Participatory Photography as a Tool to Spark Youth Participation, Empowerment and Active Citizenship

Vera Penz[1]*

[1] Cercle Libre – Association for Social Aesthetics, 1010 Vienna, Austria; E-Mail: vera@cerclelibre.at
*Corresponding author

Abstract

From October 18-26, 2022, Vienna-based civil society organisation *Cercle Libre - Association for Social Aesthetics* implemented 'Participatory Photography for Youth', a non-formal learning mobility project funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ program. Under the guidance of a professional photographer, a group of 20 young people from capitals or larger cities in Austria, Armenia, Belarus, Jordan, Ukraine and Turkey gathered in Austria for a week to explore and co-create visual content inspired by the 11 European Youth Goals. The project was designed according to the principles of non-formal education such as learner-centeredness, emphasis on peer-to-peer learning, and critical thinking. It simultaneously served as a case study accompanied by ethnographic research, documenting the creative process of doing participatory photography. The aim of this paper is to put the project in a larger context of urban creativity, participation and active citizenship in order to examine how photography can be used as a tool for young urban global citizens to define and co-create spaces of participation, citizenship and empowerment. Research shows that young people participating in the project have a high motivation to shape their lives and lifeworlds and to strive to increase their level of participation in society. Participatory Photography is a useful medium of empowerment and social learning to raise young people's awareness on their unique vantage points in order to highlight potentials for social critique and active citizenship.

Keywords

photography; participation; youth work; active citizenship; empowerment; non-formal education.

1. Introduction - Participation and Active Citizenship

Empowerment of young people is one of the main meta-objectives of youth and social work in general, and more specifically of many European Union-funded youth programmes. In a broader sense, empowerment is understood as the process and goal of enabling individuals or groups to gain agency in their own lives and the decisions that affect them. It involves providing people with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to take action and make choices for themselves. Empowerment is a way of increasing people's confidence and self-esteem, and enabling them to shape their own futures. This can involve supporting people to develop and maintain mental health and wellbeing, to increase their competences and capabilities, to set and achieve their own goals, and to participate in their communities and in society as a whole. Empowerment can be understood as a key goal of many development, education, and community-building programs, as it can help create more inclusive and equitable societies and promote social justice, decolonisation and equality (European Youth Portal, 2022; EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2022).

1.1. Youth Participation

Directly related to the notion of empowerment is the idea of participation. First and foremost, it is worth mentioning that *participation* is a term and concept used in various contexts and connexes such as politics and policies, citizen participa-

tion, urban planning, community organisation, inclusion and solidarity, and therefore denotes a wide range of meanings and definitions. Talking about participation is often directly connotated with debates about power structures and political decision-making processes (Crowley and Moxon, 2017; Kiilakoski, 2020).

In their groundbreaking work on creating urban spaces for youth participation in New York City, Kudva and Driskell (2009, p. 367) framed the term as follows:

Participation (...) is concerned with issues of power, and focuses its attention on the structures, processes, and methods through which power imbalances are alleviated (or not) and decisions are made with at least an attempt toward due consideration to the interests of those affected. What we recognize as 'participatory' depends on values, moral judgments, perceived goals, and intended outcomes.

For the purpose of this paper, regarding participation, we shall adhere to the context of youth work and youth engagement, with regards to their embeddedness in European youth policy and youth strategies. The European Union Youth Strategy is the framework for EU youth policy 2021-2027 and rests on the three main pillars Engage-Connect-Empower as fields of action: to *engage* young people, fostering their participation in democratic life and supporting civic engagement; to *connect*, as in providing structures and funds like the Erasmus+ programme to enable young people to meet; and furthermore to *empower*, supporting young people through high-quality, innovative and recognized youth work (European Commission, 2018, p. 3).

The Youth Participation Strategy[1] is based on this framework to foster youth participation in democratic life via the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes. Both programmes are open to young people from the European Union member states and neighbouring regions, such as South East Europe, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and the 'Euromed' region[2]. A relevant support structure to mention in this context is SALTO Participation & Information [3], a think tank and resource centre for youth participation operating from Tallinn, Estonia, that "supports the capacity building of young people, youth workers, National Agencies in charge of youth programmes, the European Commission and other stakeholders in involving young people in decision-making processes'' (SALTO PI, 2019, p. 7) across Europe.

