

Collective Photographic Practices Reconsidered: Temporality, Witnessing, and Responsibility

Uğur Çetin, Hacettepe University, Türkiye

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Although photography has long involved multiple participants, collective and collaborative photographic practices are frequently discussed as if they constituted a relatively coherent field. In practice, however, such projects are organised through markedly different forms of participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. This paper examines how collective photographic practices actually work by comparing three documentary photography projects developed in Türkiye: Visual Stories from My Homeland, Photography in the Time of Corona, and Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene. Rather than treating collectivity as a stable organisational model, the study approaches it as a dynamic process shaped by what this article terms the mechanics of the collective. Based on a comparative qualitative case study, the analysis examines each project through four analytical dimensions: participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. These dimensions make it possible to compare projects that share collaborative characteristics while operating through different documentary objectives and historical conditions. The findings show that collective photographic practices cannot be adequately explained through shared authorship alone. Instead, each project organises collaboration differently, producing distinct forms of pedagogical learning, collective witnessing, and long-term documentary responsibility. Rather than proposing a universal typology, the article offers an analytical framework for understanding how different mechanics of the collective shape collaborative documentary photography. In doing so, it offers a comparative analytical vocabulary for examining collaborative documentary photography across different historical and institutional contexts.

Keywords: collective photography, collaborative documentary photography, editorial dialogue, participation, temporality

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Although photography has long involved multiple participants, collective photographic practices have become increasingly visible within contemporary documentary culture. Community-based projects, collaborative documentary initiatives, and participatory photographic practices have expanded the ways in which photographic narratives are produced, edited, and circulated. Despite this growing diversity, collective photography is often discussed as though it represents a relatively coherent field defined primarily through shared authorship or the participation of multiple photographers (Azoulay et al., 2023; Palmer, 2017).

Such an understanding overlooks the considerable diversity of collaborative practices. Documentary projects may involve similar collaborative structures while differing substantially in how participants collaborate, how editorial decisions are negotiated, what forms of responsibility are assumed, and how projects unfold over time. Treating collective photography as a single category therefore risks obscuring the distinctive processes through which collaboration is organised.

This article suggests that collective photography is more productively understood as a set of relational practices rather than as a single organisational model. These practices are organised through different mechanics of the collective. Rather than asking whether a project is collaborative, the study asks how collaborative documentary practices actually work. To address this question, the study adopts a comparative qualitative case study of three documentary photography projects developed in Türkiye: Visual Stories from My Homeland, Photography in the Time of Corona, and Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene. Each project is analysed through four analytical dimensions: participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. These dimensions provide a common analytical vocabulary for comparing projects that pursue different documentary aims while sharing collective forms of organisation.

The comparison shows that collaborative documentary photography does not operate through a single organisational model. Instead, different projects produce distinct forms of pedagogical learning, collective witnessing, and long-term documentary responsibility depending on how participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality are organised. Rather than proposing a universal typology of collective photography, the article offers a comparative analytical framework for examining the diverse mechanics through which collaborative documentary practices are constituted.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Collective Photography Beyond Shared Authorship

Collective photography is commonly associated with the participation of multiple photographers or the production of images through collaborative processes. While these characteristics distinguish collective work from individual photographic practice, they do not adequately explain how collaboration is organised or how different forms of collectivity emerge. Projects that appear structurally similar may operate through markedly different relationships among participants, editors, institutions, and the communities they engage.

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged authorship-centred understandings of collaborative photography. Azoulay et al. (2023) argue that photographic collaboration extends

beyond the act of image-making to include the social, institutional, and editorial relationships through which photographs acquire meaning. Likewise, Palmer (2017) emphasises the collaborative nature of photographic practice, arguing that photographic production extends beyond the individual photographer to encompass multiple forms of social and professional interaction. These perspectives shift attention from photographic products to the relationships that make collaborative practice possible.

This relational understanding also resonates with Azoulay's (2008) conception of photography as a civic encounter, in which photographs emerge through ethical and political relationships among photographers, photographed subjects, and viewers. Although Bakhtin (1981) developed dialogism outside the field of photographic theory, the concept provides a useful lens for understanding editorial dialogue and collective interpretation within collaborative documentary practice. From this perspective, meaning is produced through interaction rather than isolated authorship.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that collaboration should not be treated as a stable category but as a dynamic process organised through different social relationships. The analytical challenge lies not in identifying whether photography is collaborative, but in examining how different forms of collaboration are constituted.

Understanding the Mechanics of the Collective

Building on this relational perspective, this article proposes the concept of the mechanics of the collective as an analytical framework for examining collaborative documentary photography. The concept does not describe a new theory of collective photography or a universal model of collaboration. Instead, it refers to the practical configurations through which collaborative projects are organised and sustained.

