Photography now marches in lockstep with smartphones, and engages all the imagemaking possibilities (democratic, social, individualistic, narcissistic) that smartphones invite—although one might not notice this turn when visiting most contemporary photography shows. This past summer, however, the exceptional group exhibition at the Center for Photography at Woodstock, The Space Between: Redefining Public and Personal in Smartphone Photography, offered a surprising corrective grounded in the ways photographers actually capture images in the present, fluctuating moment where so much of art, photography, communication, and documentation is contested and political. What’s more, the show sowed fertile ground for the progressive moves ahead in photography, and in the ways we picture ourselves.

The Space Between was curated by Henry Jacobson, a photographer invested in the uses and abuses of mobile photography. It featured the work of seven photographers and two collectives, installed throughout the large gallery space in three separate groupings: personal space, public space, and hyper-space. Thus installed, the work of the seven individual photographers documented the current moment in digital, hyper-democratic, individualist photography—in which one’s take in and out of the viewfinder is both necessary and sufficient for a picture—and pushed well beyond it.

Jacobson curated his own painterly diptychs into the show: personal notes to his friends and family, sent off like photo postcards from his recent three-year nomadic travels. The other individual photographers in the show—Chip Hinterland, Florence Oliver, Kerry Payne, Mark Peterson, Sofia Verzbolovskis, and Laura El-Tantawy—together covered, from wall to wall, the private, political, and historical bases of contemporary photography. Oliver stood out from the other photographers: a painter who uses photographs as sketches, she captures the painterly pictorialist tradition that once grounded photography. The past covered and the present counted, the show looked ahead and featured prints from Instagram. That move suggested what many already think: online, shared imagemaking is the next step in the story of photography.

Indeed, it was the work of the two collectives, Echo/Sight (a collaborative duo) and Tiny Collective (a decentralized outfit spread out across much of the world now rolling and boiling in images), that, playing off Instagram and Dropbox, seemed to challenge the monopoly doctrine of “one person, one view, one machine, one image.” The two collectives showed collaboration as the path ahead for socially engaged photography—that is, if photographers dare risk their time traversing that path.

The Egyptian-born El-Tantawy’s work reflects her myriad interests and commitments. A trio of Instagrammed photos—Faces of a Continuing Revolution—Cairo, Egypt, 26/6/2013 (2013), Outside My Window (2013), and Where Do We Go From Here?—Cairo, Egypt, 11/1/2013 (2013)—read like reflections on the recent and utterly confounding Arab Spring in Egypt. They promised the content of a conversation we might have someday about the facts “out there.” Peterson’s work documented the course of recent politics in caricatured portraits of renowned public officials. The iPhone app distortions of Hillary Clinton and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie recall Honoré-Victorin Daumier’s political cartoons and Leonardo da Vinci’s fantastic grotesques. The critique here isn’t cutting as much as historical: this happened, and then that happened on the campaign trail. Looking at the pictures, one wished politics weren’t structured the way they are, that our leaders had more integrity, that they were less farcically corruptible people. There was little of the portraiture-as-glitz-shitck of Richard Avedon’s and Irving Penn’s work, and that felt like an appropriate stance to take on the contemporary captured and coerced image.

Panama-born Verzbolovskis’s Untitled series (2014) riffed on classic street photography. A city is not a whole construct but a series of unrelated façades. Those façades are crumbling as we’re all getting squeezed in and out, and there’s a stink in the air. The two best photographs in the series suggest the artist’s view on city life is rather that of an itinerant traveler undecided on the next stop, open to her next move. Waking Up to the Sound of Breaking Glass From My Window (2014), a black-and-white image, shows the patterned mosaic view of an unnamed cityscape through a shattered window. New York to Panama (2014) shows another patterned view, this time of a road-like landscape through a dust-settled screen. The ranging (non)specificity of the prints suggests...
both a journey and the static stops along the way—a journey away from the city, possessions packed up in a U-Haul truck. The prints make a good case that Verzbolovskis is Aaron Siskind’s successor, setting out for a more country-bound life.

The Space Between was a narrative show: its objective was to relate the story of contemporary photography and highlight photography’s current status. Indeed, the material reminder, inside a white-walled gallery, that the iPhone is the most popular camera in the world, felt like a bit of a jolt. The extraordinarily expensive camera’s diminution is hardly the stuff of blockbuster shows. Yet, as the exhibition successfully documented, the world is coming together in public squares and commons, linked up by one smartphone or another. Images of abuse, coercion, resistance, and love are being documented independently, by everyone, and without caution, in a way that George Eastman could not have prefigured.

The most interesting work in the show, however, foretold the next revolution to come. The work of two collectives offered a collaborative view on the image, a view that wasn’t exhausted by the work already on display. Echo/Sight, a collaborative outfit comprised of London-based photographer Danny Ghitis and Daniella Zalcman, based in New York, experiments collaboratively via Instagram across the Atlantic, and routinely exhibits the results as prints. Ghitis and Zalcman’s double-exposure play, installed on its own wall, was the traffic of cloud-based information across oceans and borders, all of it an index of both their exchanges and the anchors they each bring to their contribution. Digital prints, dissonant and bursting with color, trace a lineage from early surrealist photo-collage. And like surrealism, the work plays on the subversive, on documentation and the secret archive, though now, unlike then, it does so simply by crossing national borders. For, as revealed by Edward Snowden and others, intelligence agencies around Washington, DC, consider all cross-border communication as contact rife with hidden codes and agendas. That Echo/Sight’s work might actually be documented and archived not only by art spaces, but also by governments fits the schemes of the surveillance state, structured now to hide more information than it reveals. Significantly, the founding collaborators are open to new contributions from new collaborators and new players. The possibility that the scope of Echo/Sight’s work could change radically depending on the scope of the contributions and collaborations offers just the kind of imaginative view that photography and photographers need to bank on if they want their craft to progress as a relevant discourse in art, and in the world.

One could test just that view in the work of Tiny Collective, a twelve-member multinational group formed in 2012. With members based in New York, Paris, Sydney, Istanbul, and elsewhere, Tiny Collective’s mission is to tease out new takes on what socially engaged collaborative photography could become. So, although each photographer lives far from the others—from Zagreb, Croatia, to Atlanta, Georgia, for example—they nevertheless work in tandem on their projects. This cooperative view on photography, this collaborative view on documentation and its production, is arguably the future, not only of photography, but also of all art.

FAHEEM HAIDER is an artist, writer, art critic, and political analyst.