In the scope of European youth policy much work has been done by practitioners and scholars on the topic of youth participation (see f.e. the large body of publications by the EU - Council of Europe Youth Partnership; Farthing, 2012; Crowley and Moxon, 2017; Farrow, 2015, 2018; Kiiliakoski, 2020). As defined by the Council of Europe, "[p]articipation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society." Following the understanding of the SALTO Participation Resource Centre, youth participation can be defined as "a process where young people as active citizens take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power on issues that affect them." (Farting, 2012 cit. from participationpool.eu) Farrow (2018) provides a comprehensive summary on the three baseline factors of youth participation: It is, first of all, a continuous process of inclusion in decision-making structures; second, youth participation is always concerned with the redistribution of power; and last but not least, youth participation is taking place on various interdependent planes–local, national and global–and in individual as well as collective spheres.

The vital and active role of youth in participative consultation processes has also led to the formulation of the *11 Youth Goals*[4] as part of the European Youth Strategy 2021-2027. They are the result of a structured consultation process in

1 youthgoals.eu

2 https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/participation/ypstrategy/

3 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/pages/glossary/euro-mediterranean-partnership-euromed_en

4 https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/participation/

the framework of the EU youth dialogue among young people across Europe, reflect the vision of young people and indicate fields of sustained action. They also served as a basis to the project design of the youth exchange project 'Participatory Photography for Youth'. The 11 Youth Goals are: 1. Connecting Youth with the European Union, 2. Equality of All Genders, 3. Inclusive Societies, 4. Information and Constructive Dialogue, 5. Mental Health and Wellbeing, 6. Moving Rural Youth Forward, 7. Quality Employment for All, 8. Quality Learning, 9. Space and Participation for All, 10. A Sustainable Green Europe, 11. Youth Organisations and European Programmes (European Union: European Youth Goals, 2019).

Kiiliakoski (2020) proposes a set of three conditions to be met in order to speak of youth participation: It requires having a recognized and legitimate role in the community, there needs to be action, and the action needs to be meaningful for participants. "Participation in a tokenistic form is insufficient if structures and power relations stand in the way of meaningful participation that leads to change.'' (Kiilakoski, 2020, p. 20) He also points out that "the task of youth [work] is to promote participation in and outside the practice of youth work." (Kiilakoski, 2020, p.1) In that sense, youth workers are the midwives of non-formal education for and with young people and their personal, social, and professional development towards active citizenship.

1.2. Active Citizenship

Active citizenship refers to the idea that members of a society have a responsibility to take an active role in addressing social and political issues, to contribute to the well-being of their community, and to work towards the common good. It is also seen as a way for individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities as members of a democratic society. Moreover, it is concerned with being engaged and informed about the issues that affect one's community, and taking action to incite positive change (Council of Europe, 2010). This can involve engaging in activities such as voting, volunteering, participating in community events and civic society organisations, and advocating for social and political change. Similar to the notion of empowerment, active citizenship is often seen as a way for individuals to use their skills and talents to take ownership of and spark improvements in their

lifeworlds in order to help create a more just and equitable society. I argue that a feeling of belonging and agency is prerequisite for identifying as an active citizen, whereas feelings of marginalisation or exclusion are detrimental.

Regarding recent developments in the participation of young people in all spheres of society and democratic life, new modalities of power, communication, and community organisation have given rise to a shift in how young people understand active citizenship. As I will further examine in the course of this paper, digitalisation and the widespread use of ICTs have broadened and diversified the playground for innovative forms and modes of participation and activism. Traditional, centralised forms of participation via long-term affiliations to interest groups, e.g. political parties or trade unions, have been replaced to a large extent by decentralised, short-term, conditional affiliations (Farrow, 2018, p. 19), often based on identity markers and causes like the fight for LGBTQA rights or against climate change. Informal, collaborative networks with a high outreach through social media allow for new forms of organising activism and uttering social critique. As Farrow (2018, p. 9) states:

[T]hrough social networks and community mobilisation, young people are developing leadership and outreach skills and confidence. Particularly by using new technologies, young people are developing new models of power, in which power comes from knowledge, peer coordination and the ability to inspire others to participate.

Hence, values, such as collaboration, radical transparency, open source, sharing and harnessing the wisdom and funding of the crowd, may translate into strong youth-led movements.

