

Critical Report

PHO 740

Iris Maria Tuşa



Figure 1. Tuşa. 2022. *Threshold*.

Introduction

The photographic production and history of collaborative or participatory photography show that relationships between photographer, subject and audience are complicated and tensioned. Projects by ground-breaking “social practice” photographers such as Ariella Azoulay, Wendy Ewald and Susan Meiselas demonstrate an uneasy tension between collaborative intentions and exploitations. The relationship between the different protagonists is less clear, the intentions behind the acts of photography are less favorable for the subject, or the motivation to initiate certain projects is troubling or even coercive. The process of voice-giving to the subject can challenge authorship and lead to changes – sometimes unpredictable – that can alter the initial idea of a project.¹

This report looks into this specific aspect of collaboration, approaching the topic not just from the photographer’s perspective, but also from the subject’s perspective, attempting to put the two on a scale. In this attempt, the report will analyse a series of photographic projects from authors with differing approaches and differing degrees of collaboration involved - from Anthony Luvera’s conscious choice on involving his subjects as participants to the project, to Diane Arbus’ photographic gaze, and many others.

¹ Azoulay (2016:189)

Second, it will explore whether the number or nature of the relation between photographer and the subject can affect the way the message is shared. Finally, the report will look at "Threshold", my photographic project, and attempt to place it somewhere within the categories discussed previously. The conclusion is that a photographer must always attempt to reconcile the subject's intended message, his own gaze, and the audience's perception, according to the aims of the project. In cases like "Agata" and "Threshold", it's easier to do - because photographer and subject become one.

I. Degrees of collaboration

Azoulay sees photography as an ongoing event involving multiple participants in which the photographer cannot claim an a priori monopoly on knowledge, authorship, ownership, and rights authorship: "Does a photographer holds monopoly or ownership and rights when it comes to collaboration? (...) collaboration is its degree zero, as photography always involves an encounter between several protagonists..." (Azoulay, 2016:189)

Anthony Luvera, for example, is interested by how "involving participants as contributors to the processes of representation can inscribe a different, more nuanced view, or otherwise complicate commonly held perceptions of their lives". (Luvera, 2019:20)

