In 2021, we saw the photography industry attempt to adjust to a changing world, with the cautious reopening of exhibitions for the first time since the pandemic, and the continuing embrace of new voices. Here, Diane Smyth looks back on a complex year.
ne of the interesting things about photography in 2021 is how the medium itself has been represented. You can literally see it. Chanel’s just-launched SS2022 ad campaign is a series of portraits by Inez & Vinoodh showing models acting out modelling, directing, taking photographs; Cartier’s 2021 Tank watch ads prominently feature both cameras and real-life photographers Coco Capitán, Moath Alofi, and Luis Alberto Rodriguez.

Photography is fashionable, it seems, and a current ad campaign by the Leica camera brand may help explain why. Put together by TBWA\Paris, it’s titled The World Deserves Witnesses and features 12 iconic images, each with its own spin on this tagline. There’s a photograph by Joel Meyerowitz showing an older white man seemingly recoiling from a younger Black guy, tagged The Fears of the World Deserve Witnesses, for example.

There’s also a photograph by Justin Mott showing one of the last two northern White Rhinos and her Kenyan caretaker Zacharia, tagged The Love of the World Deserves Witnesses, and the accompanying campaign microsite features interviews with the imagemakers, focusing on their approaches to storytelling. If 2020 was a year of street protests, in 2021 photography stood out as a means of protesting, and of showing underrepresented perspectives.

It’s easy to see why. Photography has always had a political element, but this aspect has come to the fore of late. There’s the Archive of Public Protests, for example, a semi-open platform for images documenting social and political tensions in Poland.
“If 2020 was a year of street protests, in 2021 photography stood out as a means of protesting, and of showing underrepresented perspectives.”
set up by a group of photographers covering events such as demonstrations over newly restrictive abortion and LGBTQ+ laws. The APP collates these images into one easily accessible library, making it easier for picture editors and researchers to source; it’s also become part of the action, however, with pages from APP newspapers held aloft by activists, or used as posters, on the street.

Other activities this year were less directly linked to protest but still key in shifting the sands of our time. 2021 saw the publication of several books rewriting the history of photography to include more women, for example, including Photography – A Feminist History by Tate curator Emma Lewis and What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women, 1843–1999, edited by Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich. Women Street Photographers by Gulnara Samoilova highlighted contemporary work, and by extension the idea that women should be able to go out into the street to work – or just simply walk. It’s a point that seems self-evident, but its relevance was tragically underscored in London this March, when Sarah Everard was kidnapped while walking home, then raped and murdered. The fact her attacker was a police officer only underscored the sense that the status quo must change.

Nadine Ijewere’s book Our Own Selves also came out this year, a collection of fashion photographs drawing on her roots in both south-east London and Nigeria, which aims to, as she puts it, reframe what beauty has stereotypically been and create a
space to elevate women of colour. Again, this should be self-evident but it’s not – Ijewere was the first Black woman to shoot the cover of any Vogue title – and that was in 2018. Another south Londoner, Liz Johnson Artur, has been doing something similar for a wider population via documentary images, meanwhile, gathering a huge cache of shots of everyday life for what she calls the “Black diaspora” under the title Black Balloon Archive. Johnson Artur has been making this work for 30 years, but it was in 2021 that she won the Women in Motion Award at the prestigious Rencontres d’Arles festival – an award backed by Kering, a global luxury group that develops brands such as Gucci and Balenciaga.

Interestingly, Gucci helped support another self-initiated project this year – the photographer Ronan Mckenzie’s Home, a creative space she set up at the tail end of 2020 and which is “one of very few Black-owned art spaces within London, and one of the only to be artist-led, with a leading focus on supporting Black and Indigenous people of colour”.

Gucci also marked its brand tie-up with the North Face by working with creative agency A Vibe Called Tech this year, backing a project in which artist Jazz Grant created collages from self-portraits by artists and thinkers Alayo Akinkugbe, Theophilus Imani, Renata Cherlise and Osei Bonsu. Bonsu, a British Ghanaian curator, critic and art historian, described the project as an opportunity to “amplify Black voices”. “This year has been extraordinarily challenging for so many of us, but I’ve often found hope and inspiration in the boundless creativity of my community,” he stated.