Focusing on the mechanics of the collective shifts attention away from collaboration as a descriptive label toward the processes that shape documentary practice. Similar collaborative structures may generate substantially different forms of participation, editorial interaction, responsibility, and temporal organisation. Consequently, collective photography cannot be understood solely through the number of participants or the existence of shared authorship.

The concept is proposed as a comparative analytical tool. Rather than asking whether projects belong to a single category of collective photography, it examines how different collaborative practices are organised under different historical, institutional, and documentary conditions.

Analytical Framework

To compare the three case studies, the analysis employs four interconnected analytical dimensions: participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality.

Participation refers to the ways collaborative relationships are organised, including the roles of photographers, editors, facilitators, researchers, and other contributors.

Editorial dialogue examines how documentary narratives are negotiated through critique, discussion, image selection, sequencing, collective interpretation, and editorial decision-making.

Responsibility addresses the ethical and documentary commitments that shape collaborative practice, including responsibilities toward participants, photographed communities, historical testimony, and public engagement.

Temporality considers how different understandings of time influence collaborative documentary practice. Rather than functioning merely as a chronological backdrop, temporality shapes the rhythm of participation, editorial processes, and documentary objectives.

These four dimensions are analytically distinct but closely interconnected. Together, they provide a comparative analytical framework for examining different mechanics of the collective without reducing collaborative documentary photography to a single organisational model.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative case study design to examine how collective photographic practices are organised across different documentary contexts. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the research aims to develop an analytical understanding of the diverse mechanics through which collaborative documentary projects operate.

The three case studies—Visual Stories from My Homeland, Photography in the Time of Corona, and Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene—were selected through purposeful sampling. Although all three projects are grounded in collaborative documentary photography, they represent different institutional settings, documentary objectives, and temporal structures. This variation enables a comparative examination of how collaborative practices are organised under different historical and documentary conditions.

The analysis draws on multiple qualitative sources, including project publications, editorial texts, project websites, open calls, documentary materials, and semi-structured interviews conducted by the author during doctoral research. Combining documentary sources with interview data provides insight into both the organisational structures of the projects and the perspectives of those involved in their development.

Rather than treating the cases as isolated examples, the study adopts a cross-case analytical strategy. Each project is examined through the same four analytical dimensions—participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality—allowing similarities and differences to emerge through systematic comparison. The objective is not to evaluate the projects individually but to identify how different mechanics of the collective shape collaborative documentary practice. The semi-structured interviews conducted with participating photographers and editors provide empirical depth to this analysis, offering first-hand perspectives on how these collective mechanics were experienced in practice.

Visual Stories From My Homeland: Collectivity as Pedagogical Practice

Visual Stories from My Homeland illustrates a form of collaborative documentary photography in which collectivity is organised primarily through learning. Unlike projects centred on the joint production of documentary images, collaboration was established through sustained educational interaction, collective critique, and editorial dialogue. Examined through the analytical framework developed in this article, the project illustrates how pedagogical

processes constitute a distinctive mechanics of the collective (Ulukan, 2020; Yurdalan et al., 2020).

The project brought together photographers with different levels of documentary experience through workshops, seminars, field assignments, and editorial meetings. Participation therefore extended beyond image production to include the gradual development of documentary knowledge. Learning emerged through continuous interaction among participants rather than through individual photographic practice alone.

Editorial dialogue formed the core of this collaborative process. Regular critiques, discussions, and collective evaluations encouraged participants to reflect critically on their documentary decisions while engaging with the perspectives of others. Editorial practice thus functioned not simply as a mechanism for improving individual photographs but as a shared space in which documentary understanding was collectively negotiated. As highlighted in interviews with project participants and editors, editorial discussions served not only as a critique mechanism but as an interactive space where documentary methodology was collectively developed.

Ethical responsibility likewise developed through educational interaction. Participants were encouraged to consider the implications of documentary representation, including their relationships with photographed communities and the broader social responsibilities of documentary practice. Responsibility thus emerged as an integral part of the learning process rather than as an external professional obligation.

Temporality also shaped the collective character of the project. Documentary learning unfolded gradually through repeated encounters, sustained interaction, and ongoing editorial exchange. This extended temporal structure allowed participants to revisit ideas, refine documentary approaches, and develop collaborative relationships over time. Rather than serving merely as the duration of the programme, temporality became a condition through which collective learning itself was made possible.

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that collectivity in Visual Stories from My Homeland was organised less through shared authorship than through sustained pedagogical engagement. Participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality interacted to produce a collaborative environment in which documentary practice developed collectively. The project thus illustrates how educational processes can constitute a distinctive mechanics of the collective within collaborative documentary photography.

