalisation, my initial goals of setting aside a classroom-style space to make collaborative decisions on *every* aspect of the project were subverted by the reality of working with a community drawn together by circumstance rather than the structure of higher education. While I retained the weekly workshop space, a hangover from my tertiary teaching, I soon realised that it was necessary for me to interact with participants and guide the process in a more spontaneous fashion – not on my own timetable, but rather to catch participants when I actually saw them. This method of impromptu working, as well as the limited timeframe of the residency, also meant that the initial goal of the collaborative process, extending to book design and other more production-oriented aspects, had to be renegotiated. This felt contrary to the goals of making something that sought to address the power balance of *represented* and *representing*.

The ramifications of identifying and exposing people felt like a heavy burden, and not one necessarily resolved by active participation. My sense of protectiveness (and perhaps a developed understanding of the ways in which control of images is lost once the internet becomes a primary method of distribution, and the ways in which an image can be recontextualised to suit media narratives) was measured against my assertion that the decisions of these women to participate and to choose the identity they were published under, had to be honoured.

2. Aesthetic Veracity

One of the most difficult questions this project raised (for me) was how closely this work needed to adhere to the visual and ethical aesthetic of Documentary Photography. In my determination to keep it closely aligned to a traditional aesthetic (and my inability to imagine outside of the aesthetic box). I had a difference of opinion with one of the

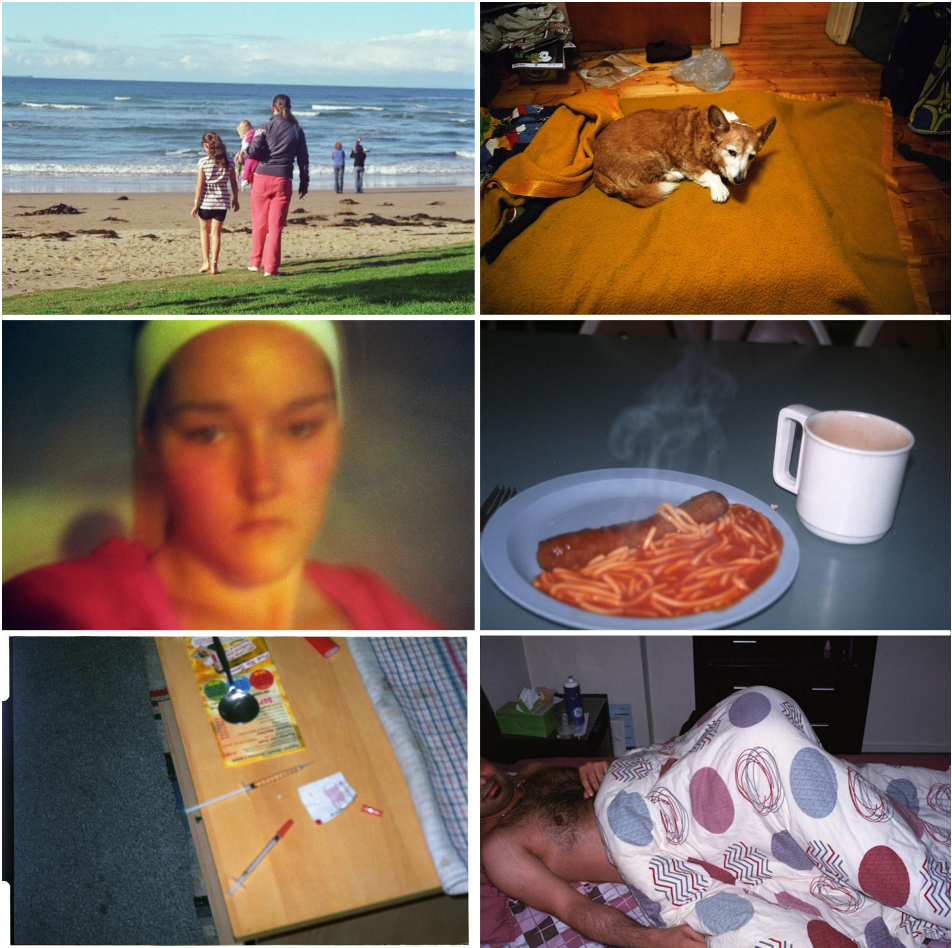


Figure 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d (clockwise from top). Bellarai, Morgan, Bek, Julie Anne, Bek and Lisa in A. et al. (2011).