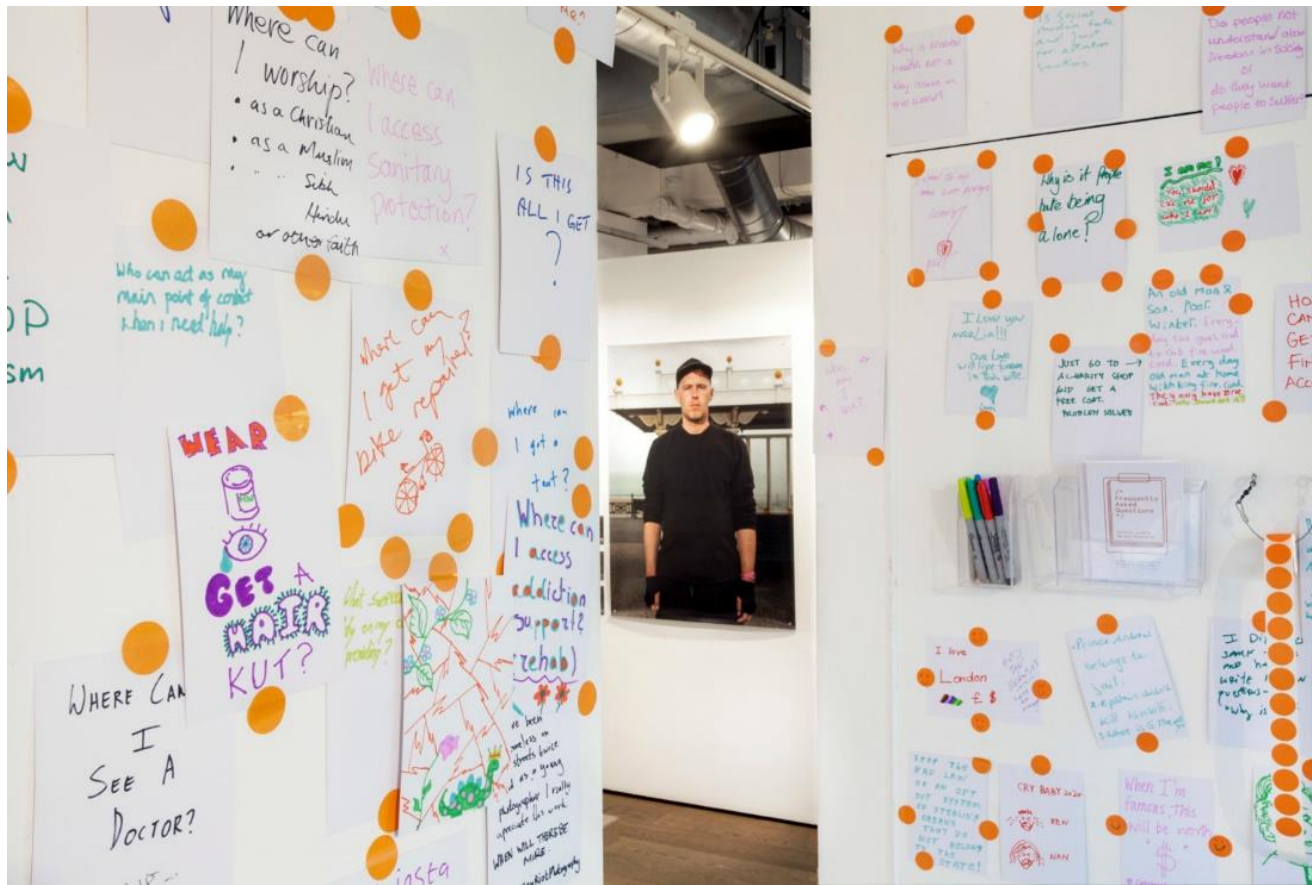


Figure 2. Luvera. 2020. Installation view of Anthony Luvera: Taking Place at The Gallery at Foyles.

In his project "Construct" he develops a methodology that aims to represent his subjects in the way they want to be represented. In contrast to his intentions, he states that "often the telling of the process is filtered through the singular voice of the artist, becoming subject to the problems of representation the work is trying to tackle in the first place". (Luvera, 2016:136)

In comparison, Diane Arbus looked at her subjects more neutrally, even while she was distorting their image to make them look strange in the eyes of the audience. Arbus' gaze interfered with what the subject may have wanted to be represented, like in the photo of a boy with a toy hand grenade. Here, Arbus chose the photograph which captured the boy as he was when his message would not be accepted, frustrated but, admittedly, compelling.²

Critics like Susan Sontag railed against Arbus' approach, arguing that "Arbus' work does not invite viewers to identify with the miserable looking people she photographed" (Sontag, 2008:17) and instead exploited them, choosing to pose them in strange ways that would trigger her audience into feeling discomfited. In contrast to Sontag's criticism, Peter Marshall argues that Arbus was giving her subjects something through her work, namely, a feeling of exchange.

Wendy Ewald states that subjects relinquish their power over pictures of themselves because how they are seen and who they are seen by is, ultimately, decided by the photographer. Moreover, she states that the more familiar a photographer is with the subject, the 'better chance they had of seeing inside their lives'. (Ewald, 2000:6) Collaboration shifts the power onto the sitter. In her project "Portraits and Dreams" she encouraged her collaborators to explore their dreams and fantasies as well as the day-to-day of their sometimes troubled existence.

