

The pearls of Istanbul

Visual autoethnography as a method of digital photography

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Fig. 1: Tram at İstiklal-Street. Istanbul 2023 © Evelyn Runge, all rights reserved

I photograph a glass cabinet in which a hand holding a spatula reaches out of nowhere to shape rice and chickpeas into an appetizing form, the Turkish dish pilaf. Next door, an elderly man steps out of the small butcher's shop, wearing a grey work coat, crumbles of meat on his fingers; in his left hand he carries a small glass for the black tea that is so popular in Istanbul, typically served with loads of sugar. He allows me to take a portrait of him before he invites me into the butcher's shop – his shop – where another man sits on

one of three chairs opposite the meat counter: he speaks in Turkish to the butcher and to me using a translation app on his cell phone. Fresh tea arrives, new customers discuss the meat extensively, have it professionally chopped and buy large portions. I photograph.

The butcher's shop is located on Tarlabası Bulvarı, a busy street parallel to the İstiklal shopping mile in Istanbul. Neighbouring Taksim Square, the district of Tarlabası has a bad reputation, and even locals recommend being alert for thieves and not roaming there after dark because of drug addicts. During the day, everything is quiet in the small streets behind the bulvar. Clotheslines are stretched between narrow houses, and the streets are steep, offering spectacular perspectives in the celebrated Istanbul light. Residents look back at me, they smile, a child tugs at my clothes and demands money until child only a few years older whisks her away. Long discredited as slums, Tarlabası and neighbouring Dorlapdere are mixed neighbourhoods which, as a man on the street says, will be gentrified in a few years.

Sensitive subjectification and the social relevance of photojournalism

In Istanbul I take part in a training course from Magnum Learn, an offering of the Magnum photo agency. Photojournalist Emin Özmen and photo consultant Cloé Kerhoas lead the workshop entitled "Exploring Istanbul" in late April 2023. In the morning, theoretical, and practical topics are discussed, and as of the second day, our own photographs receive attention: we produce every day from the afternoon onwards. A selection of each day's best photographs forms the basis for the final selection on the last day of the workshop. Kerhoas speaks about research on timely topics and gives advice about how to finance long-term documentary photography projects, as well as how to foster collaborations with photo editors of international newspapers and magazines. Fellowships and project-related funding play an increasingly important role for long-term documentaries, as journalistic media and the photography industry provide less and less money for this work.

For me, participating in the workshop is productive in many ways: I get to know my own photography better and I make improvements. I get to know the media practices of professional photographers. I learn from the workshop participants about what occupies them. Additionally, workshops of this kind allow me to explore the method of visual autoethnography, and to question digital photography and its status. Autoethnography involves collecting a variety of documents and artifacts as a database, literature, archival research, findings from the internet (according to John Postill's "Remote Ethnography"¹), and personal documents. In visual autoethnography, as I practice it, my photographs are my most personal documents, as are my field notes from the days I took them. Autoethnography involves the interweaving of methodological descriptions with self-reflexivity, in which the author contextualizes her positionality, including the embodied mode of questioning. Because photography is (also) a physical practice, in visual autoethnography the researcher and the photographer can be united in one individual. In addition to the specific perception and situation in heterogeneous environments, digital

photography needs to be reflected on as a human-machine interaction.² Digital photography is a research tool, research object, and research method all in one. In digital media research, it would be appropriate to talk much more about autoethnography: there is hardly any separation between researchers and research objects anymore, since everyone is online and often it is only very precise knowledge of specific platforms, for example, that leads to research questions.³

Visual autoethnography

For me, visual autoethnography involves the verbalization and writing of empirical knowledge that I often miss in photo-theoretical texts, especially those that belong to the canon but were not written by practitioners (Benjamin, Barthes, Sontag). Even today, when photography itself is much more text-based (for example, through project proposals intended to enable funding of photographic work, because there is hardly any significant budget due to the precarity of journalism – and yet, media outlets still want to publish exceptional photography), only a few photographers write about their work. If they do, then it is in a personalized manner without any aim to theorization or generalization. The transition from analogue to digital photography and the immense transformations the photo industry and photojournalism have undergone are hardly documented from insiders' perspectives. One of the most recent examples of an autobiographical account of an insider's career is the memoir of American photojournalist Lynsey Addario, who has won several major prizes.⁴

In their introductions, workshop leaders present their personal photobiographical development. They uncover at least one biographical element that touches them deeply and has an impact on their photography: the deaths of friends and family members, witnessing murders in war, witnessing various stages of illness, or searching for traces of family secrets. Through these narratives, photographers show themselves vulnerable. The cliched image of the heroic, masculine, cold(-blooded) photo reporter, which canonical photo-theoretical essays promote (e.g., Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave"⁵), is being replaced at the beginning of the 21st century by a younger generation of photojournalists who give hardening less space – thus making their photography more sensitive.⁶

These photobiographical presentations are autobiographies ("autophotobiographies"⁷), or they can be more broadly summarized as life writing – a vignette of one's own life (in this case verbally and visually). They are at the same time visual autoethnographies, as photography is deeply entangled with their lives and lived experiences; even if the photojournalists themselves do not theorize, they provide material for theorization in many ways.⁸ This autophotobiographical opening goes hand in hand with increasing subjectification in contemporary photography, which also means taking a hard look at oneself and arguing why self-chosen topics have social relevance, especially in long-term documentaries.



