

## Exit Theory: Thinking Photography and Thinking History from One Crisis to Another

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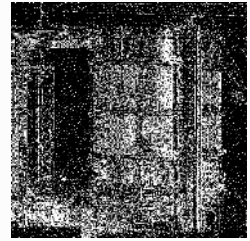


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# Exit Theory: Thinking Photography and Thinking History from One Crisis to Another

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Provocation

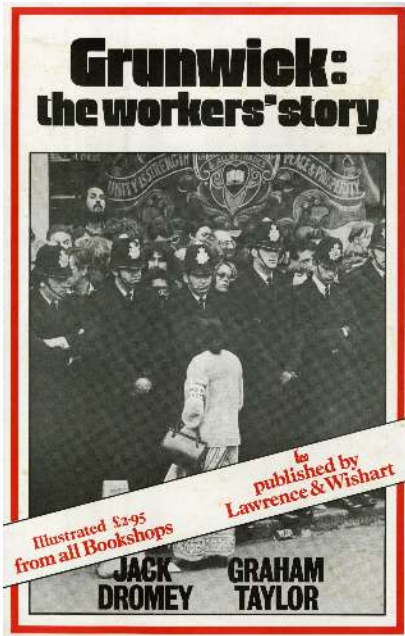


Figure 1

Jack Dromey and Graham Taylor, *Grunwick: The Workers' Story*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978).

The 1970s in Britain were a period of conflict and upheaval, now seen as marking the end of a long period of economic expansion and the break-up of the postwar social democratic consensus. For many who lived through them, however, these years seemed less of an ending than an opening to new social possibilities and new forms of struggle. A reemerging political radicalism, a second wave of feminist activism and an assertive anti-racist movement challenged ingrained ideas about the space of political action and set in motion new debates about cultural politics that turned on the political function of cultural representations. For photography in Britain, this meant, on the one hand, the shaping of new forms of practice under the influence of conceptual art's increasingly politicized structural and institutional critique. On the other hand, this emergent critical practice also demanded and provoked a critical engagement with the history and theory of photography that represented a radical break in the discourse on photography

and its histories. This was, indeed, when Theory acquired a capital letter, unsettling pedagogical habits and threatening the comforting to and fro of photography's two-party system, vacillating between photographic art on one side of the aisle and documentary photography on the other. The principal stalking horse (or straw man) for this new theoretical practice was an institutionally sanctioned and thoroughly marketized formalism, derived from the later writings of the art critic Clement Greenberg. Equally in the firing line, however, was what was seen as a naive reflectionist conception of photography---as evident in versions of social history as the reflection of social forces as it was in practices of social documentation, whether in their earnest humanist or dissociated modernist guise. For new formulations of the politics of photographic representation, photography could not merely be a tool of political action but had to be seen as a site invested in political relations and in itself productive of political effects.<sup>1</sup>

These arguments and provocations changed the game for photographic practice, for photographic education, and for the history of photography, in as much as the latter could be said to have an effective existence as a field of study at this time. The effects of this change may have been staunchly resisted but they were not to be reversed, at least in the short term, even by the political defeat that closed out the decade and set off the triumphant rise of the new orthodoxies of economic neoliberalism and unregulated globalization. It would take another decade for the immutable laws of the global free market in goods, services, finance, and ideas to reinvest and recode the very practices, institutions, and fundamental purposes of education, cultural production, and the image economy, in a process that was to be greatly accelerated by technological change in the ensuing decade. In the 1990s, new digital technologies made 1970s conceptions of image/text seem quaint, while emerging social media made the alternative networks of 1970s counter-culture seem slow and cumbersome and embarrassingly homemade.

At the same time, a new generation of art photographs scaled to the emergent visual economy of the museum as spectacle dwarfed the dense and text-heavy works of post-conceptual art, while a booming international art commodity market showed that even these once intransigent works could be readily absorbed.



Figure 2

Unknown photographer, *Violence Outside The Grunwick Processing Company In London During Strike*, published in the *Daily Mail*, 15 June 1977. Digital image courtesy of Daily Mail / REX / Shutterstock (893003a).

A similar fate of packaging and distancing also overtook what had now become the institutionally accommodated discipline of the history of photography. Certainly, this brought more scrupulous standards of scholarship, a closer engagement with the materiality of the object, and a keener attention to the image that contrasted with the frequently polemical texts of cultural studies, for which the object was often no more than an allegory of Theory. In the process, however, the larger questions were often lost, along with the sense that the attempt to reframe the terms in which these questions were asked had real consequences for struggles beyond the bounds of academe. A certain insistent historiographical formula also began to be deployed to box and label the unruly work of 1970s photo-theory as a “postmodernist” reaction to the institutionally powerful “Modernism” of the 1960s, substituting a contextualism of the exterior for a formalism of the interior. No matter that the discursive field of the photograph is not a context. No matter that the theoretically heterodox work of the 1970s could never make its mantra of Marxism, feminism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis cohere and thus, fortunately enough, never became an “ism”. No matter, indeed, that the term “Postmodernism” had no currency in Britain outside architectural criticism until the publication in English translation of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, and Fredric Jameson’s *New Left Review* essay, “Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, both in 1984.<sup>2</sup> The formula enabled a diverse and internally contentious body of work to be both appropriated and decried, while severing it from its political challenge and distancing it as the expression of a now completed and surpassed dialectical cycle. Politics is displaced by memory; overdetermination by anecdotes of chance; the activist photographer theorist by the market adept; and the archive as instrument by the curatorial platitude of the so-called archival mode. So what chance now for the re-emergence of an engaged scholarship and a pointedly political practice? The question, of course, is in some ways tendentious and conveniently misleading,

since neither has entirely gone away. The reach of critical practice and critical theory also covers a far wider world than that encompassed by the technologically and culturally limited networks of Anglo-American photo-theory in the 1970s. We stand on the threshold of global histories of photographs for which the multiple languages and institutions of photography are, at once, locally rooted and transnationally exchanged. Yet the question still has bite, not least at a moment when the neoliberal consensus installed in the late 1970s is faltering badly on both sides of the Atlantic in the face of popular anger and pervasive contempt for the architects of the age of inequality. But will the current interest in the 1970s prove nothing more than another passing curatorial revival? Or will this present period of disjunction and conflict generate its own inventive forms of practice and theory, its own new modes of intervention in the codes, institutions, and relations of power that have sustained an increasingly insecure globalized economy of museum art and academic knowledge?

