

Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography *in Dialogue with the MoCP Collection*

Collaboration is intrinsic to photography. The process of translating places, objects, events, or living people into a two-dimensional representational format often indicates the involvement of others in the act of creation. Notably, photographs of human stories are collaborative as they rely on the participation, and oftentimes the labor, of other people. Yet, the person behind the camera is usually credited as a photograph's sole author. And it bears thinking about that while many instances of photographing such stories carry the positive associations we give to "collaboration," photographic interactions can also be coercive in nature—a means to an end whereby the maker of the photograph is the only benefactor.

This exhibition is an extension of the project presented in a publication titled *Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography*, created in 2024 by scholars Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Leigh Raiford, and Laura Wexler, and artists Wendy Ewald and Susan Meiselas. The authors state in a manifesto that opens the publication: *Collaboration is an attempt to think about the participation of the many, under various conditions, in the event of photography, and to undo the structures of viewing photography as if the many who impacted the event of photography in different ways were not there. They were always there.*¹

The publication is one part of a much larger, long-term undertaking (over fifteen years of investigation), in which these authors have collectively examined a multitude of photographic projects to dive deeper into notions of authorship, visibility, and power. Looking at both artists' statements and interviews with those depicted in photographs, they question what is happening in and outside of the pictured moment: Do both sides remember the instance in the same way? How does the photographed person feel about the photograph's lifespan after it circulated through art markets, print media, and online? And what role might the photograph play in perpetuating narratives about specific histories, places, or individuals?

As a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago (MoCP), I am honored to have organized this exhibition along with three of the publication's authors—Ewald, Meiselas, and Wexler. We mined the MoCP collection to present works in conversation, connecting ideas and revealing relationships between the archives. On view next to the photographs, we have placed quotes—from the artist, the people photographed, and outside interpreters of the images. These observations

go beyond the typical artist's or curator's analysis to indicate our broader concern with the photographed moment.

For example, one project featured in this exhibition is the iconic photograph now known as *Migrant Mother* (1936) by **Dorothea Lange** (American, 1895–1965). In the image, a woman, later identified as Florence Owens Thompson, gazes somberly into the distance, with dirt visible on her skin and a baby in her arms. Two other children lean into her, their faces turned away from the camera. Later that year, when the photograph was published in the *San Francisco News*, Americans responded with empathy, spurring an outpouring of aid, and the government rushed 20,000 pounds of food to the camp where Lange encountered the family. The image became emblematic of the Great Depression and is still one of the best-known and most widely published photographs ever made.

The remarks that Lange wrote in her notebook after photographing the moment were: *Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute. Nipomo, California.*²

Dorothea Lange said in an interview about making the image: *I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.*³

However, forty-three years after the photograph was made, Thompson wrote to the editor of a newspaper to express her side of the story and to state that Lange had gotten many of the facts wrong. They were not staying in the camp. They had not sold the tires off their car. Thompson said: *I wish she hadn't taken my picture. . . . I can't get a penny out of it. [Lange] didn't ask my name. She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did.*⁴ Notably, after this statement was published, the public again sent thousands of dollars in support, but this time directly to the family in support of Florence Owens Thompson's medical expenses.

While the practice of photography has undergone many changes in the decades since Lange captured *Migrant Mother*, we still have not established a social contract or agreement of ethical values for what Azoulay calls "the event of photography."

The authors state in their manifesto: *Throughout, we tried to foreground aspects of the ways photography unfolds among people under different types of relation, be it threat, coercion, joy, or consent. Our aim was not to create a cohesive understanding of the*

*photographic event but rather to emphasize the different experiences of the participants.*⁵

Thus, the work of **Nikki S. Lee** (Korean American, b. 1970), also included in the exhibition, raises further questions about consent. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Lee adopted various identities and joined different subcultures, dressing the part of each and forming friendships with those she met. After gaining enough trust to be photographed casually with her newly found friends, she documented moments with a point-and-shoot camera, capturing herself blending in as her acted roles, from skateboarder to yuppie, all without her collaborators knowing that they were part of her artwork. These images continue to raise many ethical questions about photography. Are social identities a kind of costume, to be donned and discarded at will? Should Lee have told her uninformed collaborators about her intentions? Should she have profited from selling and exhibiting these works, depicting other people without their clear consent, in museums and galleries across the world? We can look at the project as a performance of sorts—and as a complicated record of the privileges and vulnerabilities of a certain group of people at a certain moment in time.

Lee's work touches on a part of the title of the book and exhibition that requires unpacking: "a potential history." The authors of *Collaboration* contend that the history of photography should be understood as evolving and resistant to hierarchy, and they argue that there should never be a period at the end of a sentence that describes how we learn from images. Nikki S. Lee's work is a fraction of a moment of a longer interaction between many people. Who else might tell this story? How might it still evolve? Lee's photographs capture her direction of a staged social experiment occurring on a city sidewalk at a certain moment in time. Without knowing the fuller story, viewers can easily trust that the images just portray real relationships. Yet, what if we also consider the many people and many ways the story could be told, both here and when we see other images about histories of imperialism, patriarchy, and violence? Potential history teaches us to see that the story is not over.

Many other aspects of collaboration are presented throughout the exhibition and book, including the assertion that viewers, curators, and archivists are also active collaborators who contribute to the lifespan of meanings in a photograph. Each is a participant who plays a role in contributing to photography's value by circulating and giving priority to certain images over others. All assist in cementing hierarchies in the history of photography. MoCP, for example, follows museum standards for collection care by cataloguing its collection by artist rather than by subject matter. Databases are designed to prioritize one maker, and there is not yet a standard practice for adding names of people *in* photographs into official records. In using our own archive to present this exhibition, we are asking how we might support our collection now and moving forward in a way that acknowledges the range of its participants.

The exhibition also features projects by artists working in archives. Each artist represented in this section of the exhibition questions how they can add new layers to the histories they research, collaborating with images made by known and unknown photographers of the past. On view, for example, are works by **Alayna N. Pernel** (American, b. 1996), who locates photographs of Black women held in museum and

personal collections. Thinking about the people in the photographs and whether they held agency in that moment while living in a country and time that historically did not honor Black women's autonomy, she scans the images, frames them, and holds them close to her body. Pernell presents herself holding the photograph in a reparative gesture of adding care to both the object as well as the person depicted in the image.

In both the exhibition and book, space constraints have limited the number of featured projects. There is much more to unpack. We ask that you, while viewing these projects, make space for your own readings of these images and others you encounter. We hope you will consider the history of photography as one that involves the labor of many stories, including yours, that are unfixed. We invite you to engage in the conscious act of viewing, to see yourself as a critical part of the event of photography, to know your role and assert care in the collaboration.

--Kristin Taylor, Curator of Academic Programs and Collections

1 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Wendy Ewald, Susan Meiselas, Leigh Raiford, and Laura Wexler, *Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 9.

² Library of Congress, "Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother ...," accessed March 19, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762903/>.

³ Dorothy Lange, quoted in Azoulay et al., *Collaboration*, 80.

⁴ Florence Owens Thompson, quoted in Azoulay et al., *Collaboration*, 80. See also Sally Stein, *Migrant Mother, Migrant Gender: Reconsidering Dorothea Lange's Iconic Portrait of Maternity* (London: MACK, 2023), and "Highway Histories: Photographing Migrant Labor Camps along US Route 101," by Laura Wexler, in Philip Brookman, Sarah Greenough and Andrea Nelson, eds., *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

⁵ Azoulay et al., *Collaboration*, 10.