In fact community and identity have become important touchstones for photography and beyond, in a time also marked by increasing nationalism. Five years after the Brexit vote, the UK photography scene is knee-deep in ‘state of the nation’ projects surveying the country; Brexit has troubling implications for Northern Ireland’s 1998 peace deal, so it’s interesting to see Seen Fifteen gallery open an ongoing series of shows on The Troubles Generation, and Gilles Peress publish his huge book on Northern Ireland, titled Whatever You Say, Say Nothing.

But Britain isn’t alone. As nationalism rises in France – with an election coming up next year and far right figures Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour attracting a disturbing level of support – our Gallic neighbours are getting their own share of these surveys. Le Monde put together an epic online project this October, for example, in which 100 photographers shot 100 stories in France, revealing a picture far beyond the typical stereotypes.

And while America has long been a source of fascination for photographers, new books on the country this year speak of a sense of unease. There’s American Mirror by Philip Montgomery, for example, an Aperture publication that provides “a dramatic chronicle of the United States at a time of profound upheaval”. Then there’s Matt Black’s American Geography, a radical take on poverty in the world’s biggest economy. Black was born and brought up in Central Valley, California, the primary source for produce for the US but also a region riven by deprivation. Taking a series of road trips around the US, he discovered he could travel the length and breadth of the country without leaving areas of concentrated poverty – areas in which 20% of the population or more is impoverished. Black’s publication argues that, far from a land of opportunity, the US is a place in which poverty and lack of access to basic resources is systemic.

The photographer argues the case for looking beyond the local community to find wider, more structural issues, and points out that focusing on differences between communities only divides those who would do better to unite. “Within that broad grouping there are many different issues, many different identities, and many different things going on,” he has said. “But what we’re seeing now is
how these differences have been harnessed to divide. That’s completely contrary to where I’m coming from and where the country needs to be going.”

It’s an interesting point, an argument for moving beyond simple identity politics and the dangers of solipsism, and towards a greater sense of solidarity. Black is not alone. London’s Peckham 24 curated an entire festival around the theme of ‘solidarity’ in September, finding common struggles between various minority groups, and marking a welcome return for the edgy Photo London fringe event, after both took a year out owing to Covid.

And if the word solidarity evokes politics of a particular political hue, perhaps it’s not surprising to find themes such as capitalism, industrialisation, and colonialism threading their way through photography this year. Imagemakers are considering not just the marginalisation of certain groups, but the underlying reasons behind this exclusion. Craig Easton won the 2021 Sony World Photography award with a series called Bank Top, for example, which looks at a working-class area of Blackburn and counters the idea that it’s divided because of its multiculturalism. Easton made the work with local writer and researcher Abdul ‘Aziz’ Hafiz, who says the project “challenges the simplistic narratives of ‘segregation’ and ‘culture wars’, instead pointing the finger back at the media and policymakers who attempt to dominate the discourse from afar, avoiding and ignoring the historical legacy and social costs of industrial expansion and the cruelty of colonial exploitation.”

Bank Top will be published as a book very soon. Also in 2021, Sim Chi Yin – a Singaporean photographer and the first Southeast Asian photographer to join Magnum – presented an exhibition at Rencontres d’Arles titled One Day We’ll Understand, tracing anti-colonial perspectives from the so-called Malayan Emergency (1948–60), in which local people pushed back against British and Commonwealth troops. Nona Faustine’s White Shoes, just published by Mack, is an eye-opening trip around New York, meanwhile, picking out sites once linked with slavery. One image shows Faustine naked, apart from a pair of white shoes, outside Wall Street, which was once home to a slave market. Another shows her pushing against the columns of the nearby Tweed Courthouse, the symbolic halls of justice built on a former African burial ground. “Human beings were the first commodity of the greatest finance capital in the world,” Faustine states.

It’s a perspective that’s fed through to environmental concerns, working through the connections between seeing the natural world as a set of resources and manmade disasters such as the sixth extinction and the climate emergency. Some of the most haunting footage of the year was handheld shots taken by islanders escaping wildfires in Greece, while photographer Mishka Bokharyov took an eerie shot of a young holidaymaker on a Turkish beach gazing at a plane tackling more fires. But, as a new show at London’s Somerset House points out, it is citizens of the Global South who will suffer most from climate change and, states curator Ekow Eshun, “climate change has a racial history”.

