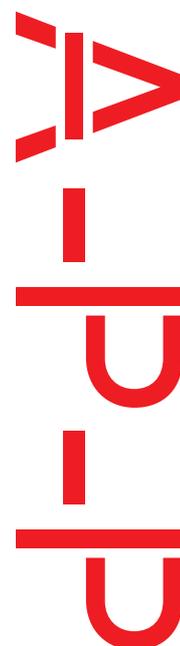# Karolina Gembara /
Between emancipation and repression.
On the agency of photography.

A young girl wearing a red dress and carrying a canvas bag slung over her shoulder is hit in the face with pepper spray. The blast is so powerful that the woman's hair is flung up into the air. This moment was caught on camera by Osman Orsal in Istanbul's Gezi Park, right at the beginning of events that were later dubbed the Turkish Spring. At least a dozen or so people lost their lives and 8,000 were injured. Ceyda Sungur, the woman in the red dress, has been hailed as an icon of the Turkish protests and a symbol of police brutality.[1] Copies of the photo appeared at the protests, visual reinterpretations and parodies were created, and female MPs in Italy turned up for work dressed in red. Two years later, thanks to the photograph, a court punished an overzealous policeman. Sungur responded: "[the policeman's] prosecution has been as a result of the infamy of the photograph on the international stage and is an attempt to quell an uprising by millions of people.[2] […] The fact that these people have not been accidentally caught on camera in a press photo is no excuse for not prosecuting and not punishing those responsible for [protesters'] deaths and suffering".[3]

In September 2015, Turkish rescue services discovered the body of a 3-year-old child washed up on a seashore. The boy, along with his family, had been trying to reach Greece by dinghy. Newspapers around the world published a photo of Alan Kurdi lying on the sand. The photo's publication resulted in heated discussions on how to solve the so-called 'refugee crisis'. Pro-immigrant organisations in Scandinavia saw a surge in donations. David Cameron's government in Britain announced it would take in more refugees. Scientists dealing with the social impact of media images published research on it. Since 2015, 13,500 more people have perished in the waters of the Mediterranean.

In January 2021, Anna, Elżbieta and Joanna were put on trial for putting up pictures of Our Lady of Częstochowa with a rainbow-coloured halo. They did it in response to the homophobic

1   Amor Toor, *How a 'Lady in Red' became the symbol of Turkey's unrest*, The Verge, https://www.theverge.com/2013/6/7/4405412/ceyda-sungur-lady-in-red-photo-becomes-symbol-of-turkey-protests;
Lewis Williamson, *'Woman in red' sprayed with teargas becomes symbol of Turkey protests*, The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/05/woman-in-red-turkey-protests;
DL Cade,*The Lady in Red: How One Photo Became the Symbol of the Turkish Protests*, PetaPixel, https://petapixel.com/2013/06/09/lady-in-red-how-one-photo-became-the-symbol-of-the-turkish-protests/;
Max Fisher, *The photo that encapsulates Turkey's protests and the severe police crackdown*, The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/03/the-photo-that-encapsulates-turkeys-protests-and-the-severe-police-crackdown/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.dde244891a4c; wszystkie z dnia 2.12.2018.

2   *'Kırmızılı kadın' Radikal iзin yazdı: O polisin yargılanması yetmez*, Radikal, http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/kirmizili-kadin-radikal-icin-yazdi-o-polisin-yargilanmasi-yetmez-1171207/, tłumaczenie z angielskiego ze strony: https://translatingtaksim.wordpress.com/tag/gezi/ z dnia 2.12.2018.

3   *The woman in read speaks*, Translatingtaksim, https://translatingtaksim.wordpress.com/tag/gezi/ z dnia 2.12.2018.

behaviour of priests from a church in Płock. They face up to 2 years in prison under Art. 196 of the Criminal Code on Offending Religious Feelings. At the same time, in solidarity with the defendants, people - both in court and on the internet - published the image in question en masse.

When the question arises as to whether photography can change the world, and it arises regularly - usually in a journalistic or activist context - the only sensible solution seems to be to deconstruct the question. What is photography? Is it a single, aesthetic object? Do the posers of such questions implicitly mean 'iconic images'? And is change always a change for the better, some progress, an improvement? What indeed does 'the world' mean? The masses? For a deeper understanding of visual culture,[4] it would be worth considering the question for a bit longer. But for the time being, our answer must be: 'no'.