RESPONSE BY

Geoffrey Batchen

*Professor, School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies*

*Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

I came of age as a budding scholar in the later 1970s and therefore was one of the fortunate recipients of the “unruly work of 1970s photo-theory” that John Tagg describes. By 1984, when I returned to Australia from a brief period in New York, the word “Postmodernism” had taken hold in my country of origin and was being used to cohere another unruly group of texts, those produced by French writers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida, to name only a few of the most familiar suspects. I was fortunate that tertiary education was still free in Australia so that, like many of my friends, I was able to audit philosophy classes in which these French proper names featured prominently. So I ended up reading the work of Tagg and his peers (Victor Burgin and Allan Sekula in particular) through that frame, reinventing it for a new decade, or at least for what seemed like a new set of challenges. By that time many of the British contributors to the intellectual provocations of the 1970s had jumped the Thatcherite ship and were teaching in the United States (or even, in the case of Tony Fry, in Australia). They became fixtures of the academy, as did their writings. When my generation began to take up teaching positions of our own, we instituted compulsory classes on “theory”—a strange word that seems to imply that not all texts are equally ideologically loaded. Let’s say we taught classes *about* theory, about the possibility of engaging with the politics of form (of language, of medium, of design, of art history) using the sophisticated, if often somewhat cynical, tools that Postmodernism offered. We were keen to infuse our students with our own enthusiasm for these tools, to get them thinking big thoughts, or just to get them thinking. We made them read Barthes, Foucault, and so on (and, by the way, Tagg, Burgin, and Sekula too) and embedded this kind of discourse in the undergraduate education of the next generation of artists and art historians.

But, in recent years, I have wondered whether this has been the most effective way to choreograph such an education. When I read all those authors myself, it was voluntarily (I never had an art theory course to take) and out of a shared enthusiasm for the task. In Australia in the 1980s, postmodern theory seemed to matter and we applied ourselves to the task of making it matter, at least to us. It felt like it was ours! But what happens when students feel the same way, that the theory they are taught is the discourse of their instructors and not something forged by themselves out of the demands of their own moment? What happens when they repeat it back to

me for a grade, faithfully but without any great enthusiasm? This unease is made more acute when I read the criticisms of the work on photography that came out of that moment by, say, Steve Edwards (himself a child of the politicized 1970s, in my estimation).

As I have recounted elsewhere, Edwards complains of the “post-structuralist pyrotechnics” that have tainted recent scholarship on photography. In his view, this kind of scholarship is guilty of “severing representation from social interest”, of abandoning “the terrain of historical persons for transcendental notions of the Subject”, and of favouring “big ideas” over “small, tacky social histories”.<sup>3</sup> It is a reasonable enough critique, even if one would want to draw on the remnants of those pyrotechnics to caution against the wisdom of simply moving from one pole (big ideas) to the other (small social histories), as if the second is not just as limiting as the first. Surely some kind of reverberation between them is what is needed? But more than that, we need a discourse about photography informed by and infused with the political demands of the present. We need, to take but one pertinent example, a refugee theory that grounds any discussion of the practice of photography in the very real and pressing challenges of that particular crisis. In short, we need our students to come up with a discourse—a “theory”—of their own, that they have *made their own*. It is their turn to teach us.

RESPONSE BY

Siona Wilson

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City University of New York*

Is the Personal Still the Political?

If all historical work is shaped to some extent by contemporary issues, reconsidering the 1970s today through the vectors of photography, photographic theory, and political economy seems particularly timely. Beyond the dominant preoccupations of 1970s photographic theory—the documentary and conceptualist pairing John Tagg points to—the theorization of vernacular photography, the family album in particular, had also emerged for the first time. The hyper-expansion of the use of photography in everyday life has given a whole new meaning to today’s vernacular image, making this area of theoretical work especially urgent (fig. 3). Vernacular photography (including the growth of documentary by citizen journalists) is a particularly important site for a reconsideration of the everyday manifestations of the neoliberal project that, as many agree, was nascent in the 1970s.



Figure 3

Werker Collective, Werker 3 / Domestic Worker  
Photographer Network, *Kitchen* (screenshot). Digital  
image courtesy of [www.werkermagazine.org](http://www.werkermagazine.org).

While second-wave feminist photographers such as Jo Spence developed a confessional form of subjective self-imaging to expose the workings of institutional power in everyday life, comparable strategies of self-surveillance have become writ large in today's digital sphere. The mainstream proliferation and routinization of self-documenting, however, no longer carries the transgressive charge of exposing private images to public scrutiny. Not only are such strategies a new everyday norm, but the family album is also no longer a discrete, material object reserved for private use. It is now dispersed, immaterial, and immediately available to—in many cases—a mass audience of “friends” and strangers. And even more significantly, these platforms are enabled by and serve commercial interests and, potentially, those of the state. This integration of state, commercial, and personal spheres has profoundly transformed some of the most significant feminist questions of the 1970s, with the vernacular image as a newly central element. For example, the expansion of working life into private spaces, the experience of love and the socialization and psychical development of children are all now mediated in much more visible ways.

For second-wave feminists the political significance of personal images lay in the sustained interrogation of the institution of the family as an important site for gendered subjectivization. Transgressing this public/private divide was part of a broader feminist project of the political analysis of social life—the normalized site of women's oppression—that liberal theory had traditionally deemed beyond the scope of the political per se. Today such insights about the politics of the social might indeed be more widely assumed, but they have also become subject to an accelerated logic of what Wendy Brown has called a generalized “economization” of political life.<sup>4</sup> The second-wave feminist leitmotif, “the personal is the political”, popularized by Carol Hanisch in a 1969 essay, is now much more closely linked to the ever pervasive monetization of the self.<sup>5</sup> Theorizing these transformations, beyond the melancholic laments of neo-avant-garde co-option or the mindless celebration of technological democracy, is one of greatest challenges in bringing the 1970s into critical dialogue with our current moment.