Despite these positive developments, issues of inequality concerning access to digital infrastructures, media literacy, and digital competences should not be neglected. In parallel, the question remains how and to what extent these movements penetrate and influence established structures of power and decision-making. Especially some of the participants of the youth project analysed in this article, for example from Belarus, reported not just harsh restrictions, but a

tremendous backlash on freedom of expression and the right to civic association and community organising, including youth associations, existed in recent years. Activists and civic associations have, in many instances, been forced to operate from abroad or in the underground. Some project participants asked not to be identified with their full names or with their faces visible on the photos for security concerns due to oppressive state apparati. Nevertheless, more and more young people are critical, creative, and active in finding and creating channels and outlets for promoting and advancing causes and narratives that matter to them.

2. Methodology

The methodological toolbox applied for this case study contained a mix of methods. As a mental framework for the process of preparation and data collection in the field, on the one hand, and for the process of evaluation and synthesis of insights, on the other, this article refers to the toolbox of '*Art of Hosting/Art of Harvesting conversations that matter*'(artofhosting.org, 2022). Art of Hosting & Harvesting is a participatory method and practice that can be applied in a variety of contexts and, as I find, also quite beautifully in a participatory research project. The toolbox is based on a set of principles that I will briefly outline below:

The Art of Hosting aims to create an open yet safe space and, by facilitating group processes, also to elicit and inspire a group's self-organising capacities. Furthermore, it is also based on an open attitude towards field participants, and a practice of holding space to bring up the issues that they consider relevant. In the context of ethnographic fieldwork in a youth project, these questions can include a) research-guiding questions; b) questions to the field participants (photographers, interlocutors, facilitators); c) questions to the material (field notes, photographs, videos, workshop content produced by participants) and d) questions of self-reflection.

The Art of Harvesting, on the other hand, structures the insights from the Art of Hosting process to illuminate and understand different types of results and their quality. Art of Harvesting implies to listen properly and actively, i.e. also reading between the lines, catching subtle nuances and also wondering what was not said and why; within the scope of

possibilities and in the spirit of ethnographic participant observation, it can also mean feeding back, reflecting and reviewing observations, impressions, and interpretations in dialogue, thus generating new insights - or new questions. As outlined on artofhosting.org:

The Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter takes into account the whole process – all the preparations before the participants come together, what happens while they are working together, and how the results of their conversation – the 'harvest' – support next steps that are coherent for their purpose and context. (artofhosting.org, 2022)

Participant observation is a methodical approach very much in line with the *Art of Hosting* toolbox. It is also the most prominent and, until today, the most relevant ethnographic method. Participant observation is one of the primary methods in anthropology and constitutes an approach specific for this discipline. It is a participatory method in itself, where the researcher is embedded in the field for a certain period of time and/or repeatedly co-creates a dialogue with the field and its participants, while continuously self-reflecting his or her role in the process. Similar to the Art of Hosting and Harvesting, ideally, research observations and findings are fed back to the observed field participants in order to co-elicit insights and results (Flick, 2010).

In the scope of this research project, participation and observation happened on multiple levels at once. Questions to reflect on this notions were: Who in the project was (were) the participant observer(s)? Was it the project's facilitator in the role of educator and writer of this paper, who happens to be a social and cultural anthropologist trained in ethnographic methods, both visually documenting the creative working process of the group and harvesting the photographic outcomes of the project? Or was it the project participants, who took the actual visual footage in connection with the 11 EU Youth Goals?

Based on the notion that ethnography is per se a dialogue between researcher, field, and field participants, I argue that both approaches are correct. It is worth mentioning that the entire project design was based on the principles of non-for-

mal education, which is in itself participatory, learner-centred and includes the freedom of attendance and contribution to learning invitations, the self-made decisions of the learner, what the actual learnings were, and a strong emphasis on peer-to-peer learning. In that sense, the project design aimed at honouring the critical pedagogy approach of Brazilian-born educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. As Freire (2005, p. 72) outlined in his seminal book "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", "education must begin with resolving the paradox of the instructor-learners, including the poles of contradiction that both the instructor and the learner belong together." The aim of education, according to Freire (2005), is to empower individuals towards self-authorship and emancipation. Similarly, ethnography is always embedded in social relationships and is constituted in dialogue with the field; the ethnographer's interest lies in personal practices and approaches to the matters at hand–in our case, the 11 EU Youth Goals and their creative expression by the young participants.