participants, Morgan. She wanted to construct images that *illustrated* her experience as a sex worker, rather than undertaking what I perceived as the more powerful and genuine act of simply *photographing her own life*. Her elaborate photographic construction was the vision she had for best representing herself, but I was limited by what I then thought documentary *should* be, concerned the collaboration was diluting the veracity of the visual narrative being produced. This unconsciously framed me as having more ability to make authentic images about sex work and inferred participant contribution was naturally less credible. I was set on producing something that, for all intents and purposes, was a photojournalistic piece – favouring a candid, snapshot, or “real-life” documentary aesthetic to tell the “truth”.

Throughout the project I actively maintained and taught a visual language that was synonymous with this goal. Constrained by the form of the medium in which I was accustomed to working, her constructed approach was outside of the parameters of possibility *for me* at that moment. Fundamentally, I am still troubled about the process by which the visual vocabulary I utilise and teach can be expanded to include image making that falls

outside the realms of a photojournalistic narrative (which I naturally see as maintaining the veracity necessary for the kinds of activism my work concerns itself with).

3. Authorship

A year ago I set out to tell the stories of some of St Kilda's street sex workers. What I didn't know then was that getting to know these women, and seeing past the surface of their lives, was going to become my story too. (Turnbull in A. et al. 2011)

These questions began with the not-so-simple question of how to acknowledge authorship. It felt disingenuous to name myself as the author of the work when it was clear it wouldn't exist without the input of participants. But it also felt disingenuous not to take credit as the primary author when the project was clearly not cooperative, but rather designed, implemented, directed and edited by me. My confusion about how to approach the authorship of this participation is evident in the way in which this text still frames me as the principle contributor in the introductory text (see above).

This dilemma with authorship extended past design, to publication. The archival format (the book) meant that the ultimate control of the images rested outside of the participants, removing the ability to retract permission, or add to stories they felt hadn't be told adequately (raising another question about whether a permanent record like a book is the most appropriate format for this kind of collaboration). This is the essential conundrum of this kind of work, that if *truly* collaborative, it may not take the form that we expect from, or can understand as, documentary practice.

4. Measures of "Success"

From its conception the project was framed with a fundraising goal for the partner non-profit organisation; costs were covered by grants² and all book sale proceeds were donated back to St Kilda Gatehouse (the total raised by book sales to date is \$40,000). Community-based feedback gave anecdotal measures of success, including greater engagement of the community with the goals of St Kilda Gatehouse and an increased knowledge, sensitivity and sympathy to street-based sex work within the community, businesses, organizations and the local government. The work was exhibited in both solo and group exhibitions in places like the Brisbane Powerhouse, both the *Foto Freo* and *Head On* photography festivals, and the Queensland Centre of Photography, as well as a being a part of the *Right Before Your Eyes: Photography Driven By Social Change* exhibition, curated by PhotoPhilanthropy, at the United Nations, New York City, New York.

Despite the range of ways the work was exhibited, the traditional structures of photographic evaluation became a difficult benchmark to assess from, because the social aesthetic was as important as the visual aesthetic, and was near impossible to represent with a few images. This is perhaps the central conundrum of the photo world when it comes to understanding, critiquing and evaluating these kinds of participatory practices, both conceptually, and pragmatically. As the work is really only able to be understood as a complete unit, it often needs a person (me), or text chaperone explaining the process. So extracting 10-12 images to showcase it becomes difficult (this is the approximate number commonly asked for in grant applications, photographic competitions, visual abstracts etc.). As stated earlier, it is this tension that propels the work into being able to claim more affinity with SEA practices.

