The Troublesome Document

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Photography Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/3475

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
The Troublesome Document

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography & Film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa
BA Double Hons. Oxford University, 2002

Director: Brian Ulrich, Associate Professor, Department of Photography & Film
Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia, April 2014
# Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... iv  
Section I. The Problematic Document ................................................................. 1  
Section II. A Period of Transition: From Picture Press to Photobook ............. 18  
Section III. The Virtues of Documentary Photography .................................. 40  
Section IV. Illustrations ......................................................................................... 45
Abstract

THE TROUBLESOME DOCUMENT

By Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, BA Double Hons

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography & Film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Director: Brian Ulrich, Associate Professor, Department of Photography & Film
Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia, April 2014

An essay concerning the development of documentary photography, its relationship to political norms, conventions of realism in visual culture, and the form of the photographic book.
I. The Problematic Document

The term “political” derives from the Greek word *politikos*, meaning of, for, or relating to ‘civic’ or ‘civil’ matters.¹ Such a definition grounds all notions of the political in the predicate of citizenry—grounds them on the basis of membership in a specific group. Meanings in language are similarly both constrained and informed by the specific histories of particular, socio-culturally constituted groups. It seems reasonable to postulate, therefore, that photographic meaning has been, and inevitably will always be, the product of the particular, locally circumscribed cultural conditions at play within the group(s) for whom its images retain some currency or significance. To the extent that images can have meaning, and to the extent that those meanings can be construed as political, the character of the politics of those images, and the nuances of their meanings, will be a dynamic result of the ways in which social, cultural, sexual, religious and economic forces intersect in their reading.

In his seminal essay “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)”, theorist, photographer and critic Allan Sekula argues for a comparable model of understanding the manner in which meaning arises in relation to documentary photographs. Sekula suggests that if we understand art as “a discourse anchored in concrete social relations,” or as something very much akin to speech, then the production of meaning can be understood as a result of an interpretive act, which is by definition “ideologically constrained.” Therefore:

The meaning of an artwork ought to be regarded, then, as contingent, rather than as immanent, universally given, or fixed. The Kantian separation of cognitive and

affective faculties, which provided the philosophical basis for Romanticism, must likewise be critically superseded.²

It is thus crucially important to recall that the reading of an image is not a unidirectional activity in which an image transmits, and a viewer receives. The meaning of a documentary photograph is not immanent, but contingent, reciprocally constructed, and subject to both temporal and culturally specific pressures. What meaning we find in an image is as much the result of an individual investment as it is the byproduct of a visual method of disseminating information. We claim something of ourselves in our readings of those images that confront us, just as we assert something of ourselves in the manner in which we understand the words and images that surround us.

***

The term ‘documentary,’ as used in the context of the visual arts, was first employed in describing the film Moana, directed by Robert Flaherty and reviewed by the filmmaker and British government official John Grierson in 1926. The etymology of the word devolves around the Latin term docere, which means to ‘tell, or inform.’³ Grierson wrote of the film that “being a visual account of events in the daily life of Polynesian youth, it has documentary value.”⁴

---


For Grierson, a filmmaker expressly concerned with exploring the political utility of the then emergent powers of cinema and photography, the instructional value of *Moana* was laudatory and significant. The possibility of producing visual forms of communication that could incorporate the public in a visceral process of identification with a common struggle—forms that could inculcate political values consonant with the interests of the state—was of vital interest to Grierson.

Thus from its very beginnings, the politics of the term ‘documentary’ have been tied to its genesis as a pro-statist instrument of public communication. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, documentary photography has been subjected to a sustained and frequently suspicious critique—one that has taken the fact of the origins of the term as indicative of the essential nature of this photographic form. Thus the politics of documentary photographs have been construed as typically or essentially retrograde, on the basis of its heritage and history of use, rather than on the basis of its wider expressive and analytical possibilities. Sekula continues:

> What I am arguing is that we understand the extent to which art *redeems* a repressive social order by offering a wholly imaginary transcendence, a false harmony, to docile and isolated spectators. The cult of private experience, of the entirely affective relation to culture demanded by a consumerist economy, serves to obliterate momentarily, on weekends, knowledge of the fragmentation, boredom, and routinization of labor, knowledge of the self as a commodity.\(^5\)