² Hobson (2022:215)

In her wish to give voice to the subject she felt necessary to remove herself from the photographer-subject equation. In this sense, she exhibited her work separately from those of the students, but when she sensed that something was missing by not including her own voice she decided to place it on equal footing with those of her students so we could experience her voice as one among many. Here, we are required to guess who the photographer is. This approach keeps the question of authorship in the foreground. It destabilizes the viewer's expectations. We cannot take for granted who is seeing and who is being seen.³ These examples bring up a question of whether collaboration with subjects is truly helpful to give them a voice, because, regardless of the method of collaboration, be it Luvera's, Arbus', or Ewald's approach, ultimately it is the photographer that remains at the forefront. Even in the case of Afghan Girl, the 1984 photographic portrait taken by Steve McCurry, where the subject was at the forefront of the photograph, she did not truly matter for the audience, as her name was not even known to the public until years after the photograph had been taken.

In consequence, we wonder whether a perfect balance between the photographer's and the subject's interests is resulting in value-oriented collaboration that can also inspire potential audiences to hear and understand the subjects. John Steinbeck's words come to mind: "What I'm trying to talk about is the irony that nobody will ever know what another person thinks."⁴

³ Ewald (2000:10)

⁴ Avedon and Arbus (1999:72)

II. Common voice vs. unity between photographer and subject

“The Alien Trail” project is an example in which four photographers - Antoina D’Agata, Nikos Economopoulos, Bieke Depoorter and Nicolas Iordanou - collaborated with several subjects to create one common message about the refugees and migrants living in Cyprus.⁵ In this project, it’s difficult to pinpoint one clear individual voice or message.

Each of the photographers developed their own methodology, in accordance with their own visual style. For instance, D’Agata captured his subjects as people living in isolation, loneliness, and fear, avoiding showing his subject’s faces in most of his photos. In contrast, Nikos Economopoulos captured the vividness of the refugees’ life, whereas Bieke Depoorter chose to live inside Syrian families’ houses focusing on developing relationships with them, capturing intimate moments of their domestic life. In a similar vein to Depoorter, Iordanou selected one worker from Syria and followed his daily life, creating a “poetic atmosphere” to the viewer. The result was a combination of visual styles that told a variety of stories, making it difficult for the audience to focus on something other than the intended message.

When thinking of documentaries that involved more than one subject, “Sweet Nothings” by Vanessa Winship comes to mind. In documenting schoolgirls from the borderlands of Eastern Anatolia, the only decision that her subjects seem to have made was with whom they chose to be photographed. Although the level of collaboration feels lower,

⁵ Markidou (2002:4)

we can still feel the empathy of Winship towards her subjects: “Many things touched me during the making of these images. I was touched by the gravity in their demeanour at the moment in front of the camera, their fragility, their simplicity, their grace, their closeness to one another”, says the photographer. (Winship, 2008:5)