Additionally, despite the “positive” impact and outcomes of the project, I was left with troubling questions about how to measure success in this unfamiliar territory (where the work was not just mine, but had been created by a group of individuals, each with their own understanding of “success”). Any summation I gave to validate the project/outcomes seemed too reliant on the quantifiable – the financial and informational – and not enough on the less easily quantified – the personal and relational. The personal value in having the work published seemed to vary dramatically from woman to woman, and I was left unsure of how to unpack the diversity of participant experience and self-evaluation. And as I was then unaware of the conversations being conducted within the realm of SEA, by practitioners and critics seeking new methods of evaluation that included an understanding of projects made under this kind of social aesthetic, my inability to determine more precise ways in which the project was a success to the people who participated in it, led me to a feeling of the project as a “failure.” This rejection of evaluative structures has probably been the most significant motivator for continuing to work in this way – a desire to make the process more quantifiably valuable for co-authors and participants.

The King School Portrait Project 2014

The King School Portrait Project (Cerriteno-Apolonio et al. 2014) was made during my time as a scholar in residence³ in the Portland State University Art and Social Practice program with graduate student Emily Fitzgerald and group of students from King Elementary School: Alan Cerriteno-Apolonio, Ashmeena Kipp, Chanel Wilson, Dashielle Swain, Pesalili Laulea Jr. , Quebrance Waters, and Semaj Baldwin-Fontenot. Although it is difficult to compare projects that are so diverse in duration, participant identity, collaborative structure, and for which I was not the sole catalysing artist responsible, this is the project in which I feel I am finally moving toward some resolution of the questions raised by both the process and outcomes of the *Red Light Dark Room* project. Holding them up next to each other functions less as a comparative analysis then, and more as an insight into the understanding the kinship documentary-based collaborations have with SEA.

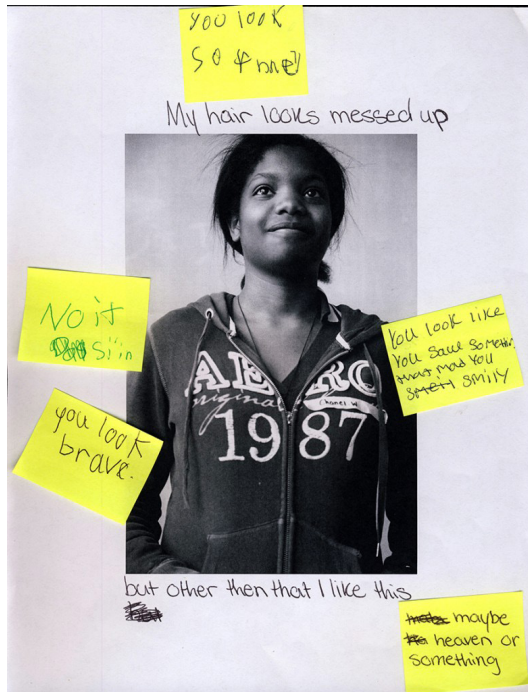
In this work, conceived by Fitzgerald, who also has a background as a documentary photographer, and myself, the photographic product acted as kind of a synopsis and catalyst, rather than an end in and of itself. A book and an in-school installation were the result of a long form conversation about identity and representation between myself, Fitzgerald, and the elementary school students, who ranged in age from six to fourteen-years-old.

The project was not constructed, either explicitly or implicitly, to visually align with a more traditional documentary project – my desire to retain the veracity and aesthetic of Documentary Photography has been diluted by years of investigating the practices of SEA, and a gained understanding of the ways the prescriptiveness of the documentary aesthetic limits the ability of collaborators to visualise the way in which they want to be represented. Although its concerns were less obviously politically activist than *Red Light Dark Room*'s, the project was similarly conceived as a way to explore what happens when a group of people (in this case children) is given the tools, support and platform to explore and present the identity they perceive of themselves, rather than that prescribed by socioeconomic, gender, age, race, ability, life experience, or any other

status. As Luvera writes of his work with people who have experienced homelessness, *Residency* (2013):

It seems to me that forms of self-representation may go some way to broadening our understanding of individuals whose portraits are depicted primarily through the trace of their brushes with the institutions of commerce, charity, law and the state or in representations produced by social documentarians.