Sekula is here still addressing the field of documentary photography, but from the vantage point of a moment long after its works have been accepted as art, and incorporated into the art history of photography as well as the history of art. What is troubling in the argument outlined above is its deep cynicism on the one hand, and its modest faith in the interpretive faculties of the viewing public on the other. If meaning, as Sekula states, is contingent, culturally-specific and reciprocal, then it is at least theoretically possible that a documentary photograph—or a group of them—might

---

offer not an imaginary, but a plausible transcendence, a visual refutation of the prevailing conventions of social order that Sekula himself rightly critiques.

If we recall the definition of *politikos* outlined earlier, I argued that the predicate of citizenry was indispensable to any object, act or gesture understood to possess a political quality. Citizenry, therefore, should be understood in the context of documentary photography as a necessary precondition for any possible social function or meaning that an image might provide for those who may read it. If a photographic image is characterized by an acute and insightful reading of a ‘repressive social order’ then it is not only plausible, but potentially highly probable that it will be capable of exposing and critiquing the normalcy of the value system that produces that order.

One must affiliate oneself with an image to render it legible, and the strength or intensity of that voluntary affiliation will bear some direct relation to the profundity of the image’s impact on oneself as a viewer. The nature of the ‘transcendence’ offered by a documentary image may not be that of immediate social transformation (no photograph is equivalent to concerted political action). But a documentary photograph may find its value in the representation of a dissident perspective–one that militates for a substantial reorganization of the norms that govern the society in which the image finds its meaning. In this sense, a photographic image can represent a means to identify with individuals or communities from whom one is otherwise removed or estranged, not on the basis of common experience, but on the basis of a moral principle at odds with the ‘repressive social order’ that the image depicts.

In the context of the history of photography, the social function of the documentary photograph has contributed to a basis for protest about an injustice insufficiently represented or redressed, or to claims for a set of conditions not presently in existence but nevertheless
necessary—even essential—to a more inclusive model of justice and community. Photography is inextricably tied to projection, but an integral part of that projection is the instinct to proffer one’s own voluntary affiliation, which is an effort of solidarity, as much as it is an element in process of visual communication. The political character of a documentary image is thus constrained by the specific interests and attentions of the culture in which it circulates, but its contents can contribute to a shift in the norms of that culture, as a result of the urgency of its viewer’s gesture of projection and voluntary affiliation.

***

Some of the necessary, but at times reductive, criticism to which documentary photography has been subjected stems from an understanding of the documentary image that is framed by a unidirectional understanding of seeing. Such readings hold that since documentary photographs circulate primarily in the mass media, they are intrinsically antithetical to radical political change, or they argue that since documentary images are the product of an unequal power dynamic between photographer and subject, they unavoidably redouble social subjugation. Alternately, such criticisms highlight documentary photography’s deep ties to pro-statist policy, and thereby claim the form itself to be the issue of a paternalistic model of humanism, or they emphasize the fragmentary nature of documentary photographs, and thus suggest them to be intrinsically untruthful, and thereby opposed to transparency and social justice. There are many antecedents to these viewpoints, but salient among them are the

---

tendencies to conceive of viewers as passive subjects of visual media, to simultaneously doubt and believe in photography’s ultimate fidelity, to bemoan artistic license while overlooking the unavoidably rhetorical nature of visual composition, or to conflate the politics of modernism in art, and liberalism in New Deal policy with the fullest scope of the documentary photographic form. Sekula’s earlier argument about art offering an imaginary transcendence from a repressive social order is perhaps indicative of the more pessimistic strain of this critique.

This is not to suggest that there are not structural pressures that stand opposed to the efforts of documentary photographs to produce a transgressive, dissident or even transcendent alternative to the reigning social order of the day. Chief among these pressures are the institutions, publications and social spaces in which such imagery has been allowed to circulate. Solomon-Godeau writes:

The paradox that underlies those documentary practices that have defined themselves as critical of the status quo, or at very least reformist in intention, is that they normally operate within larger systems that function to limit, contain, and ultimately neutralize them. The issue here is not co-option as such, but the structural limitations of conventional documentary imagery to disrupt the textual, epistemological, and ideological systems that inscribe and contain it.  