I want to propose not so much an alternative understanding of the question "can photography change the world?", but rather a nuanced understanding (of the three components: "photography", "change" and "world") that reflects new research in culture, new concepts and new socio-political realities.

The sources that make it possible to consider the question we are interested in date back to the 1960s, at the very least, so they are hardly new. However, relatively recently, a methodology that combines multiple perspectives has begun to be applied in cultural studies. In particular, cultural 'turns' suggest these perspectives, being as they are evidence of the humanities' reaction to events in the world and a symptom of the weakness of hitherto prevailing constructivism.[5] In order to make it possible to ponder the agency of photography, Karolina Charewicz proposes an "alliance" of turns: the pictorial (or iconic) and the performative turns. According to Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, the origin of this alliance is twofold: there is a substantive origin, which considers the state of contemporary culture (which - on the one hand - takes on performative features, and - on the other - is saturated, or rather oversaturated, with images of various origins), and a methodological one - related to the desire to overcome the limitations of the first turn".[6] This, it transpires, is still not enough to say that photographs do something, let alone that they do something good. Therefore, this alliance must be augmented with a turn towards things (photography is still, after all, sometimes an object) as well as an ethical turn – a theoretical and methodological orientation emphasising the importance of involvement.

Photography as an event

In his book *Culture as a Verb*,[7] Ryszard Nycz argues that contemporary culture and the way we study it have a verb-like character - what counts is agency and action, applicability of solutions,

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4   I understand photography to be part of visual culture, hence my considerations in the context of research on visual culture, and not, for example, the history of art.

5   Ewa Domańska, *Zwrot performatywny we współczesnej humanistyce*, "Teksty Drugie" 2007, no. 5.

6   Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Visual Culture Studies czy antropologicznie zorientowana Bildwissenschaft? O kierunkach zwrotu ikonicznego w naukach o kulturze,* "Teksty Drugie" 2006, no. 4, p. 12.

7   Ryszard Nycz, *Kultura jako czasownik. Sondowanie Nowej Humanistyki*, IBL PAN, Warsaw 2017.
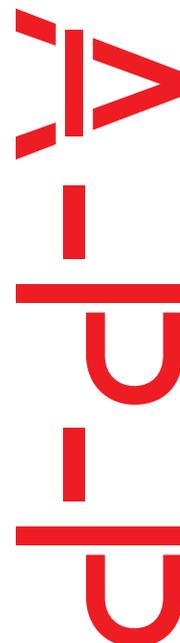
usefulness, and activity. Photography can be understood in a similar way - not as a noun, object, or even a digital file, but as a multi-stage and multi-component activity, as an engaging activity (a photograph vs. photography). For example, I can see the nature of the Archive of Public Protests, which, despite their seemingly static form as a categorised collection, is the result of a whole host of performative actions, not just on the part of protesters, security forces, and photographers, but even those viewing the photographs.[8]

The performative nature of a photographer's meeting with a photographed object is described by the creator of the concept of somaesthetics, Richard Shusterman,[9] while paying attention to corporeality and body language as presented to the camera. He also talks about the circumstances needed to take the photograph and mentions the various elements that are present on such an occasion: movement and body language, facial expression, and expressions of feelings. Interestingly, these behaviors do not refer solely to the subject of the photograph itself, but also to the photographer. As components of these circumstances, Shusterman also mentions the place and the camera, whose presence adds a frisson to the pre-photographic situation, and which ultimately of course takes the picture. The omission of any of these elements limits the impact of photography as an art, reducing it merely to an aesthetic object.[10]

The notion of the complex nature of photography is developed by Ariella Azoulay in her book *The Civil Contract of Photography*, published over a decade ago. In it the Israeli researcher puts forward a thesis that there is a civil contract contained in the act of photography, an agreement which is a contract between equal subjects (in this case between photographers, viewers, photo subjects, and recipients), i.e. the citizens of photography. Any discussion about the power of a given image does not just come down to its iconic nature, but to the responsibility for what we are looking at. Instead of what art history has called aesthetics, what the anthropologist Alfred Gell terms technical complexity[11] (artistry) and Jacques Rancière "unbearability",[12] Azoulay proposes "civic duty" as a factor that triggers action as a result of any encounter with photography.

This is no longer the Barthesian "it was", but an "it is" that becomes the subject of deliberations that last, because photography itself lasts. Azoulay uses the word "event" to describe photography understood in this way, and therefore one should not merely look at a photograph, but watch[13] it as if it were happening in time. An event that had a cause, course, circumstances, dynamics, participants, and which affects an audience, is discussed, and it makes and acts. You can then use it, discuss its meaning, and then renegotiate it, "reopening" it, imbuing it with

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8   Cf. inter alia Judith Butler, *Zapiski o performatywnej teorii zgromadzeń*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw 2016.