RESPONSE BY

Dengyan Zhou

*Contributing author*

*Chinese Photographers magazine, Beijing*

The 1970s in China were a period of profound political, social, and cultural changes, though in a completely different historical context from that in Britain. The death of the great leader Mao Zedong in 1976 marked the end of three decades of central planning, but also of a Party-oriented and politically engaged mass culture. The “Open and Reform” policy initiated in 1978 brought to China a market economy and a flood of diverse and even conflicting cultural ideas, theories, and forms of practices from the West.

For Chinese photographic practitioners in the reform era, a critical engagement with photography first and foremost meant marking a conceptual and pictorial distinction from Maoist socialist realism. On the one hand, independent committed amateurs sought to break through political and institutional constraints by emphasizing photography's “ontology”---a striking combination of modernist and reflectionist conceptions of photography. On the other hand, officially recognized photographic organizations saw the humanist rhetoric of American documentary as something they could appropriate as a means to restore the credibility and vitality of socialist realist principles. Despite their contradictory perspectives, the shared desire of these two initiatives to reconnect with the outside world has shaped a new photographic culture in contemporary China

that is dominated by Eurocentric conceptions of practice and critical theory, yet has entirely overlooked ideas of the politics of photographic representation in 1970s Britain.



Figure 4

Li Xiaobin, *Petitioner*, 1977, contemporary color print.  
Digital image courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

The tendency towards the depoliticization of photography in China can be seen in the reframing of Li Xiaobin's *Shangfang zhe* ("Petitioner"----a term for citizens seeking justice through state petitioning bureaus) as an icon of Chinese "documentary" (fig. 4). Li took this street snapshot near Tiananmen Square in 1977, but he waited until 1986 to make it public for the first time in an exhibition of his Modern Photo Group. The "Petitioner" became even more widely known after 1988, when it was shown as an award-winning "news photograph" in the National Art Museum. In 1998, Li's photograph was purchased by the Museum of the Chinese Revolution (now the National Museum of China) for its "first-grade" national collections. The effect of this discursive and institutional reframing is to validate ideas of a new realist rhetoric and to transform the anonymous subject into a generalized symbol of the suffering of a Chinese generation during the Cultural Revolution.

As Chinese photography attracts greater scholarly interest as a result of the recent global turn of the history of photography, the opportunity for Chinese scholars to foreground a critical engagement with photography must lie in a rational re-examination of the cultural technology's recent past in relation to current concerns in China. The building of a transnational archive, curatorial cooperation, academic exchange, and the growth of social media may facilitate professional communications, but they also risk reinforcing cliché. An effective open network requires us not merely to participate and appreciate, but also to cultivate new historical viewpoints, broaden and complicate avenues of inquiry, and contribute historical insights and inventive ideas to the field. This will depend, above all, on a conscious engagement with the politics of depoliticization that saturates our everyday working lives and our living environment.

RESPONSE BY

Elizabeth Edwards

*Professor Emerita*

*De Montfort University*

While I recognize the history and its political problematic plotted out by John Tagg, in many ways these questions, assumptions, and practices have been premised on very specific ideas of what photography is, what it does, and under what conditions. A whole body of Theory has been built on these foundations, characterized by anxieties about status, the power and ethics of representation, about claims to realism, the workings of the sign, and the nature of the index. But a theory of photography based largely on instrumentality and the "hermeneutics of suspicion" elides very real photographic desires, both historical and contemporary, of the

majority world for whom photographs function within specific cultural discourses of identity, lineage and ancestry, spirit, and in many cases cultural reinvigoration. This resolutely realist ontology and its cultural applications demand a language and theoretical disposition that acknowledges the power relations of the image, but at the same time accounts for the photographic desires, expectations, and uses of photographs in that majority world—an ontology that is allowed to exist in a world in a critical, certainly, but not hostile interpretative environment. This demands not only that assumed categories of analysis are refigured, but also that we engage with different ways of talking about photographs embedding conceptualizations that may make photographs something else entirely. For instance, in Morobe Province of Papua New Guinea, the *punctal* functions as a mark of the presence of the subject's ongoing agency, not loss. That is, their presence, their social being, remains active as the agency of the living and the agency of the dead become coeval, giving the photograph the status of “a node in the folding and unfolding of persons and places”.<sup>6</sup> Another cogent example is the photographic application of the seSetho word *seriti* by the South African photographer and artist Santu Mofokeng. *Seriti* is not merely “shadow” but “aura, presence, dignity, confidence, spirit, essence, status, wellbeing and power”.<sup>7</sup> *Seriti* thus explodes standard definitions of real by presenting another order of things that “materialises a different understanding of the real”.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Maori in Zealand challenge assumed categories and the management of “the real” in their recognition of photographs as *toanga*: cultural treasure/power/spirit, located in the values attributed to the “index”.



Figure 5

A. C. Haddon, *Family traces: Torres Strait*, 1898, photograph.

Tagg asks, “will this present period of disjunction and conflict generate its own inventive forms of practice and theory”? A wider definitional base for the medium premised on what photographs *do* in the world might be part of this. One could pile up very numerous ethnographic examples, but the point is that anthropologists are good at disturbing categories and good at thinking within photographic spaces.<sup>9</sup> Addressing a differently premised *realpolitik* of the image has some

possibilities for the successive crises. Photography needs to be, indeed must be, understood as a network of processes and relations, and in relationship with other complex local beliefs.<sup>10</sup> If relations emerge from an almost universal pre-discursive recognition of the ontological scream of the medium and its presence and visceral sympathy, the explanations of how and why this might matter might produce a counter-narrative that opens a more fluid theoretical space, which is nonetheless anchored in the political.<sup>11</sup>