While we have long recognized photography’s participation in the production of codes and conventions of normalcy that served specific political ends, the images produced to entrench those codes have been, and could at any point be set against the intentions of their makers. The matter of the legibility of ideological imperatives that reject social change is not settled simply because they have been successively deployed in images by powerful political interests. The very same strategies that disseminate value systems opposed to political or social reform can be exposed, and critiqued by those who view them at work on the printed page. This is to say that

---

the pedagogical qualities of the documentary photograph are not necessarily limited in absolute terms by the context in which those images circulate.

I would argue that at the root of this sense that the documentary photograph can be *contained* by the context in which it circulates lies a difficulty in reconciling what Michael Chaban has called the “ontological antinomies”\(^8\) of the screen (which can be read here, for our purposes, as equivalent to the photographic image). Earlier I noted the difficulty in reconciling a tendency to both doubt and believe in photography’s fidelity to the real world, and I mean to invoke that problem here, as an essential part of the photograph’s capacity to exceed the discursive context in which it is employed.

In broad terms, if we take the photograph to be an absolute objective record of the world, then its use in a photographic essay detailing the inequities of poverty in the slums, for example, is likely to be understood to represent a verifiable reality. However, if we accept and consider the selective, subjective activity necessary to the making of a photograph, then we can consider those things that the photograph *excludes* in relation to those objects, people, or symbols that it *includes*. We can, in this sense, test the logic of its representational rhetoric, and interrogate the extent to which that logic favors one ideological stance over another.

In her essay “Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Thoughts about Documentary Photography,” Abigail Solomon-Godeau cites the analysis of Jacob Riis’s slum photographs by Sally Stein. Solomon-Godeau pays specific attention to those analyses in which Stein focuses critically upon the images Riis rejected as much as on the stylistic consistency of those images he selected for public use:

---

We can indeed marvel at the consistency of Riis’s photography in which so few of the exposures presented a subject sufficiently composed to return the glance of the photographer. That he rejected those rare photographs in which the subject did happen to look back suggests how premeditated this effect was… The averted gaze, the appearance of unconsciousness or stupefaction, were only a few of the recurring features which gave Riis’s pictorial documents stylistic unity and ideological coherence in relation to the text.9

Stein’s focus on the images that were regularly excluded from Riis’s studies of slum poverty exposes a specific and consistent rhetorical strategy in his photography. Stein’s deliberate effort to read against the grain of Riis’s pictorial mode exposes one means by which he constructs his subjects as subjugated—by denying those images of subjects that demonstrate their awareness of, and participation in the photographic act. If one were to similarly and habitually question the invisible and yet constitutive choices made by a photographer whose work is circulated in the picture press, one could quickly come to expose the manner in which that photographer’s subject matter is constructed. Such an analytical effort would close the apparent gap between the objective and subjective qualities of the published photographs, and would help to expose for a reader the possible ideological interests of the publication and/or photographer themselves.

It is, to my mind, the deep historical influence of photography’s early employment as an ostensibly transparent means of visualizing the world that leads to the belief that photographic images are wholly subservient to the method of their use. This is not to suggest that they are not substantially influenced by the discursive context in which they are employed. I am merely arguing that that context can be interrogated, and its particular logics exposed. Such an activity requires analytical tools that are not taught frequently or extensively, either by the visual media or by the educational systems in place in our western culture. However, they are nevertheless latently available within the substance of photographic images themselves.