3. Participatory Photography

The project's objectives were to provide a space for values-based individual and social learning, exchanging perspectives, skills, and practical ideas, and to explore creative methodologies to foster participation and active citizenship among young people. Likewise, the project aimed at encouraging young people to act as responsible, active citizens and to strive for positive change in their environments. Through the medium of photography we attempted to raise awareness for the 11 EU Youth Goals and their impact on participants' urban lifeworlds in their country of origin. While upskilling participants' digital competencies through participant-led workshops on media literacy, essential photography techniques, and examination of modern digital tools and platforms, the young people empowered themselves to collaborate and co-create approaches and solutions to personal, economic, environmental, and social issues. Living and working together for nine days in a workshop-setting in a youth hostel in Lower Austria, the project fostered mutual understanding and critical discourse, social engagement, and exchange of perspectives on issues that mattered to them.

In the project, the participants were asked to select two to three youth goals, which were closest to their hearts. Afterwards, they teamed up in groups of three to four and took photos to visually reflect on the chosen topics. Examples include issues of gender equality, access to quality education, sustainability, or inclusive societies. They were free to go for all styles of photography, may it be street photography or creating sets with a rather stylized ambience, doing hair and makeup.

I chose the term Participatory Photography to describe the process of eliciting visual data in a photographic reflection of participants' lifeworlds in an on-site participatory setting. In this process, participants took both the roles of observers and creators: On the one hand, they were observers of different forms of urban cohabitation, as mirrored in the context of the 11 EU Youth Goals, creating pathways for urban transformation and societal critique. On the other hand, they created the data to reflect on their life in their city of origin and expanded on possible spheres of influence to incite the potential for activism and critique to achieve societal change. In the course of the project, participants were invited to initiate, organise, and contribute to workshops, group exercises, discussions, and individual reflection techniques to collectively make sense of the participatory process. This way they acquired a space of empowerment and an understanding of current potentials for active citizenship, framed by the 11 EU Development Goals. At the end of the project, participants created an online exhibition to publish and disseminate the project outcomes among their peers, stakeholders, and policy-makers.

It is important to note that the project participants' local political realities included current situations of war, a constitutional monarchy, autocratic state systems with strong anti-government, pro-democratic movements, relatively young, post-socialist democracies, and long-established, stable democracies. Hence, a multiplicity of personal and political views were shared in the project, reflected via photography and other forms of communication, refined in different forms of community exchange, and finally disseminated in an online exhibition. Participatory Photography served as a tool to elicit collective approaches to participants' lifeworlds,

political opinions, and perspectives for social change and empowerment. As observers, participants were invited to expand on issues that mattered to them, initially led by the framework of the 11 EU Youth Strategy, and to highlight potentials for social critique and active citizenship.

4. Results of the Participatory Photography Process

During the project implementation week in October 2022, a large body of visual data was created by the participants with regard to the spheres of action, reflected in the 11 EU Youth Goals. As the participants, who worked together in teams, were free to choose, which of these areas mattered most to them, it became evident that some of the youth goals resonated with almost all members of the group, regardless of age, gender, national or religious affiliation, or other markers of identity. These were, first and foremost, a 'sustainable green Europe', 'gender equality' and 'inclusive societies'. In some cases, participants have been actively involved in the respective fields in their home environments, before taking part in the project, in roles such as activists, educators, volunteers, youth leaders, makers, or community builders. Some of the participants were more or less newcomers both to taking an active part in their communities and to attending an Erasmus+ project. Almost all project attendees were living in capitals or larger urban areas, however, as some of them were born and raised in rural settings, the youth goal 'moving rural youth forward' also elicited many reflections, discussions, and, subsequently, visual works. Throughout the creative process, the project facilitators assisted a deeper reflection of the young people's sense of agency and empowerment. It is equally noteworthy that, during the process, the participants started to create works on a range of topics not explicitly mentioned in the framework, such as domestic violence and peacebuilding.

Below we see a couple of pictures that the participants took during the Participatory Photography process. Figure 1 shows a photo on the Youth Goal 'Equality for all Genders'. The team described their intention for taking this photo with the wish to express a need for accepting and acknowledging their common humanity above all markers of identity.