RESPONSE BY

Jordan Bear

*Associate Professor, History of Art*  
*University of Toronto*

When Victor Burgin's *Possession* (fig. 6) first appeared in 1976, illegally fly-posted on the sides of buildings in Newcastle upon Tyne, it constituted a direct assault on the private property rights of the city's landowners. More oblique, and more potent, was the blow dealt by the composition itself: a forceful critique of the culture industry's commingling of sexual and consumer desire. In reviving a politically engaged poster art, Burgin expanded the terrain of photography's engagement in Marxist struggle, widening out from sober documentary traditions of protest to a broader indictment of bourgeois consumer imagery. He described his aim in an essay published that same year: "to unmask the mystifications of bourgeois culture by laying bare its codes, by exposing the devices through which it constructs its self-image."<sup>12</sup> At the heart of the poster is a stock photograph of a couple achieving conjugal satisfaction, turned against itself by juxtaposition with the economic reality that its fantasy enables: "7% of our population own 84% of our wealth." *Possession* hoists this modern gentry with its own petard. But forty years later, an even more elite cadre has struck back, reclaiming its own mythological iconography and seizing from the left the visual repertoire of resistance.

Getty Images is today the world's largest repository of news and stock photographs. One image from its news portfolio is representative of the iconographic impoverishment of contemporary mass media (fig. 7). Depicting a demonstration by residents whose lives were "disrupted" by an environmental disaster, it includes all the expected constituents of a protest photograph: the hand-lettered, vernacular signs of the masses are jaggedly arrayed before the civic heft and regularity of a Corinthian column; in focus, their leader stands at a microphone, her clenched fist rising into the air. So generic, so perfunctory is the semiosis of the picture that we sense that, after a suitable interval, the image might be easily extracted from Getty's news photography range and assimilated into its lucrative stock photography holdings.



Figure 7

David McNew, *US-Energy-Fuel-Fossil Protest*, 42504.  
Digital image courtesy of David McNew / AFP / Getty Images.

Clicking on the “Protestor” tag below the photograph plunges us into that sister database, and reveals that such requirements have already been anticipated. Witness the extraordinary *Protestors with Picket Signs*, in which a frieze-like assortment of ethnically diverse, well-dressed “activists” hold up blank placards primed to brandish a message of the licensee’s choice (fig. 8). The representational infrastructure of mimed outrage stands at the ready, these evangelists of blankness greeting their unseen antagonist. The metadata tags reveal, among the merely descriptive “Demonstration”, “Low Angle View”, and “Mixed Race Person”, the key element of the photograph: “Copy Space”. The photograph, and its markers in the database, anticipate perfectly the search strings of besieged editors, avaricious marketers, and demagogues alike.



Figure 8

Martin Barraud, *Protestors with Picket Signs*, Getty Images stock photo. Digital image courtesy of Caiaimage / Martin Barraud.

The corporate consolidation of visual representation under Getty Images has been breathtaking. The firm now controls the intellectual property of some eighty million photographs, including fifteen million from British press archives dating back to the nineteenth century. The spoils of Getty’s own rapacity were, in turn, ingested by a larger predator, when the company was

acquired by the Carlyle Group, a firm best known for its influence in the financial, energy, and defence sectors. A more complete absorption of visual communication to the prerogatives of the neoliberal arrangements forged under Thatcher and Reagan would be difficult to imagine. If the ingenuity of engaged photography four decades ago involved the *détournement* of found imagery, the economic shifts that quickly ensued have powered another turn. The reclassification of virtually the whole universe of extant photographs as private “intellectual property” has secured such imagery from the interventions that, as recently as 1976, could still prove vital. Before politics becomes entirely resistant to the visual, it is imperative to visualize resistance differently. Absent new means of doing so, and the terrain of dissent is left to the nihilistic, prefab protestors of the contemporary image economy.

RESPONSE BY

Vered Maimon

*Senior Lecturer, Art History Department*

*Tel Aviv University*

I agree with John Tagg’s argument that the recent emphasis in photography theory on photographs as material objects often leaves out larger questions and usually refrains from situating photographic discourse in relation to current and urgent political concerns. This is because current photography theory is no longer motivated by the *interventionist* impulse that triggered so much of the work done in the 1970s, where scholars formulated their ideas in response to what they perceived as major economic and political transformations in the operations of post-war welfare states.

This development can be also be linked to the fact that current scholarship is focused on *vernacular* photographic practices, rather than on the mass-produced advertising imagery that stood at the centre of scholarly analysis and artistic practice in the 1970s—for example in strategies of appropriation. Yet, I actually see a potential for engaged scholarship and innovative forms of political practice within these new fields of scholarship, with their emphasis on the tactile and embodied rather than the strictly spectatorial, within specific communities of producers and users. New scholarship points out that photographs have a certain social, political, and emotional efficacy—they are affective: they produce social effects and enable agency, while their concrete modes of production and circulation are embedded within specific social and cultural relations as part of actual *lived* environments.

This move away from problems of representation actually provides a necessary analytical and theoretical framework for understanding photography’s changing role within contemporary global and digitalized visual culture. It signals a shift from problems of reference to those of circulation and transmission; and from the focus on images and their institutionally “constructed” meanings to an analysis of their performative modes of re-inscription through which political forms of affiliation are both contested and made possible.

This also explains the recent scholarly critical interest in “counter-archives” that are not simply curatorial or market-driven: the work done, for example, by Anthony Downey on archival projects in the Middle East by artists such as Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, and Dor Guez. These projects highlight the roles of desire, emotion, and the imagination within processes of archiving. They are concerned with the *practice* and *use* of photography, the temporal contingency and instability of archives, and the multiple lives of images. The images in these archives show signs of damage, touch, and exchange. They are addressed not simply as visual documents, but as material and tactile objects that were held, marked, and sometimes corrupted by their specific

users. That is to say, their meanings derive from their (re)uses and not only from their modes of representation. These strategies can no longer be described through the concept of appropriation because they are not concerned with “anti-aesthetic” issues of originality, authenticity, or the critique of institutions.