---

The Spanish photographer Joan Fontcuberta said recently: “Reality does not exist by itself. It’s an intellectual construction; and photography is a tool to negotiate our idea of reality.”\(^{10}\) If we were to incorporate a more profound recognition of the implications of this statement for the photographs we create and are surrounded by, I would argue that it would be significantly more likely that we might find a reliable means to resist the institutional, ideological and discursive pressures exercised against documentary photographs that seek to expose ‘repressive social orders.’ Such a possibility depends, in the end, on our capacity to reconcile ostensibly opposing truths, and to become more sensitized to what Chaban describes as the ‘ontological antinomies’ of the screen (equivalent, for my purposes, to the photograph):

The screen as a representational space offers a constant interplay between different modes of appearance which present themselves conventionally as ontological antinomies: reality and illusion, realism and fantasy, story and non-story, staged and unstaged, etc. It was probably inevitable that when documentary emerged in the 1920s this dualism would be reinforced. If it was rapidly perceived as fiction’s other, this is first of all because it involved the repudiation of fiction in the name of the real.\(^{11}\)

The traditional model according to which ‘documentary’ has been distinguished from ‘artistic’ in the context of photography has thus depended on a diametric opposition that is unstable at best. Since documentary photography has historically been billed as the ‘real,’ the need for a critical sensitivity to the manner in which its realities are framed has been strategically overlooked.

***

The photograph was first understood as a technical device—a product of scientific experimentation that promised the possibility of absolute objective clarity, and thus the prospect of improved means of knowing facts derived of and from the world. The fact that a photograph

\(^{10}\) A Film About Joan Fontcuberta – 2013 Hasselblad Award Winner, http://www.hasselbladfoundation.org/2013-Joan-Fontcuberta/ (As of March 31\(^{st}\) 2014)

resembled the reigning pictorial convention of the way in which the world appeared, with a
greater measure of specificity and clarity than any other visual media, lent itself to the
normalization of a model according to which the photograph was objective and truthful—a virtue
measured against the ostensibly expressive and fictional qualities of other visual media.
Moreover, the fact that such images could be produced mechanically, with relatively minimal intervention by the human hand (as measured against painting, sculpture and drawing) lent to photographs a greater air of authority, and of authoritative objectivity.

The seminal early photographic albums that documented the vastness of the American nation (those of Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, for example) were instruments of policy, and were thus defined as objective records of a national inheritance. They were of vital importance because they were understood to be objectively accurate, and they were timely in their depiction of abundant beauty and great economic opportunity. The earliest photographs of the American Civil War were similarly circulated as factual records of a grievous and lengthy national tragedy, and were made to serve a wider conversation about the tumultuous struggles underway for the identity of the American nation. Little emphasis was placed on the selective nature of the making of those photographs, and less attention still was dedicated to contemplating the specificity of those choices in establishing their subject matter in terms that would be legible to policy-makers, or to the public at large.

Photography, since its earliest beginnings, has thus been of particular use to the state, whether as a means of recording the progress or cost of public policy, as a means of calculating political and economic opportunity, or as a means of establishing and developing a catalogue of ‘knowledge’ about the subjects of governmental power.
In his essay “The Plane of Decent Seeing: Documentary and the Rhetoric of Recruitment,” art historian John Tagg writes of this particular aspect of photography’s history, describing the way in which photography offered to institutions of the state

a new language, that harnessed the latest imaging technologies and systems of information handling to a novel purpose: the careful scrutiny of bodies and spaces with a view to their regulation, modification, and productive application; the accumulation, from this sustained observation, of dossiers, case studies, files, and records; the labeling, cataloging, and painstaking storage of these discriminating texts; their jealous, expert handling; and their elaboration into new systems of knowledge, new professional jurisdictions, and new institutional hierarchies.  

Documentary photographs have thus, since their earliest categorization as such, been of particular value to an effort by state powers to establish a specific way of seeing the national body, the national space, and the national citizenry. Seeing has in this sense been bound up with identity, and photography was deployed in an effort to both legitimate and popularize an arbitrary set of conventions of identity as desirable, or worthy of approbation.  

Later on in his essay, Tagg quotes from various Grierson texts in a short passage in which Grierson’s writings serve Tagg’s efforts to define the political virtues of the documentary photograph. Tagg argues that “[i]n short, documentary provided ‘the imaginative training for modern citizenship’ in ‘a world where only the corporate and the co-operative will matter.’ This is what constitutes ‘documentary’s primary service to the state,’ just as the State is, in turn, documentary’s logical sponsor.”  