Figure 3. Chanel Wilson in *Cerriteno-Apolonio et al.* (2014)



All of the photographic images were authored collectively by the group, on cameras supplied by Fitzgerald and I, in an attempt to represent our wide-ranging discussions in visual form. The students responded to the images, made progressively over two months, by drawing on them and selecting their favourite representations from proof sheets, marking their choices from the thumbnails. They also responded to their own, and classmates' portraits with sticky note comments (Figure 3). And although we made images each time we met, they were formed after we had drawn, written and spoken at length about how we saw ourselves in the world, how other people saw us, and the disparity that sometimes existed between those two points. In

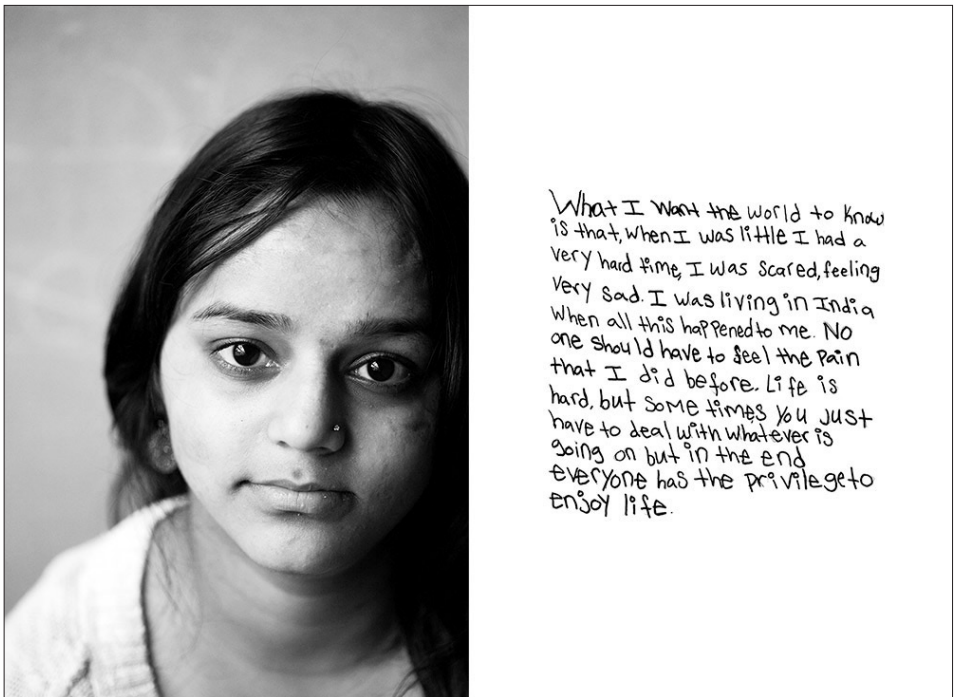
this sense the image making was more of a tool of articulation, as well as the catalyst for further reflection and discussion.

Of course it would be disingenuous not to note that Fitzgerald and I were more than partially responsible for the images produced. We were responsible for establishing the framework of production, the location of the images within the room we worked in, explaining the ways in which light worked for and against portraiture (we had a more elaborate technical curriculum, which was quickly abandoned in favour of the exploration of our personhood). I then designed the work into a book, using a template made by designer Molly Sherman. Although we ran out of time to consult with our participants on every single editorial choice, they saw all but the very final version of the book edit. Such are the perils of a too short duration and deadlines that came too quickly (our installation process suffered this too – causing us to abandon a more complex, visible and permanent installation for a less visible but more manageable one (Figure 3a)).

Figure 3a. Installation at King Elementary School. Photograph Emily Fitzgerald, courtesy the artist.



Figure 3b. Ashmeena Kip in *Cerriteno-Apolonio et al.* (2014)



The dilemmas of indicating authorship experienced during the design and attribution process of *Red Light Dark Room* were less present here. Where I was previously con-

cerned about the importance of cataloguing a list of photographic projects to establish my veracity as an author, I now understand the veracity of my work lies in acknowledging the process of collaboration and co-authorship. We did have concerns about how the children's peers would respond to the in-school installation of images (particularly for Ashmeena (Figure 3b), who shared very intimate revelations about herself) but in all instances we workshopped these concerns with the participants, as well as sending home proofs of the final installation images to parents, with a request that they discuss them with their child. Inviting parental input at this point was not to censor, but to make sure the participants fully understood the implications of having the 90cm x 60cm images installed at the front door of the school (we recognised here that the children might be able to raise concerns with their parents that they might not feel comfortable raising in the group).