Photography in the Time of Corona: Collectivity as Witnessing

Among the three case studies, Photography in the Time of Corona most clearly illustrates how collaborative documentary photography can function as a form of shared witnessing. Unlike Visual Stories from My Homeland, where collaboration was organised around sustained learning, this project emerged in response to an unfolding historical crisis. Its collective character was shaped not by physical co-presence but by a shared commitment to documenting uncertain and rapidly changing circumstances through distributed documentary practice (Açık Çağrı, 2020).

The project's temporal structure fundamentally influenced its collaborative organisation. Photographers worked without knowing how the pandemic would develop or which experiences would later acquire historical significance. Documentary decisions therefore had

to be made while events were still unfolding. Temporality was not simply the context of the project; it actively shaped participation, editorial dialogue, and documentary responsibility.

Participation took the form of distributed collaboration. Interview accounts further reveal that online editorial meetings played a crucial role in maintaining collective momentum, allowing photographers to navigate the spatial isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic together. Although photographers documented their local environments independently, their work was continuously integrated into a shared editorial process through online meetings, collective discussions, and digital communication. Physical separation therefore did not diminish collaboration; rather, it transformed editorial dialogue into the principal mechanism through which the mechanics of the collective were realised.

Editorial dialogue became particularly significant because documentary interpretation unfolded simultaneously with documentation itself. Participants collectively reflected on how everyday experiences of isolation, uncertainty, illness, public restrictions, and social change could be translated into documentary narratives. Editorial discussions therefore functioned not merely as evaluations of completed work but as an ongoing process through which historical experience was collectively interpreted.

Responsibility likewise acquired a distinctive character. Rather than focusing primarily on individual ethical conduct, participants shared responsibility for creating a documentary record of an unprecedented historical moment. This responsibility extended beyond producing accurate visual documentation to considering how present experiences might contribute to future collective memory.

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that the project's collective organisation was shaped by the shared negotiation of historical experience. Participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality converged to create a form of collaborative documentary practice in which witnessing itself became a collective process rather than an individual act. In this sense, the project illustrates a distinctive mechanics of the collective, in which collaboration emerged through the shared interpretation of an unfolding historical event.

Documentary Stories From the Anthropocene: Collective Responsibility as Documentary Practice

Of the three projects examined in this study, *Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene* places responsibility at the centre of collaborative documentary practice. Whereas the previous case studies illustrate how collectivity may be organised through pedagogical learning or collective witnessing, this project demonstrates how collaboration can be sustained through a long-term commitment to understanding and representing complex environmental transformations. Responsibility is therefore not simply one analytical dimension among others; it serves as the organising principle through which participation, editorial dialogue, and temporality become interconnected (Yurdalan et al., 2020).

Rather than limiting participation to photographers, the project brought together editors, researchers, scientists, and invited speakers within an interdisciplinary learning environment. Documentary practice developed through seminars, collective discussions, readings, and project-based exchanges that encouraged participants to integrate photographic observation with broader ecological and social perspectives. Participation therefore involved the collective production of documentary understanding as much as the production of photographs.

Reflecting on the project's interdisciplinary structure, interviewed contributors emphasized that engaging with scientific and theoretical inputs significantly altered their approach to visualizing long-term environmental processes.

Editorial dialogue likewise extended beyond conventional photographic critique. Discussions addressed not only image selection and narrative coherence but also the conceptual frameworks through which environmental issues could be understood. Scientific knowledge, documentary experience, and visual interpretation continuously informed one another, transforming editorial dialogue into a collaborative process of knowledge production rather than a purely aesthetic exercise.

Responsibility consequently assumed a broader meaning than ethical conduct during photographic production. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how documentary photography might contribute to public understanding of environmental change while acknowledging the limitations of photographic representation itself. Responsibility thus became an ongoing collective commitment to producing informed, critically grounded documentary narratives rather than simply recording visible environmental phenomena.

The project's temporal structure reinforced this orientation. Unlike documentary work responding to immediate events, the Anthropocene demands engagement with processes that unfold across decades or even generations. Participants were therefore required to connect present observations with long-term ecological transformations that often remain difficult to perceive directly. Temporality became an epistemological condition of documentary practice, shaping both what could be photographed and how documentary narratives were constructed.

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that collaboration in *Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene* was organised through a shared commitment to understanding complex environmental realities. Participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality operated not as separate components but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a collective documentary process. In this sense, the project illustrates a distinctive mechanics of the collective, in which collaboration is sustained through long-term documentary responsibility and interdisciplinary inquiry.

Comparative Discussion

The comparison of the three case studies demonstrates that the four analytical dimensions proposed in this article do not operate independently. Rather, participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality assume different configurations according to the documentary aims, organisational structures, and historical conditions of each project. This finding suggests that collaborative documentary photography is best understood not through a single definition of collectivity but through the changing relationships among these dimensions.