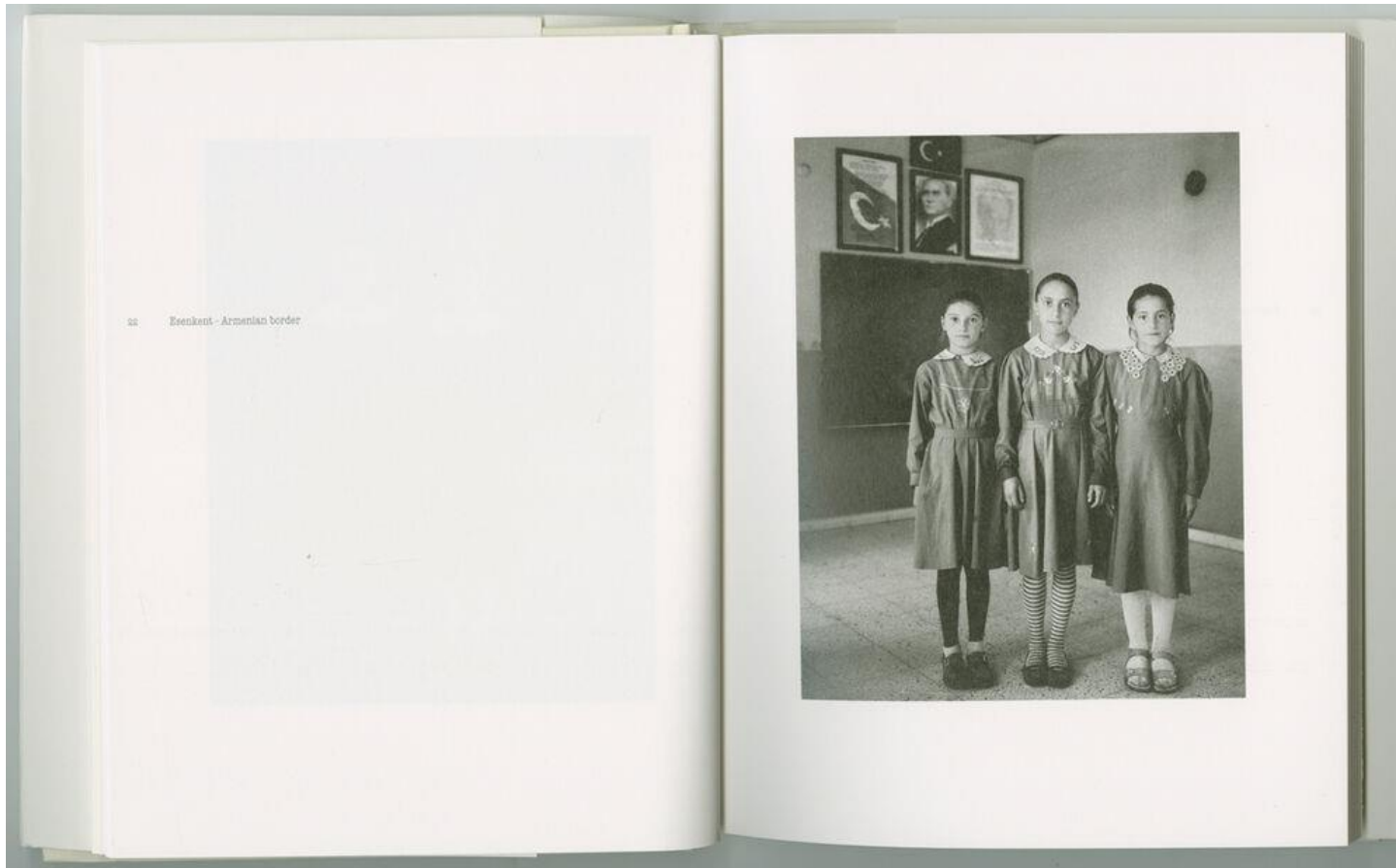


Figure 3. Winship.
2008. *Sweet
Nothings.*

In the same vein, “The Sisters Project” by Alia Youssef combats negative stereotypes of Muslim women by showcasing the diverse stories of women across Canada, while also creating a space of inclusion and belonging for all self-identifying Muslim women to embrace and celebrate their unique identities. By photographing 160 women from 12 cities and 8 provinces she succeeded in combatting the one-dimensional image and stereotypes imposed on Muslim women and created a space for connection and sisterhood within the community and outside of it.



Figure 4. Youssef. 2020.
The Sisters Project.

Bieke Depoorter's "Agata" takes the collaborative process to another level, by exploring the relationship between the photographer and one subject, met in a strip club in Paris. Depoorter describes not only her motive, as photographer, for approaching Agata, but also Agata's, as subject, for accepting to be photographed. Each has a different motivation – firstly, to understand photographic authorship and herself, and secondly, to find some sense of identity.



Figure 5. Depoorter.
2018. *Agata*.

The collaboration has resulted in the audience knowing very clearly whose voice they are listening to. However, as it turned out, it's very difficult to maintain a perfect balance of power between two voices. Eventually, Depoorter and Agata become muddled, and the audience is forced to ask who the true subject is.

In a similarly personal vein, Colin Pantall documented his daughter's childhood in two photobooks. He spoke about the beautiful bond between father and daughter and how it developed in time giving voice to his subject by writing her own words in the "Sofa Portraits" photobook.