We Are History tells this story via imagemakers based in the worst-affected regions; it includes work by Carolina Caycedo, for example, who has combined satellite photographs, archival images, maps, and photographs to show how water river systems have been industrialised and privatised in Colombia, Mexico and Brazil. Beyond the show, 1854 x WaterAid recently commissioned Ngadi Smart to document issues with water access in Sierra Leone, while imagemakers such as Seif Kousmate in Morocco, Sarker Protick in Bangladesh, and Hashem Shakeri in Iran are all making important work documenting climate change. Listening to people from the Global South is important, not just because it’s the right thing to do but because they’re
THIS SPREAD, FROM
LEFT Mohammed Afzal
(Birdman of Bank Top),
photographed by Craig
Easton in his Sony
World Photography
award-winning series
Bank Top; Mustapha
Kamara, photographed
by Ngadi Smart, 2021,
as part of a commission
from 1854 x WaterAid
on the frontline of this crisis. But as I write, indigenous activists at the Cop26 United Nations Climate Change Conference are accusing world leaders of sideling them in “a continuation of colonialism”.

But if there is a wave of anti-capitalist, anti-colonial sentiment, it’s not clear that photography is the good guy. On the contrary, the last year or so has seen a clutch of academic publications taking a cool look at imagemaking, including Capitalism and the Camera (ed, Kevin Coleman and Daniel James, May 2021), Photography After Capitalism (Ben Burbridge, November 2020), Photography’s Neo-liberal Realism (Jörg Colberg, November 2020), and Photography: A Critical History (Erina Duganne, Heather Diack, Terri Weissman, June 2020).

These books set out ways in which photography has pushed back against inequality, but they also consider how it’s part of the problem, and how it has reinforced – and is still reinforcing – existing power structures. The most obvious example is the way in which colonial subjects were photographed as if they were commodities in a stock-taking, but more recent ‘white saviour’ narratives around the disadvantaged perhaps do something similar, no matter how well-intentioned.

This sense of unease has filtered through to the industry. Bieke Depoorter published the book Agata this year, for example, a collaboration with a young sex worker in which the imagemaker questioned her own role, or complicity, in taking photographs, and which has been nominated for every big prize going. London-based collective Rake is tackling how the police use photography to put pretty much everyone under surveillance, meanwhile, and similar questions about power and accountability are swirling around technology and access to information. Instagram has long been decried for its queamishness over showing nipples, for example. It has been subject to a ‘free the nipple’ campaign for years and this year it was forced to apologise to director Pedro Almodovar for censoring his new film poster. The Vienna tourist board recently opened an OnlyFans site to show works of art censored by the social media giants.

These questions aren’t new – they’re the reason, after all, that there has been such a collective effort to put more underrepresented groups behind the camera. But perhaps they’re set to get more pressing. We’re all spending an increasing amount of time online, and Covid restrictions only exacerbated the trend; this year, MoMA’s senior curator of photography, Roxana Marcoci, stated that “online viewing has far surpassed (by millions) the traffic within the institution’s tangible walls” in Curator Conversations, a book published by online photography magazine 1000 Words.

Meanwhile, Mark Zuckerberg recently announced that Facebook is creating a metaverse, a sci-fi-esque mashup of image and life which will run from virtual to augmented reality. Facebook is already spending billions on its strikingly named Reality Labs, just as Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen is testifying on the company’s terrifying power to modify our perception of reality — and therefore our actual reality.

But it’s not all bad news. Ghanaian-British artist Baff Akoto suggested a powerful way to harness some of these technologies in a project titled Up:Rise, marking ten years since the 2011 England riots. Backed by Arts Council England and retail giant Gap, this project allowed viewers to access archive footage and testimonies from those who were involved by scanning QR codes on posters placed in London, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham. For Akoto, the digital space opens up new audiences around marginalised stories, and Gap’s reach was part of the appeal. “The idea is to make it accessible to non-traditional audiences,” he told The Art Newspaper. “Digital public art can reach further.”
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