The intimate relationship between the imaging of a nation and the powers that govern it is, for Tagg, integral to the very nature of the documentary photograph. That is to say, Tagg argues based on the historical fact of documentary photography’s unique value to government

---


13 See, for instance, Matthew Brady, The Gallery of Illustrious Americans (1850)

policy, that documentary photographs are thus inevitably—even genetically—pro-statist forms of visual rhetoric. His essay focuses on Grierson, who first established the genre ‘documentary’ in the 1920s. This coincided precisely with the newly built Museum of Modern Art’s establishment of a photography department, whose curator Beaumont Newhall was busily writing the first history of the medium. Tagg opens his essay quoting Grierson on the rhetorical motivations for his documentary practice: “I look to register what actually moves: what hits the spectator at the midriff: what yanks him up by the hair of his head or the plain boot-stra es to the plane of decent seeing.”

Grierson’s motivations as a filmmaker, and as a senior government official, were to find ways of producing documentary films—at a time of acute economic peril—that could not only inform, but mobilize the general public in an effort to support policy aimed at economic recovery. Crucially, however, such policies were geared toward a recovery modeled on the same basic economic logic that preceded The Great Depression. Thus the socio-cultural and political motivations of the form that these films would take was to a large extent governed by their efficacy in creating a sense of common purpose, rather than in fomenting radical responses to the status quo.

The relevance of this period of history to documentary photography stems from the explosive impact of the picture press on visual culture, and the sudden proliferation of photographic images disseminated to ordinary (non-expert) members of society as a record of the goings on in the world around them. The Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (subsequently named the Farm Security Administration) was launched with precisely the same motivations as those espoused by Grierson, and in its stable of employees it included a large number of documentary photographers whose contribution to the medium was both immense and

---

precocious. Such photographers as Ben Shahn, Jack Delano, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Gordon Parks, Marion Post Walcott, Arthur Rothstein, John Vachon and Walker Evans contributed to an extensive archive of documentary photographs from the time of The Great Depression, photographs which continue to exert a powerful influence on contemporary norms of photojournalism and documentary photographic practice.

There is no evading the charge that documentary photographs are rhetorical forms of visual communication, nor is there any virtue in suggesting that such photographs—as documents—do not simultaneously emerge from a specific and arbitrary set of subjective concerns on the part of the photographers who create them. However, the level of significance accorded by Tagg to the genesis of documentary practice runs the risk of simultaneously disavowing free agency on the part of those people who view such photographs, and according too great a measure of power and influence to the state over a medium that is both inherently ambiguous, and utterly subject to the specific objectives of its users.

Rhetoric is inextricably bound up with all images, and the practice of rhetoric devolves around the art of persuasion. Photographic composition conforms to the logic of rhetoric in establishing a hierarchy of space, and a specific arrangement of forms through which a particular, subjective point of view can establish itself as legible and (to some degree) transparent. The significance of that which is depicted is thus a necessary byproduct not only of a photographer’s reading of his or her cultural and historical moment, but simultaneously of the manner of deliberate organization of those objects and forms in space that can invoke culture, and history.

Thus the question in documentary photography is not so much whether what the photograph depicts really exists, as it is whether the importance of its material relationship to
actual things in the world is disqualified by the subjective choices that informed the rendering of
the image. Documentary photographs stage the apparent opposition of subjective and objective
conditions. This is Chaban’s ontological antinomy noted above. For Tagg, the internecine
relationship between policymakers, magnates like Henry Luce (owner of *Time, Life* and
*Fortune*), wealthy benefactors like the Rockefellers (founders of the Museum of Modern Art)
and documentary photography itself, discredits the notion of its capability to argue *against*
prevailing conventions, or persistent and grievous injustices:

[I]f there is a link between documentation and “documentary,” that link is now
seen to come not via the pristine camera but via the institutions, discourses, and
systems of power that invest the camera and sully it, and via the regimen that
holds the document in place. What links document to “documentary” is not a
natural continuity founding a seamless tradition but, rather, the uneven history of
photography’s implication in the purposeful institutionalization of boundaries to
meaning.  