Figure 6. Pantall. 2022.

Sofa Portraits.

“Isabel loves the images because they showcase these different states of being and, to a certain extent, she still has those states of being”⁶, states Pantall. The project is the culmination of a father-daughter relationship, in which the photographer cannot be removed from the subject.

The works highlighted above showcase collaboration between subjects and photographers in two very different ways. In the first case, one observes the nature of multi-sided collaboration, wherein there are a greater number of collaborators involved, and where the result is not just about one singular subject’s voice, but about the collective experience. In the second case, an intimate relationship between photographer and subject doesn’t just loudly and clearly share the subject’s message, but also makes the audience question whether the photographer remains only the photographer, instead of an inextricable part of the subject.

III. Threshold

“Threshold” is a personal project in which I reconnect with my childhood memories that surface when I visit the isolated Turkish villages located in the south of Dobrogea region. It’s about crossing from the outside world into a more personal and intimate one that speaks more about the subjects. Crossing the threshold is both a physical and metaphorical journey. It is a poetic endeavor that explores loose associations between images and my personal

⁶ Interview with Colin Pantall in British Journal of Photography.

experience and stream of consciousness. Taking into consideration the works discussed above, there is a question to be had regarding the interplay between my subjects' voices and my own.

The houses I was invited into are Muslim homes that value intimacy and privacy. Being a woman made it easier to be trusted and be invited in, but it also restricted me from interacting with men. This is another link to myself, as photographer, as the girls I ended up working with closely reminded me of myself.



Figure 7. Tuşa. 2022.
Threshold.

Regardless of my associations, however, the houses I explored did not resemble what I grew up with. The dignified, and somewhat careless, personalities in the homesteads popped up from the vividly colored and textured wall coverings. However, like the commercial carpets and interior decorations surrounding them, the girls lacked the sense of individuality. Their gestures, the lights, or earthy smell have the power to surface deeply-held emotions from my childhood and to trigger past recollections.



Figure 8. Tuşa. 2022.

Threshold.

Unlike in Michelle Sank "My.Self" project, the homes' interiors don't become metaphors in defining the girls personality, but they talk more about their alienation due to decades of communism and difficult socio-economic conditions.



Figure 9. Sank. 2018. *My.Self*.

The similarity of the interiors in all houses visited also made me think of Vanessa Winship and how all the girls that she shot were wearing the same school uniform – making them all look alike. The collaboration with children unfolded as a joint engagement of photographing and being photographed. There were never rigid rules or expectations at any end when it came to shooting. Getting closer to the children I interacted with, the natural flow of things was to be invited into their homes.

Our collaboration evolved from photos taken in the hallway or living room to more personal spaces like their bedrooms. The images reflect the girls' personalities. Our photographic journey took us from more shy portraits to those in which they would like to dress in a certain way to be photographed or playfully wrap their bodies in curtains. To give voice to the girls, I asked them to ornate their portraits, however they saw it fit. In this process I felt inspired by a number of artists.⁷