Figure 2 shows a photo, related to the Youth Goal 'A Sustainable Green Europe', by Talin Abuwardeh. By choosing soil in human hands as a subject, participants in this team expressed a feeling of care and responsibility that should guide our perspective towards a socially and ecologically sustainable evolution of society.

In figure 3, a black-and-white photo, an empty basketball field in front of a forest is depicted, which the participants described as an expression of unused opportunities with regards to the Youth Goal 'Moving Rural Youth Forward'.
In figure 4, the team created a photo of a female hand stopping a male fist to describe a reference to domestic violence.

The Participatory Photography process was accompanied by a number of auxiliary exercises, designed by the researcher-facilitator team, to allow participants to get to know each other and foster team-building, while getting familiar with essential photography techniques. In another exercise the teams created a common community contract, coming up with their own community guidelines on how they want to communicate respectfully, self-organize tasks, or use shared spaces, materials, and devices. In one reflection exercise, participants were invited to write a fairy tale on their experience with themselves (as a human or non-human figure) and other people in the group during/in the course of the project. The fairy tales were afterwards shared in the forum.

Furthermore, the process was complemented by workshops designed according to the principles of non-formal education: Approaches of embodied learning and exercises, e.g., from Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre' (MacDonald and Rachel, 2000) toolbox deepened and integrated the understanding of what participation means for individual participants in a social setting and shared space. In a guided process for/towards approaching online activism, participants assembled digital toolkits for photo-editing and easy-to-use graphics design, while testing their potential for creating a campaign promoting sustainable practises in schools and youth organisations. The whole process was accompanied by discussion groups and harvesting circles for maximising the reflective potential of the teams and the group as a whole.

Figure 1. Untitled (On Gender Equality). Source: Participatory Photography Collective, 2022.

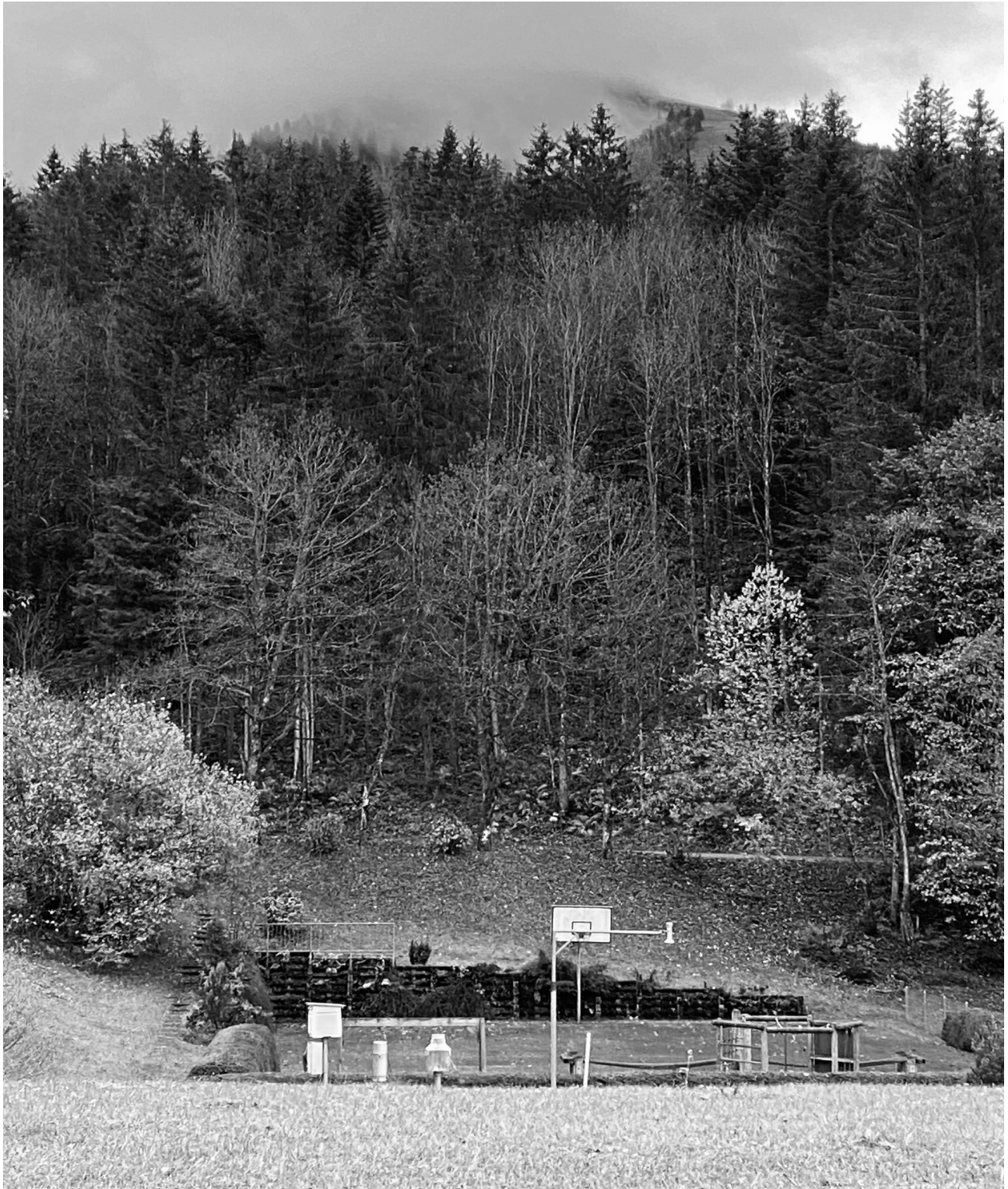**Figure 2.** Untitled (On Sustainability). Source: Participatory Photography Collective, 2022.