Another major concern of recent scholarship is with visual activism, for example in the work of Ariella Azoulay and Thomas Keenan. This body of work has inspired my own recent work, which I see as both scholarly and interventionist, with the photography collective Activestills, documenting protests against human rights violations in Palestine/Israel. Activestills’s photographs take part in the formation of specific protesting communities and their struggles (Figs 9 and 10). Their images are meant to be touched, held, carried, and worn, and, in this way, become inseparable from bodily gestures and acts; they function as agents for the propagation of political struggles rather than “fixed” representations of subjection or resistance----objects for passive contemplation.



Figure 9

Tess Scheflan, *Street exhibition, in the West Bank village of Bil'in marking two years of the Palestinian popular struggle against the Israeli separation wall and confiscation of lands*, 2007. Digital image courtesy of Tess Scheflan / Activestills.org.



Figure 10

Activestills, *Protests against evacuation of Bedouin villages in the Negev Desert, Al Araqib*, 2011. Digital image courtesy of Oren Ziv / Activestills.org.

So while I agree with Tagg’s criticism, I also think that the shift away from representation and institutional critique opens the way for newly devised interventionist political forms of theory and practice, and for much needed collaboration between academic research and activist agendas.

RESPONSE BY

Stephen Sheehi

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From Crisis to Condition: A Movement towards the Decolonizing of the “History of Photography”

Standing on the “threshold of global histories of photography”, I look forward and behind me, pondering John Tagg’s question: “will this present period of disjunction and conflict generate its own inventive forms of practice and theory”? Are we----those previously articulated as exterior

to the West's discourse on photography but, currently, integrated (or absorbed) into its art circuits and political grammar of globality and worldliness—positioned to seize the “chance now for the re-emergence of an engaged scholarship and a pointedly political practice”? Rather than reach to the East to find the redemptive power of photography pass into the hands of those photography has historically overlooked, objectified, and kept exterior to its constitutive discourses, let us understand these questions as an invitation for the *decolonization of photography*.

For all the emancipatory possibilities of photography, photographic practice, and historiography—possibilities inspiringly distilled in the 1970s moment—photography is haunted, if not undergirded by, its “darker side” (to crib Walter Mignolo).<sup>13</sup> From the colonial postcard to Abu Ghraib to the theft and destruction of Palestinian photographic archives, the darker side of photography is central and salient, if not ever-urgent, to those of the global South whose scholarship and practice have never had the privilege to cease being engaged politically. Yet, despite its omnipresence, the darker side of photography endures invisibly. The very term “history of photography”, for example, is itself laden with erasure, because the history of photography is the history of Euro-American photography. It excludes, exoticizes, or, more recently, hails the “Other” (of) photography, beckoning us to search for the history of “other” photographs (“African”, “Middle Eastern”, “South American”, and “Asian”) beneath the “true”, yet now bankrupt and co-opted history of photography. The “history of photography” is one-fifth of the world's photography.

Connecting new (and old) politically committed photographic practices and histories of the global South with the Anglo-American photography scene of the 1970s is pertinent and productive. The connection highlights the political, class, and formalistic critique that arose during that decade in relation to shifts in national and local economies and politics that foregrounded issues of class, gender, and race in Britain and North America. The association also calls to centre stage the politics of representation and makes visible the economy of the photograph, its production, dissemination, and discursive (and disciplinary) effects within a larger topography of class, race, gender, economy, politics, and empire. Yet the fate of the 1970s movement provides us with a prescient lesson to avoid looking to the global South exclusively as a fount of salvation. We need to understand the co-opting, containment, and homogenizing of the 1970s photography movement as a forewarning to the perception of “other photographs” as the source of undiscovered possibilities that will aid us in combating the disciplining, dehumanizing, and decentring effects of our local contexts within a global world.

Yet this warning may already be too late, where the art market has successfully absorbed the “threat” of, for example, Arab art over the past fifteen years. The terms “global”, “non-Western”, and so on, function in a similar way to the term “postmodern”, emulsifying the heterogeneity of photographic practices that differ greatly in political power, position, profundity, and relevance into one singularity of “non-Western” or “global” photographic practice. From the Venice Biennale to the Dubai art scene, from the Delfina Foundation in London to the Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne, the indeterminacy of photography and local production is defanged by the effort to make it “intelligible” and to retool it to remediate the failures and alienation arising from the suppressed but un-ignorable darker side of photography. If nothing else, looking to the global in order to find the new loops us circuitously back into a containing pattern of looking to art as the latest native informant, the most recent co-conspirator, and the newest prophet.

This critique is not to say that contemporary and historical photography originating in the global South should be ignored, in order to counter the threat of reinscribing the “East” as a place and

space of salvation from the destruction and misery wrought on the world by the West. But, rather than suggest that we are on the threshold of a new era of radical practice ushering in those previously excluded from the “history of photography”, perhaps we might look to the 1970s, not as a past, precipitous moment, but as one movement in tandem with multiple others, both contemporaneous to that decade and contemporary to this moment, that gesture towards photographic decoloniality and the project of decolonizing photography. This project, which is less an “option” than an imperative, seeks to stir, highlight, salvage, and forge historic, contemporary and future practices and scholarship, building, built, rebuilt, and perpetually emergent within the fluid global, political, economic, and technological conditions that hegemonically encase, entrap, ensnare, and co-opt us with every good intention. Decolonizing photography involves practices and scholarship that insist on challenging, making visible, reclaiming, and contesting past attempts---even those failed, contained, co-opted, outmoded, and homogenized---in order to forge, even through epistemic violence, new possibilities of seeing the “history photography” as the history of photography.

RESPONSE BY

Jonathan Long  
*Durham University*

### Feeling Our Way

A constellation of disparate images and ideas coalesces as I read John Tagg’s piece “Exit Theory”. Tagg’s history of photography theory is bookended by the collapse of two kinds of consensus: in the 1970s, the waning of the social democratic consensus that had prevailed since the end of the Second World War, and, in our own day, the faltering (if not yet the terminal demise) of the neoliberal consensus established in its stead. One manifestation of the latter is the EU referendum outcome in Britain.