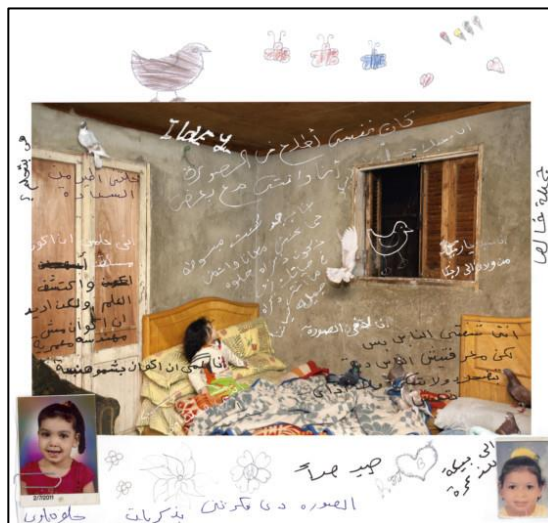
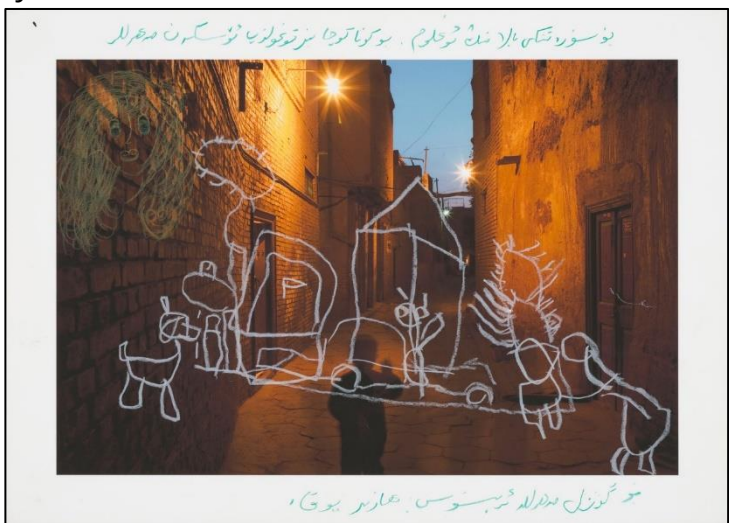


Figure 10. Drake. 2014. *Wild Pigeon*.

Figure 11. Bieke Depoorter. As *It May Be*.

⁷ Carolyn Drake, Bieke Depoorter, Rehab Eldalil, Susan Meiselas.

Besides drawing Turkish symbols, they also wrote tiny wishes that they placed into small envelopes. These contributions are included in the photobook for the audience to discover.



Figure 12. Tuşa and Elif. 2022. *Threshold*.



Figure 13. Tuşa and Seda. 2022. *Threshold*.

Looking back upon it now, it becomes clear that the collaboration in “Threshold” is aligned with Depoorter’s “Agata” - irrespective of the themes within, my own self is inextricably linked with that of my subjects, and while the audience may only see them, for me it is as much an exploration of myself as it is of the alienated culture that still remains in Dobrogea. In this sense, I am as much a subject as the girls I captured.

IV. Conclusions

This report has taken a journey throughout many different photographic projects, starting with an overview of wildly different collaborative projects - from the most collaborative oriented ones, like Anthony Luvera's "Construct", to Steve McCurry's "Afghan Girl". From this initial assessment we can observe that regardless of how involved or not the collaboration between subject and photographer is, ultimately it is either the photographer's gaze or the audience's perception that wins out, perhaps leaving out the subject's intended message. In a medium like photography, that is to be expected - a picture may be worth a thousand words, but the audience sometimes cannot read.

For situations like these, we would expect the photographer to orient their projects in a way that either solely focuses on the subject (or subjects) or links themselves to the subject in such a way that the photographer's message and the subject's message become so linked that it is their common interest to share it with the world. The second part of the report focuses on collaborative projects like which either explore the common voice of several subjects - like "The Alien Trail", "Sweet Nothings" or "The Sisters Project" - wherein it becomes almost impossible to ignore the grander themes of the project. Alternatively, there are also the projects in which the line between photographer and subject becomes blurred, like "Agata" or "Sofa Portraits". Collaboration, here, is of a less transactional nature and it becomes an exploration of self.

Finally, the report assesses “Threshold”, my photographic project, and through the lens of all the works discussed previously, I wonder where the collaboration involved here lies on the scale. Clearly, it is a work relying on a common voice of several subjects, like “Sweet Nothings”, but then again, my own gaze as photographer is inextricably linked to that of my subjects’, because I see myself in them. Therefore, I posit that regardless of the number of subjects involved, “Threshold” is far closer in ideology to “Agata” - it is as much an exploration of self as it is the girls I photograph.

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