The King School Portrait Project is the project in which I feel (as a catalysing artist) I have come closest to meeting the needs of the primary audience (in this case the elementary students). Of course it is hard to quantify that statement (that it was a voluntary after school program and the kids kept turning up to participate seems trite, but also true). Although I think the images we made are thematically and visually strong, and that we all really enjoyed making them (the pleasure in process is absolutely part of the evaluation of success) the most "aesthetically strong" part of the project was the moment that we (almost unwittingly) bridged the gap between the participants and the consumers of their creation (something that I had never managed to figure out how to do with the *Red Light Dark Room* project).

Figure 3c. *King School Portrait Project* participant Semaj Baldwin-Fontenot at *Shine A Light* at the Portland Art Museum June 2014. Photograph by Emily Fitzgerald, courtesy the artist



The books were published by King School Press (KSP), set up by Sherman and I, to be included in the *Shine A Light* event at the Portland Art Museum. The low-fi, but high quality design of the book, with its vibrant orange cover, were sold for the cost-covering sum of two dollars (a deliberate tactic to maximise access to the publication). The participants were invited to be a part of supervising the sale of their books from the KSP booth. Logistics of transport, teaching and parental supervision, and the late night time of the event meant that not all the children were able to attend, but those that did took on the task of telling everyone who stopped about their project.

The most fascinating part of these interactions was hearing them explain the project to viewers (Figure 3c). The language they used indicated the different ways they had interpreted our framework. Predominantly their speeches focused on the action of taking and selecting the photos, but also presented the project aims simply and succinctly: “This is a project about who we are.” It is hard to articulate how important that moment was to the project, except to say that without it the conceptual integrity would have faltered in ways that would have been clear (if not visible to anyone not past the primary audience). This may highlight a way to ease some of that tension between process and outcome in these kinds of projects: positioning the primary audience as the mediating third term (in addition to the photographic outcome), gaining a unique purchase on the secondary audience.

Moving Forward

So, how can you retain the agency and activist potential of photo-media for a secondary audience, when you integrate collaborative and participatory processes into documentary-based photo projects with the explicit intention of forefronting the social aesthetic, and privileging a primary audience? There are no clear-cut answers for delineating the parameters of an easily replicable, photo-based, socially engaged art project model. To claim so denies the complexity of influencing practices, individual situations, and the diversity of potential participants, collaborators, co-authors and catalysing artists. However, the proliferation of documentary-based socially engaged art projects is demonstrative of the broader ways in which photography is moving away from traditional frameworks, visual aesthetics, ethical boundaries and medium specificity. The emergence of these kinds of works, which articulate the beginnings of a new framework, are useful not only to instigate a more comprehensive understanding in the art and photographic worlds, but also to lay foundations for the critical analysis of practice, and aid in the establishment of a base point from which further innovations, experimentations and explorations of the parameters of practice can be launched.

What has become clear over the last couple of years of my own practice is that I have found those project outcomes corollary to the photograph itself the most valuable to myself, and ostensibly to the participants and collaborators too. As Gregory says of her own practice the “micro-level social interactions that went into making the photographs as products that were at least as important as the images themselves” (2013). Letting go of physical media is a radical idea for photographers, even those trying to incorporate participatory and collaborative elements into their working methodologies. But in seeking to transform the aesthetic values of our practices the idea of incorporating these social interactions *deliberately* (rather than accidentally) into the work feels like

some step toward resolving the tension between the needs of the primary and secondary audience, as well as reframing the image-value of photo-based work.

Notes

1. St Kilda Gatehouse is a not for profit organisation which works alongside people involved in street sex work.
2. From both The Australia Council for the Arts and The Helen McPherson Smith Trust.
3. The project was made as part of a two-year residency the PSU Art and Social Practice Masters Program has at King Elementary School, where I was a scholar in residence from 2013-2014.

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