Fig. 2: Garage in Dorlapdere. Istanbul 2023 © Evelyn Runge, all rights reserved

Approaches to photography

A metropolis with 16 million inhabitants – some say 20 million including tourists – spread across two continents and countless districts and köys (villages), Istanbul poses a challenge to photographers. The city is considered too big even by its residents, too stressful, too expensive, the air too dirty. At the same time, this city has attracted Magnum photographers such as Ara Güler (1928–2018), Nikos Economopoulos (*1953), and Bruno Barbey (1941–2020). They took photographs in the same places as us – on the piers of Karaköy and Eminönü, on the bridges with anglers, in oriental teahouses and mosques – and these places appear simultaneously recognizable and foreign to us.

Research literature on photography neglects questions about access to protagonists. In their study, Ferrucci and Taylor found that researchers' idea that access primarily means formal permission to enter property has little to do with the reality of photojournalists' experience: body language and verbal clarification of intent are addressed by photojournalists themselves as key skills to gain access to protagonists.⁹ It is part of the emotional labour that makes up the job of a photojournalist.

Questions of accessibility also occupied the workshop participants. One participant reported being aggressively approached when a man (falsely) suspected he and his family were photographed in public. These experiences opened reflections: unpleasant encounters are an everyday part of photojournalism and one has to find ways to deal with them, for

example, through one's own visibility. Taking photos means exposing oneself in the field – this is also part of the emotional labour of access. Visual autoethnography involves reflecting on one's own gender and accompanying experiences of moving freely or being restricted by others in the world.

Verbalizing one's own photography

The last day of the workshop was dedicated to editing and sequencing as purely visual, i.e., not specifically journalistic, artistic, exhibition, or book editing. Editing means ultimately making a final selection from the daily selections; sequencing means putting these selections into an order that can reveal a story, or at least has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Emin Özmen compiled the photos into a zine and presented each photographer's final selection of the week on three double pages under the title "The City" – with a self-selected title and a text of 200 words. My vignette reflects on my photographic experience in Istanbul and refers to other workshops where I internalized that more than "one photographer" can be discovered within the same selection of images that form the basis of an editing process ("another photographer"). This thinking informed my photography in the streets, yet while I was in a more journalistic-descriptive mode, the subject and light spoke much more for a poetic photograph. I am including my text here, the grammar slightly edited; it is part of my visual autoethnography of Istanbul.

Pearls of Istanbul

"Pearls of Istanbul: Istanbul is the city of light, love, and laughter. Each of these pearls invite us to leave trodden pathways to find more of this, in spots we have not imagined before. The prerequisite is the openness of our heart and mind to let ourselves go. Deliberately getting lost in neighbourhoods and accepting our thoughts and visions allows us to put a light on the people who live and work there, and whose vernacular spaces we enter; as fellow humans, and as visual people alike. Photography is a collaborative practice that can only appear with the utmost respect for the human condition we, too, co-create. The highlights and the lowlights we explore shine on those we portray, and our personal attitude towards 'the other' will be seen within the images we make. Leaving the common ways means connecting with one's own deeper self through photography and overcoming potential prejudices materialized in fears that are groundless most of the time. Photography means pushing boundaries and internal frontiers. Therefore, another person surfaces after having wandered the köys of Istanbul. Sometimes a second person appears, or even a third one, and that is another photographer. In this way, we become a pearl of Istanbul ourselves. The city of light, love, and laughter leaves traces in our visual memories, its photographic materialization, and in the streets we once walked."

The final

Following good ethnographic traditions, I go back to Tarlabası Bulvard a few days later with printed portraits: the butcher is one of the subjects I revisit because I know where he works. He recognizes me immediately from the shorter end of the counter, where he inserts fresh kofta with his fingers into a large sandwich. He waves and offers me a kofta sandwich. He looks at my portraits of him only briefly; it's more important that I eat something. Shortly afterwards, an acquaintance comes into the butcher's shop, he appraises the prints, shows them again to the butcher, who prepares another sandwich for him – which leads him to put the prints in the box next to the rest of the bread. I consider getting my camera out of my backpack to document the portraits lying in the box next to the sandwich. I leave it. In addition to my visual memory, I have this written essay – and the juicy, greasy stains on the sleeve of my jacket, dripped from the kofta.



Fig. 3: Chestnuts on the pier. Istanbul 2023 © Evelyn Runge, all rights reserved

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