One way of interpreting the Brexit vote is as a protest born of popular anger against economic neoliberalism and unregulated globalization, whose concrete, visible consequences are felt and seen across the UK: conspicuously increased income inequalities; depressed wages (especially in unskilled occupations); large-scale immigration; and a governmental commitment to shrinking the state by eroding all forms of social welfare. Protest against neoliberalism sounds laudable, yet the most notorious image from the Brexit campaign conjures an uglier form of populist protest (fig. 11).



Figure 11

Family design agency, *Breaking point: the EU has failed us all*, Brexit campaign poster, 2016. Digital image courtesy of UK Independence Party.

The interest in the 1970s, to which Tagg alludes, is not the preserve of academics and curators. The poster produced by the unofficial Leave.EU campaign of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and toured through London on the side of trucks (fig. 11), is intertextually (and in my view self-consciously) linked to an earlier icon of British electoral politics (fig. 12).



Figure 12

Saatchi & Saatchi, *Labour Isn't Working*, Conservative Party campaign poster, 1979. Digital image courtesy of the Conservative Party.

But now the wit and humour are gone; nor is there an address to the country as a whole or an invitation to subscribe to the programme of any particular party. We are, instead, offered the contention that the EU has failed all of “us”. It is this “us” that is troubling, precisely because it is one side of a “them and us” polarization in which the people depicted are excluded from the audience apostrophized by the text.

Some years ago I argued that, of the theoretical paradigms that emerged in the study of photography in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, with its emphasis on subjectivity, memory, and temporality, has proven more influential than the politically engaged work of Tagg, Victor Burgin, Allan Sekula, or Martha Rosler.<sup>14</sup> The emergence of emotion and affect as a significant orientation in recent writings on photography suggests that this diagnosis was not wrong-headed. Whether in a Deleuzian or a resolutely anti-theoretical mode, affect studies regard the production of emotional or affective communities as one of photography’s most powerful effects. The problem is that the tacitly presupposed subject of this community formation tends to be a white, Western, liberal bourgeois viewer---the “we” to which Susie Linfield makes such frequent and untroubled reference in *The Cruel Radiance*.<sup>15</sup> As the UKIP poster shows, though, “we” is a treacherous term. Known as a “shifter” in linguistics, its meaning is utterly dependent on the communicative situation, and its capacity for producing inclusion and exclusion unlimited and unpredictable. It is not a sufficient basis on which to found a critical practice adequate to the politics of our time. Better, perhaps, to return to Barbara H. Rosenwein’s account of emotional communities, if we wish to understand the political efficacy of affect. Rosenwein argues that emotional communities are governed by “systems of feeling”, which include “the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore”.<sup>16</sup> The UKIP poster both expresses and appeals to emotions with variable positions in Britain’s affective economy: antipathy towards the EU; fear of immigration; racist hostility. British political culture has conventionally tolerated the first two and deplored the third. What the poster does is seek to change the rules regarding what emotions can be expressed and tolerated in the public sphere. It offers a form of affective community built around negative emotions that are designed to foster paranoid closure and inwardness, to constitute the “we” of the text through common rejection of the people portrayed in the

photograph. Herein lies the political rationality of this image: its capacity to change “feeling rules” in ways that exceed or bypass the accepted limits of political debate.

To come back to John Tagg’s closing questions, it seems to me that the UKIP poster, when understood in this light, represents an intervention in the codes, institutions, and relations of power, but not of the kind Tagg, or indeed I, would have hoped for. This alerts us to the need for a mode of critique that takes seriously the politics of emotions but does not see affective communities as an unalloyed good.

RESPONSE BY

David Company

*Reader in Photography*

*University of Westminster*

John Tagg’s invitation to respond to his “Exit Theory” dropped into my email inbox while I sat with coffee in New York after seeing two separate exhibitions by the British artist and writer Victor Burgin. A good coincidence.

A Chelsea gallery was presenting two of Burgin’s recent video pieces; another gallery, on the less salubrious but upcoming Bowery, was showing the eleven-panel work *UK76*, now forty years old.<sup>17</sup> All the works combine image and text. The video projections comprise scrolling photo panoramas and/or camera movements through computer-generated interiors, intercut with texts, and they consider mid-century modernist architecture (by Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright) through its complex and often suppressed relation to politics and history. Modernism as autonomous, as a “fresh start”, is a dangerous myth. This is the gallery’s press release:

*Prairie . . . describes the history of “The Mecca” apartment building, built in 1892 and destroyed almost sixty years later when Mies van der Rohe undertook a redesign and expansion of the Illinois Institute of Design. Combining images and descriptions of van der Rohe’s Crown Hall with those of former Mecca residents, Prairie unearths an erased history, revealing the close links between memory and space.*

*In Mirror Lake, Burgin contrasts the history of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Seth Peterson Cottage, located in what is now Mirror Lake State Park, Wisconsin, with that of the Winnebago culture and tribe, which was forcefully relocated from that same area to Nebraska in the late 19th century. Burgin’s work positions such architectural sites as the crystallization of our wishes and fears about the past, present, and future. The forgotten stories he illuminates, whether real or imagined, underscore that the built environment is not an isolated, physical construct, but rather a shifting perception layered with many different cultural histories.*

*UK76* is a photo-text work, pasted directly to the wall. Eleven large scale photographic images borrowing the typically mid-1970s rhetoric of black-and-white documentary, reportage and street photography are overlaid with words derived from or mimicking advertising, cinema publicity, and fiction. Back then, text within the frame did seem something of an affront to the aesthetic norms of art. It was also technically quite tricky to achieve, believe it or not. For his newer works Burgin spent around eighteen months teaching himself how to use industrial strength CGI programs. In the new works and the old, the calculated tensions between image and text do not resolve into easily consumable messages, opening a space for the reader/viewer to negotiate. The technical, aesthetic, and formal differences are as stark as the continuities over four decades. Some things have changed for Victor Burgin and some have not.



Figure 13

Installation view, *VICTOR BURGIN: UK76, 4*  
December 2015 - 5 February 2016, Great Titchfield  
Street, London. Digital image courtesy of Richard  
Saltoun Gallery.