9   Richard Shusterman, *Photography as Performative Process, "*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", February 2012, Vol. 70, Issue 1.

10   Ibid.

11   Zob. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998.

12   Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London and New York 2009, p. 83.

13   Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York 2008, s. 14.
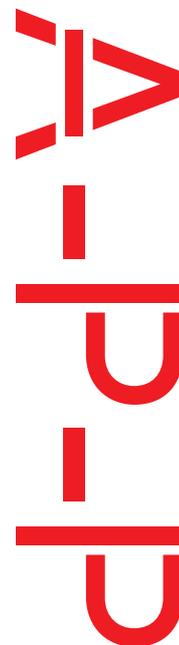
life and changing it. With this approach, photography is not an aesthetic object or an object of semiotic research, but a reconstruction of events, a performative attempt to recreate all the factors that took place. It is a reaction to what we are looking at, the use of photography, responding to it, showing it, exhibiting it, modifying it. It is also a transformation - from observer to participant.

It can be said that in the photographic event, as understood by Azoulay, all the elements to be found in everyday practices meet: the senses, embodied skills, and bodily behaviour. That which is material and that which is social interact in different ways. Photographic equipment is present here on the same principles as the people who stand in front of it, using it, observing. "Very often (too often for my taste), I have been photographed while aware of it. Yet as soon as I feel I am being viewed through a lens, everything changes: I strike a pose, I immediately create for myself another body, I transform in advance into an image",[14] says Roland Barthes. The appearance of a camera, as we read, changes a situation - you can get scared by a camera, be embarrassed at the sight of it, look directly into it, and gesticulate. If we assume that photography has an affective effect on those who attend the Women's Strike, and if it is activated in symbolic and reflective relations, then photography is an active actor. If a police officer takes pictures of or films participants in these protests, s/he uses the camera in an oppressive way and may lead to the depicted citizens being brought before a court for participating in riots. Thus, the camera is an actor that causes fear and ambivalence.

Sometimes photography is also a thing, a thing with non-visual attributes. In 2009, an Israeli soldier shot and killed Palestinian activist Bassem Abu Rahmah. A portrait of Rahmah by an Active Stills photographer, Oren Ziva, was subsequently turned into a poster that adorned the walls of Palestinian houses, and was found on placards and makeshift shields under which activists stood as they took part in clashes with the Israeli military. Photography became protection against a bullet, a grenade, death.

So, let's look at photography as a tangled web of actions, people and things, as a plexus, and as a duty - as Azoulay would say, one which we are all burdened with. With responsibility for what we take part in: seeing. After all, there is always the potential for action, reaction, outrage and compassion.

Change

In the context of science, art, culture, and especially in the context of activism, we wish to see change in the sense of an improvement. Meanwhile, the consequences of actions involving images in the field of visual culture can be complex, contradictory, unfavourable or simply so extended in time that it is difficult to finally assess the consequences of the actions of given images. While analysing the nature of strong images (i.e. those that clearly have power, and activate and stimulate people), Marek Krajewski points out that strong images can also be those that have the power to stop change in its tracks and maintain the status quo. Expecting to successfully improve the world is therefore naïve, so having a broad research perspective (the alliance of turns) at our disposal, it would make more sense to consider the nature of photography's agency. One should name all the shades of emancipation and repression that

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14   Roland Barthes, *Światło obrazu. Uwagi o fotografii*, KR, Warsaw 1996, p. 23.
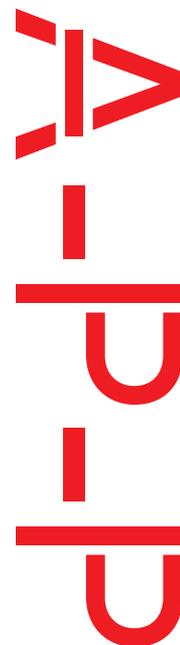
arise as a result of it, but one should also realise that we might see the results of actions involving pictures, and shown in pictures, in the distant future. The event of photography, Azoulay says, continues, and it does not only bear witness to the past. We can respond to it now or sometime later. Thus, it remains important to ask questions not just about the nature of change, but also about the nature of our reactions, and the "difference"[15] that an image will cause.