Figure 3. Untitled (Moving Rural Youth forward). Source: Participatory Photography Collective, 2022.

Figure 4. Untitled (Stop Domestic Violence). Source: Arpi Hovhanissyan, 2022.

Concerning the 11 EU Youth Goals, the participants agreed on their relevance, however, they also concluded that they were rather broad ideas and needed adjustment according to local realities and contexts. The participants emphasized that daily topics of concern, such as the war on Ukraine or the energy crisis, often overshadowed the broader ideals of the Youth Goals. Also, these events were detrimental for the mental health and wellbeing of some participants.

As a road to empowerment they wished for more awareness of the relevance of participation in civic life among their less engaged peers. All in all, the process showed the high interest of young people in active citizenship and helped to increase their understanding of the potentials of participation.

5. Discussion and Conclusion
From a standpoint of applied visual anthropology, the youth project served as a case study for inciting and documenting the potentials of participatory photography and the accompanying workshops as tools for reflection, identification, and self-empowerment, based on the 11 EU Youth Goals.

The researcher-facilitator documented the daily programme with fieldnotes, photographs and recorded video material, which was then played back to the group. I, as a researcher, was able to observe how the participants related to the frameworks of European Commission policies from a grassroots perspective. They were able/inspired to formulate strategies for change, utter critique, and assert their voice. They created not only abstract knowledge but also aesthetic and emotional accounts of their worldviews. In a self-reflective process, the researcher-facilitator entered into a dialogue with the group of participants and, through the hosting and harvesting practice, helped to co-create insights for the collective creative endeavour of defining and living youth identities in Europe.

From the perspective of Paulo Freire's educational approach of Critical Pedagogy as a 'praxis of freedom' (Freire, 2005), the process served to unearth the political potential of non-formal and peer-to-peer learning processes and enabled the participants to utter their worldviews and understand themselves as empowered global citizens. Through the workshops, the individual and collective reflection and the participatory photography process, the participants understood their agency from a perspective of active participation in the local and subsequently global sphere.

To conclude, Participatory Photography–the creative group process of eliciting visual data in a reflection of participants' lifeworlds in an on-site participatory setting–turned out to be a useful medium to raise young people's awareness of their unique vantage points for observing their lifeworlds. Moreover, it helps spark empowerment and a feeling of common humanity to co-create and shape the world they live in. By locating the self in an active part of one's lifeworld, on an individual, local and global level, Participatory Photography served as an empowering tool to define their spaces of agency. At the same time, it is a powerful means for young people to exert social critique and co-create activist content.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

About the Author
Vera Penz is a social and cultural anthropologist, freelance researcher, youth work facilitator and Co-Director of Vienna-based NGO Association for Social Aesthetics. She is working as an applied anthropologist in non-profit and corporate settings, specialized in digital social innovation, UX|UI research, and visual and design anthropology.

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