As Tagg notes, the most radical photographic gestures can be bought, resold, and bought again in the free market of contemporary art. “Even these once intransigent works could be readily absorbed”, as he puts it. Be that as it may, the important distinction is between art that is made with the auctioneer’s easel in mind, and art that isn’t (I think the phrase is Burgin’s own). The only thing the bourgeoisie cannot hang on its walls, wrote Terry Eagleton somewhere around 1990, is its own political defeat.

Although I didn’t live through it as an adult, it seems clear to me that the moment in the 1970s that Tagg describes so well was indeed remarkable, and its implications profound. I came to that moment when I studied photography, film, and video at the end of the 1980s. I soon realized that the positions that had been staked out, in writings and in images, in implicit or explicit opposition to everything—from the unconscious of patriarchy and the persistence of colonial attitudes, to neo-liberal economics and the hegemony of its art market—were positions that were going to remain pertinent for as long as those ills were around.

I don’t see the current interest in that 1970s moment as a simple curatorial repackaging and sanitizing, nor as the last gasp of the artists and academics that contributed to that moment and now look to “retirement”. Yes, on some level the works are dated and can be subsumed into art history and social history, but only the wilful are blind to their contemporary pertinence (wilful blindness being no more or less common now than I imagine it was in the 1970s when that work reached its first small but vital audience).

Perhaps the single greatest challenge of critical engagement is *vigilance*, the need to keep returning to certain hard-won lessons, but each time formulating them differently, because the “same old problems” do not circle around: they spiral around, never quite repeating themselves. I sense that spiralling vigilance in Burgin’s art and writing since the 1970s.

It is a daily challenge, as a teacher, to help students to grasp the history of critical resistance, to feel a part of its various ruptures and the continuities. When I show students the work from the 1970s I don’t show it as a “high point”, necessarily, nor a foundation. I try to show it alongside either what those artists and writers are doing now, or what younger and older figures do with a similar spirit. So, Hannah Höch with Alexis Hunter or with EJ Major. The Worker Photography movements of the 1930s with Jo Spence or with LaToya Ruby Frazier. Martha Rosler with Mark Neville. Ernst Friedrich with Bertolt Brecht, or with Broomberg & Chanarin. Siegfried Kracauer

with Allan Sekula, with Ariella Azoulay or Esther Leslie. It is messy, of course, and full of problems, but it does sidestep the unhelpful fetishizing of the 1970s.

RESPONSE BY

Shawn Michelle Smith

*School of the Art Institute of Chicago*

Photography. History. Crisis.

The making and circulation of videos of the police shooting African Americans is a new form of political photographic practice in the United States. The videos provide “new modes of intervention in the codes, institutions and relations of power”, in John Tagg’s words. They offer brute evidence of anti-black police violence and murder, and in this way they are undeniably important. But beyond this, the effects of their circulation remain ambiguous, as a look at historical images of white supremacist violence against the black body makes evident.

The current videos of police brutality have an important historical precursor in the infamous video George Holliday made in 1991 that showed Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King with night sticks. A year after a portion of the video was first broadcast on television the four white officers charged with the beating were acquitted, sparking the Los Angeles rebellion in late April and early May 1992. According to the Ventura County jury the video did not provide sufficient evidence to convict the officers who delivered fifty-six blows to King’s prone body. However, a wider viewing audience saw enough in the video to refuse a “not guilty” verdict, and rioted.<sup>18</sup>

If the Rodney King video provides a measure, recent videos of police shootings may be ineffective in securing legal prosecution of police officers and instigating institutional transformation, even as they affectively move an expansive audience in powerful ways. The videos beg for accountability that they cannot deliver. They are important records of a recurring nightmare of violence against black bodies that alone they cannot stop.

Lynching photographs provide another precedent for images of authorized and institutionalized white violence on the black body in the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lynching photographs were used in the press both to condone and to condemn the murder of African Americans. As the circulation of Lawrence Beitler’s infamous photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith makes clear, as late as 1930 the white press could publish a lynching photograph without decrying the violence it presented. *The Muncie Evening Press* (8 August 1930), which ran Beitler’s image, framed the lynching as retribution for an attack on a white woman. The paper also demonstrated that white officials were implicated in the lynching, but failed to censure their inaction. In one of the stories on its front page, reporter William E. Hallberg quoted Sheriff Campbell as saying he had refused to intervene in the mob murder for fear that white people “would have been endangered”. Campbell was at the scene of the crime but, by his own admission, did nothing to protect the young African American men murdered by the mob.

Conversely, the black press framed the same photograph as evidence of white terrorism and used it to condemn institutionalized white supremacy. In their caption for the photograph, editors of *Crisis* magazine (October 1930) drew attention to the clearly visible white faces in the image in order to challenge the official lie that the perpetrators could not be prosecuted because they could not be identified. Editors of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper (16 August 1930), which also ran the image, underscored that “the police made no resistance” to the crime.

Like historical lynching photographs, the current videos of police shooting African Americans show both the victims and perpetrators of white supremacist violence. They show the police firing at unarmed African Americans, and some of them have been used successfully in efforts to indict police officers of murder. This is indisputably important.

However, the videos of police shootings, like historical lynching photographs and the Rodney King video, also make spectacles of the violated black body. They reinforce a vision of African Americans as victims, helpless in the face of systemic racism and institutionalized white violence. They show over and over again that unarmed African Americans can be shot down in the street. In this way, they reinforce white supremacy by suggesting that violence against African Americans is authorized and ongoing.

There are a number of important differences to draw between historical lynching photographs, which are still, analogue prints, and the moving images of digital videos. And there are important differences to draw between the videos themselves. Cameras mounted on the dashboards of police cars produced some, like that of Laquan McDonald's murder in Chicago, while a witness to the crime produced others, like the video of Philando Castile's murder outside Minneapolis, made by his fiancée, Diamond Reynolds. A larger public did not see the video of McDonald until a year after the murder took place, when a judge ordered it to be released, while Reynolds streamed her video of Castile live on Facebook as he was dying.