Susan Sontag, known for her skepticism towards press photography, believes that the last photos that had any impact on public opinion whatsoever, that changed anything, were those of the Vietnam War.[16] One can, of course, recall many other photos taken later which triggered specific actions, such as a certain photo taken in Sudan by Kevin Carter. A few years ago, at the beginning of the refugee crisis, three-year-old Aylan Kurdi was washed up on the Turkish seashore in Bodrum.[17] A journalist from the "Independent" wondered: "If these extraordinarily powerful images of a dead Syrian child washed up on a beach don't change Europe's attitude to refugees, what will?",[18] and the question was echoed by many news editors.[19] The impact of photography has been the subject of much scientific research,[20] and the research has revealed an increase in financial aid for pro-immigration organisations as well as various political pledges to admit more people from Syria, and the mechanisms responsible for the "viral nature" of such photography have been analysed. All these phenomena are of great importance, but has the refugee crisis eased? No. But is that what we would expect when talking about agency?

Both sceptics and proponents of performative image theory are right. The Louise Michel and Open Arms rescue boats are working flat out with financial support from the public. However, the fact remains that more children (and adults) are drowning in the Mediterranean, and 5 years after Aylan drowned, refugees are still being treated extremely cruelly. Nobody paid any attention to another, almost identical photograph, which shows Mohammed Shohayet, a small

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15   Anthony Giddens, *Stanowienie społeczeństwa. Zarys teorii strukturacji*, trans. S. Amsterdamski, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2003, p. 53.

16   Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador. Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York 2003, p. 93.

17   The boy's real name was Alan, however, in initial media reports, his name was changed and that is the one people around the world know him by.

18   Adam Withnall, *If these extraordinarily powerful images of a dead Syrian child washed up on a beach don't change Europe's attitude to refugees, what will?*, "The Independent", https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/if-these-extraordinarily-powerful-images-of-a-dead-syrian-child-washed-up-on-a-beach-don-t-change-10482757.html, accessed 7.05.2020.

19   Amongst other sources, "Gazeta Wyborcza", https://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,18701523,jesli-to-zdjecie-nie-zmieni-stosunku-do-uchodzcow-czy-cokolwiek.html; Al-Jazeera, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/images-don-change-europe-150902220504564.html.

20   E.g. Paul Slovic, Daniel Västfjäll, Arvid Erlandsson, Robin Gregory, *Iconic photographs and the ebb and flow of empathic response to humanitarian disasters*, "PNAS", January 24, 2017, Vol. 114 (4) p. 640-644; Fausto Colombo, *Grief and pity: Investigation of the social impact of photography* [in:] *Current Perspectives on Communication and Media Research*, L. Peja, N. Carpentier, et al., Edition Lumière, Bremen 2018, p. 23-42; Farida Vis (ed.), Olga Goriunova (ed.), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab, Sheffield 2015.
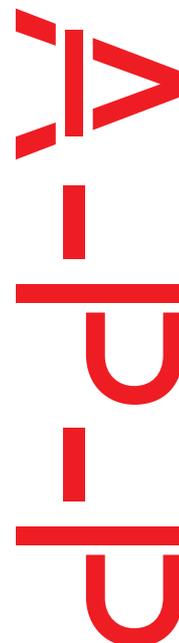
Rohingya[21] refugee who drowned with his family while fleeing the terror of Burmese troops, nor to the photo of an anonymous child whose body was photographed off the coast of Tunisia in 2020.[22] Krajewski sees the power of certain images in the fact that they depict something we have not seen before, which we do not know, something which is surprising: "Their strength flows from knocking us out of our habits and routine, from disturbing our perceptual field via an element that is incongruous, something which detaches from it, which we have a problem understanding, categorising and recognising".[23] Perhaps that is why yet another photo that shows a small drowned person has no power, does not spark action, or payments to pro-immigration organisations, does not trigger protests at the headquarters of the European Commission, does not even become - as Hito Steyerl would say - a miserable picture,[24] marked, duplicated, infamous.