I spoke earlier of the relationship between citizenship, culture, politics and meaning–
extrapolating from the intersubjective nature of each to the potentially open-ended nature of the
photographic image. It seems unarguable that individual people propose their own interpretations
of, and express their own affiliations toward those things they find meaningful and urgent in
images, just as in language. Documentary photography’s origins at the nexus of state and
corporate power cannot be understood to encapsulate the totality of its discursive possibilities
without disregarding, in a wholesale fashion, the plurality of other ways in which people have
used the camera to record the appearance of the world around them. Such ways include:
newspapers and pamphlets produced by workers organized around increased rights, suffrage,
anti-colonial struggles, efforts to popularize a fight for civil rights, and the immense vagary of
family photographs seeking to cherish private moments and relationships against the

---

irrepressible onslaught of time. The fact that the earliest rapid proliferation of public imagery occurred by means of a more or less beneficial collusion between powerful governmental and corporate institutions, abetted by wealthy private individuals, does not capture the full extent of the uses of photography even in the late nineteenth century, much less in the early decades of the twentieth.

For Tagg, such a position in defense of documentary seeks to avoid the tarnish of its linkage to privilege and power. For him:

[T]he history of documentary is the history of a strategy of meaning for which reality is not only a complex discursive effect but also an effect of power that returns its own force to the struggle to control the social field. It is not, then, just a matter of the textuality of the documentary image. Like all realist strategies, documentary seeks to construct an imaginary continuity and coherence between a subject of address and a signified real—a continuity and coherence in which not only the work of the sign but also the effects of power of a particular regimen are elided.  

I argue that such a position conflates the steep challenge of democratic freedom in a corporatist state with the expressive powers of a medium that has done such states great service. The sense of irreparable moral compromise implied in Tagg’s position is more properly attributed to the difficulty of organized political resistance to the hegemony of social and economic conventions than it is to the potential scope of the medium itself. Moreover, the pivotal vector by means of which documentary photographs were allowed to circulate in public culture is here elided with the nature of the medium itself. Newspapers and magazines are taken to be as foundational to the documentary form as the camera itself, when in reality they were a pivotal but arbitrary means for the popularization of these types of images.

Tagg’s argument suggests (at least implicitly) that the arm of the mass media conglomerate is long enough to taint any photograph with documentary intentions, regardless of

---

its method of circulation. However, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed the steady devaluation of the primacy of the documentary photograph in the normalization of a public narrative about the condition of the world. First, its primacy was dethroned by the sudden and vast influence of television, second by the equally transformative effects of cable news broadcasting, and third by the advent of the Internet and wireless technologies. This marks a sequence of technological and cultural transformations in which documentary photography’s hold on conventions of realism has been successively undermined by the proliferation of media platforms—a proliferation that has brought with it a broadening of visual conventions of realism, and a diminution of the authority of the traditional picture press.

As photography’s power to define public conventions of realism waned in the final two decades of the 20th century, photographers sought through public exhibitions and photographic books to exercise greater control over the discursive functions of their images. The audience for their work diminished immeasurably, as first magazines and then newspapers struggled to compete with other media to maintain sufficient editorial space for the types of extended photographic essays best suited to documentary praxis. In the significantly narrower, but equally freer space of the museum, the book or (eventually) the gallery, greater measures of individual control offered some compensation for the loss of a once pivotal position in the wider public conversation about the state of the world.

Documentary photographers continued to contend with the complexity of a rapidly changing world, no less rife with conflict, exploitation or injustice than it had been during the early decades of documentary’s existence. As the photographic medium more broadly achieved entry into the high arts, photographers made use of the photographic book (photobook) as an optimal means for establishing and experimenting with photographic language. Simultaneously,
such photographers continued to address the socio-cultural and political norms of the day, finding means to invoke and critique norms of representation, as well as to speak to sublimated conflicts or tensions infrequently addressed elsewhere.18

II. A Period of Transition: From Picture Press to Photobook

The photobook emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s as the pre-eminent vehicle for a documentary photographer seeking to address complex interweaving questions with a high degree of formal control, and thus control over the specific character of their political critique. It would be tempting, given its importance, to periodize the significance of the photobook as emerging directly from the dissolution of the picture press. However the pivotal exemplar of acute aesthetic, cultural and socio-political critique in documentary photography remains that of Walker Evans’s *American Photographs*, published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1938. This is to say that even in the moment of the rapid ascension of *Life* magazine and the wider picture press, an alternate model for formal experimentation and discursive specificity was already being developed.