Participation, for example, serves different functions across the three projects. In *Visual Stories from My Homeland*, it is primarily pedagogical, supporting the development of documentary knowledge through sustained interaction. In *Photography in the Time of Corona*, participation becomes geographically distributed while remaining editorially connected through digital communication. In *Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene*, participation expands beyond photographers to include researchers, scientists, and other contributors, transforming collaboration into an interdisciplinary process of documentary inquiry. Participation therefore

varies not according to the number of contributors but according to the forms of interaction through which documentary practice is organised.

Editorial dialogue likewise performs different functions. In the pedagogical setting of *Visual Stories from My Homeland*, critique and discussion facilitate learning. During the pandemic, editorial dialogue enables participants to interpret an unfolding historical event collectively despite physical separation. In *Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene*, it becomes a site where documentary practice intersects with scientific knowledge and theoretical reflection. Editorial dialogue therefore functions not merely as an evaluative procedure but as a central process through which collective meaning is produced.

Responsibility likewise assumes different forms across the three case studies. In the first project, it develops through documentary education and ethical reflection. In the second, it is closely connected to the collective production of historical testimony during an ongoing crisis. In the third, it expands to encompass the long-term social and environmental implications of documentary representation. Responsibility therefore emerges not as a fixed ethical principle but as a relational documentary practice shaped by the objectives and context of each collaborative project.

The comparison also highlights the significance of temporality. Rather than serving as a neutral background, different temporal structures actively shape collaborative documentary practice. The extended duration of a learning programme, the immediacy of documenting a rapidly unfolding pandemic, and the long timescales associated with environmental transformation each generate distinctive forms of participation, editorial dialogue, and responsibility. Temporality therefore influences not only when documentary collaboration takes place but also how it is organised.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of this article. Collective photographic practices are more productively understood as relational documentary practices organised through different mechanics of the collective than as a unified category defined by shared authorship or the participation of multiple photographers. Examining participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality as interconnected analytical dimensions provides a comparative analytical framework for understanding how different collaborative documentary projects operate under different historical, institutional, and documentary conditions.

Conclusion

This article began with a simple but often overlooked question: How do collective photographic practices actually work? Rather than approaching collaborative photography as a coherent category defined by shared authorship, the study examined the organisational processes through which collaborative documentary projects are constituted.

Drawing on a comparative analysis of three documentary photography projects developed in Türkiye, the study showed that collaborative practices are organised through different configurations of participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. Although all three projects involve collective forms of documentary production, they differ substantially in how these dimensions interact and in the documentary purposes they serve. Collectivity therefore emerges not as a stable organisational model but as a relational documentary practice shaped by specific historical, institutional, and documentary conditions.

The principal contribution of this article is the proposal of the mechanics of the collective as a comparative analytical perspective. Rather than introducing a new typology of collaborative photography, the concept provides a way of examining how different forms of collectivity are organised across documentary projects. By focusing on the relationships among participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality, this analytical framework offers a more precise vocabulary for analysing collaborative documentary practices without reducing them to a single organisational model.

Beyond the three case studies examined here, this analytical perspective may also contribute to future research on participatory, community-based, and interdisciplinary photographic projects in different cultural contexts. As collaborative documentary practices continue to evolve in response to social, technological, and environmental change, greater attention to the mechanics of the collective may provide a more nuanced understanding of photography as a relational documentary practice.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language editing, stylistic refinement, and improving clarity during manuscript preparation. The conceptual framework, research design, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the author's own.

References

- Açık çağrı: Korona Günlerinde Fotoğraf* [Open call: Photography in the days of Corona]. (2020, April 27). Korona Günlerinde Fotoğraf. <https://www.koronagunlerindefotograf.com/acikcagri>
- Azoulay, A. (2008). *The civil contract of photography*. Zone Books.
- Azoulay, A., Ewald, W., Meiselas, S., Raiford, L., & Wexler, L. (2023). *Collaboration: A potential history of photography*. Thames & Hudson.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Palmer, D. (2017). *Photography and collaboration: From conceptual art to crowdsourcing*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ulukan, S. (2020, March 21). *Proje hakkında – TFSF Memleketimden Görsel Hikayeler* [About the project – TFSF Visual Stories from My Homeland]. MGH Projesi. <https://mgh.tfsf.org.tr/tr/proje-hakkinda>
- Yurdalan, Ö. (2020, March 21). *Ana metin* [Main text]. Fotoğraflı Antroposen Hikayeler. <https://fotografliantroposenhikayeler.com/ana-metin/>
- Yurdalan, Ö., Aslan, Y., & Özener, A. (2020, March 21). *Bir Anka Kuşu Hikayesi* [A phoenix story]. TFSF Memleketimden Görsel Hikayeler Projesi. <https://mgh.tfsf.org.tr/tr/editorler>