Sometimes the change is symbolic, one that here and now does not have a direct impact on the fate of a particular person or group of people. A photo by Rafał Milach entitled *Stop Calling Me Murzyn*, from the spring of 2020, was a clear contribution to a broader discussion on the nature of the "M-word" (perhaps best translated as "Negro"), which is typically conducted by predominantly white internet users. Black people in Poland and Polish racism are an unknown, absent, downplayed topic, yet suddenly, like the photograph itself, this topic took over social and traditional media. It broke into the mainstream and recalled the unsettled mentality of the Polish colonialist. Bianca Nwolisa, the subject of the photograph, was carrying a placard pointing out the offensiveness of the commonly used word "Murzyn", and she found herself on the cover of the Polish edition of "Vogue". And society saw a black citizen, a girl born in Poland, not an interloper or a stranger, and I see in this an emancipatory phenomenon (though it arises from oppressive circumstances). The Polish Language Council subsequently distanced itself from the opinion of one of its members that the word "Murzyn" is offensive and should only be used in a historical quotation.[25] Nonetheless, this kind of debate was a surprising and, despite everything, necessary offshoot of the BLM movement – and the debate is bound to be renewed at some point.

At the time of writing, the town of Płock was host to the first trial of three female activists accused of offending religious sentiment. The evidence in the case consists of images of the Virgin Mary sporting a rainbow halo, images which the women put up in the vicinity of St. Dominic's church in response to a homophobic installation organised by local priests. Just before the trial commenced, the internet was flooded with images of the Rainbow Virgin, duplicated, shared, made available in various formats according to users' needs. Physical images also appeared around the court building in Płock. The prosecution service had by now already achieved the opposite effect to what it had intended, but one must not forget the repressive nature of the whole situation. The image (which, according to legend, has already demonstrated

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21   https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/03/asia/myanmar-alan-kurdi/index.html, accessed 14.01.2021.

22   https://twitter.com/ABoatReport/status/1300119448595107840, accessed 14.01.2021.

23   Marek Krajewski, *Słabe obrazy – obrazy słabych*, "Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej" 2015, no. 9.

24   Hito Steyerl, *W obronie nędznego obrazu*, trans. Ł. Zaremba, "Konteksty" 2013, nr 3.

25   The Polish Language Council https://rjp.pan.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1898:slowo-murzyn&catid=109&Itemid=55, accessed 15.01.2021.
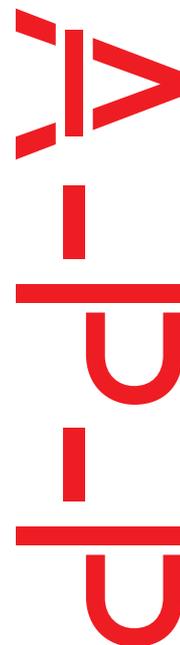
its power once) and the way it was used led to the activists facing prosecution. At the same time, its replication in solidarity (and the inability to control it) may paradoxically undermine the legitimacy of any possible punishment. The lack of precedents in Polish law will not, however, protect other citizens from charges in the future.

The World

What would happen if Israelis viewed Palestinians as their fellow citizens, as fellow dwellers in the land that stretches between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, as equals of Israeli citizens? What if the whole world looked at Palestinians in this way, instead of seeing them merely as "victims" of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Would we participate in a protest, knowing that no media would be interested in them and that our *selfie-protest* would not even be seen by our friends? The impact of an image varies. It can have repercussions for entire communities, the climate, and even individual creatures. Changing "the world" does not mean changing the world. It can mean a change in perception, in an opinion, and also the lack of any change – it can perpetuate the system, sometimes an oppressive one. But it can also mean changing the world for a refugee who, as a result of David Cameron's government loosening its refugee policy (caused by the scandal that followed the death of Aylan Kurdi), manages to enter the UK. It can convince millions of people that Osama bin Laden is dead.[26] It can lead to activists being brought before a court. It can help buy mattresses, kettles and ensure a warm shower.[27] The symbolism of the word "world" found in the question that forms the subject of this text is not innocent. On the one hand, it contains scepticism – as employed by critics of the theory of agency, and it contains an attempt to discredit the theory, and on the other hand, it expresses a range of needs, expectations and hopes, which symbolism's supporters have, hold and cherish.

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A literal approach to the question "can photography change the world?" forces me to answer: no. If, however, we adopt a performative definition of photography that breaks with the understanding of photography as a single aesthetic act belonging to the author; if we agree with the broad definition of change, a change that may occur in the future and whose potential lies in each and every one of us; and if we finally decide that the scale of the impact cannot be confined to one category, then perhaps it is easier to agree with Rancière, who admonishes us that when we are looking we are participants, that the moment we look at a picture, we become co-responsible for it.

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26   A photograph by Pete Souza, White House/European Pressphoto Agency.

27   The "Peace and Love" initiative by Jan Jurczak, https://www.janjurczak.com/peace-and-love-initiative, accessed 14.01.2021.