Despite their differences, reading the current videos in relation to historical images of white supremacist violence reveals important similarities that might give one pause. At the most basic level, such a comparison demonstrates that images that implicate the police in the murder of African Americans have existed for decades, and yet the violence persists. The images alone cannot stop the violence, or dismantle white supremacy, or demand accountability, or effect institutional change.

Like lynching photographs and the Rodney King video, the current videos of the police shooting African Americans provide evidence that is important but ultimately insufficient. Simply circulating the videos or watching them does not constitute an anti-racist act. One needs to stop asking the images to perform work they cannot accomplish. Ultimately, what one might learn from historical images of white supremacist violence against the black body is that the current videos require the efforts of scholars, artists, activists, lawmakers, and politicians to direct their meaning in protest against institutionalized white supremacy, anti-black police violence, and murder. The images alone will not perform this critical political work; they can only incite one to it.

RESPONSE BY

Young-June Lee

*Hanyang University*

A Need to Renew the Mode in which Critical Discourse on Photography is Employed

We are witnessing a moment of history in which the photographic image has lost the power that it once assumed it had. At this juncture, what matters is not what is being recorded, but the mode in which a record is made and inserted into a complex array of institutions and relations. What is to blame is not the onslaught of digital or artificial intelligence, but the ever more complex layers of contexts and effects in which photography functions.

The emergence of industrial photographers in Korea in the first decade of the twenty-first century is a significant phenomenon, in that Korea's industry is facing a severe crisis after decades of rapid expansion. This crisis in Korea's heavy industry, once the cash cow of the country, is so

serious that shipbuilding and shipping companies such as Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering Company and Hanjin Shipping are facing radical restructuring. As if in response to Hegel's famous axiom that "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk", the photographic reflection on industrial scenes comes at this moment.<sup>19</sup>

A new type of industrial photographer now enjoys a different status from that of industrial photographers of the past, whose works were produced on commissions from industrial companies. The work of the new type of industrial photographer is based solely on their own interest and motivation. Their presence is significant in that the scene of industry, especially heavy industry, is now being incorporated into the field of sensibility and meaning. Before this, scenes of industry were either used for government propaganda or were criticized as sites of alienation and the exploitation of labour. Leaving this bipolar response to industry behind, some photographers are now producing images of industry which are heavily laden with complex structures and show a new sensibility towards machinery.

Among these photographers, the case of Jo Choonman is peculiar. Born in 1957 into a poor rural family, he went to work at Hyundai Heavy Industries as a welder when he was seventeen. He endured long hard labour, sometimes working at construction sites in Saudi Arabia. As the labour was very tough at this time, sometimes causing him injuries, he did not have the luxury of observing the scenes of industry. But, as time went by, he gradually developed his own sensibility towards industrial scenes, discovering the sublime beauty inherent in complex industrial structures, and began to take pictures of them. His photographs encompass wide fields of heavy industry such as shipbuilding, the petrochemical industry, and construction sites. He has recorded almost all the production sites in Ulsan, one of the biggest industrial areas of the world. Though it refers in part to earlier industrial photographs by Margaret Bourke-White, Paul Strand, and Charles Sheeler, Choonman's work requires a new approach to critical discourse. His works are a testimony to the fact that photography these days evokes overdetermined layers of meaning. A new kind of machine critic who delves into the meaning of the history, structure, and function of machinery is required to dig into these layers. The vicissitudes of heavy industry on a global scale are also seen in Choonman's works, which are the result of the prosperity of heavy industry in Korea. Having once thrived in Europe and America in the early twentieth century, the centre of heavy industry shifted to Korea in the late 1980s and is now about to take another shift to China. With the recent decline of heavy industry in Korea, Choonman's photographs have now acquired a new meaning as a record of this history. Thus critical discourse on his photographs also has to consider the mode in which photography has extended its role in relation to industry."



Figure 14

Jo Choonman, *Ship building*, 25 March 2016, inkjet print, 110 × 165 cm. Digital image courtesy of Jo Choonman.



Figure 15

Jo Choonman, *Petro Chemical Plant*, 25 January 2015, inkjet print, 110 × 165 cm. Digital image courtesy of Jo Choonman.

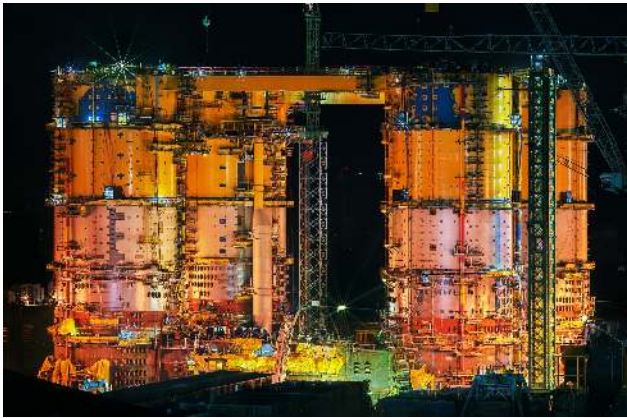


Figure 16

Jo Choonman, *Off Shore Plant*, 15 March 2016, inkjet print, 110 × 165 cm. Digital image courtesy of Jo Choonman.

## About the author

John Tagg is Distinguished Professor of Art History at Binghamton University. Born in the northeast of England and trained at the Royal College of Art in London, Tagg writes on forms of photographic practice not previously considered part of the history of photography, including police and prison photography, social surveillance, urban records, and other archival systems in which the photograph is made to serve as a document. From here, his interests have extended to the ways we construct histories of cultural technologies and visual regimes, and to the theoretical debates that have transformed the history of art and photography since the 1970s. Tagg is the author of *The Burden of Representation* (1988) and *The Disciplinary Frame* (2009), among other books. In fall 2016 he spent the semester at Yale University as the Andrew Carnduff Ritchie visiting scholar.

## Footnotes

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3. See Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2006), 300–1, and my "Origins without End", in *Photography and Its Origins*, ed. Tanya Sheehan and Andrés Zervignón (New York: Routledge, 2014), 67–81.
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