While Tagg and Sekula are scathing in their critique of documentary photography’s relationship to institutions of power, they are nevertheless broadly laudatory of Evans’s example. This is a hard circle to square when attempting to reconcile their dismissal of documentary photography against their praise for Evans’s work. Evans, for many years an employee of Henry Luce at *Fortune* magazine, coined the now well-known phrase “documentary style” to differentiate the lyrical agenda of his documentary photographs from the ostensibly objective intentions of photojournalism.

Critically, Evans recognised that the camera was capable of producing an image that seemed politically and emotionally neutral, and thus superficially disinterested in the ideological

---


character of the subject matter it depicted. *American Photographs* adopts the neutral formal register of documentary photographs, while simultaneously elaborating a subtle yet extensive political critique of American cultural norms. It is the conflation in Evans of a frontal style of photography with a deeply specific symbolism in subject matter—most especially as it develops through sequencing—that enables him to elide the ‘ontological antinomies’ of documentary photography. In this his work is both subjective and objective, and it is to the simultaneously incisive and elusive qualities of those photographs that Tagg most strongly and positively responds.

In discussing the distinctions between Margaret Bourke-White’s 1937 photograph *When the Flood Receded, Louisville, Kentucky*, and Evans’s photograph from the same year, *Negroes in the line up for food, Forrest City, Arkansas*, Tagg notes that “[f]or Bourke-White, meaning must be delivered and the viewer must take receipt. In Evans’s image, meaning is held back, seemingly less by the photographer than by the objects themselves, from which the viewer is cut off by an uncertain distance that reintroduces the presence of the lens between the eye and the scene.”

(Fig. 1 & Fig. 2)

Bourke-White’s elision of two profoundly disparate economic realities within a single frame compels the viewer to read one set of conditions (real, in the literal state of flood victims forming a bread line) against another (aberrant, in the contradiction embodied by the commercial myth of American independence). Both sections of the image pertain to real forces in American culture, but the illustrated fiction of the billboard is rendered as implausible through its conjunction with the virtual starvation of real Americans lining the streets. By contrast, Evans’s image invokes the bread line and the threat of starvation without providing a counterpoint against

---

which to draw an ethical baseline that might clarify the narrative of the image. His attenuated, flattened and iconic image addresses race and starvation without simplifying the comparative effort required to locate the injustice of that starvation in the landscape that surrounds it. In this Evans does a poorer job as a photojournalist (or government employee) than he does as an artist.

Tagg continues:

In (Bourke-White’s) case, meaning always arrives, guaranteed by the transparency of rhetoric and the finality of photographic truth, through which the misrepresentations of American capitalism can be confronted with the reality they occlude. In the other, we encounter an attachment to the object that does not accommodate itself to instrumental communication but is encrypted, locked away in layers of representation like an infinite series of Russian dolls.

It is the sophisticated quality of Evans’s understanding of the layering of meaning, both within individual images and more crucially across the variegated progression of a photographic sequence, that enables his work to attain a lucidity that is less didactic, and more elliptical in nature. His photographs frequently intimate a wider reality more so than they describe it comprehensively, and they are in this sense more elliptical, open, ambiguous, and thus demanding images to read. They evade a tendency toward essentialism by insisting on the fragmentary qualities of photographic images, and it is this tendency, and the narrative strengths of which it is capable that characterises the work of Michael Schmidt, Paul Graham and Christopher Killip, whose work I wish to focus on in a consideration of the merits of the photographic book. I take their work to represent a creative refusal to concede to the criticisms that debilitated documentary practice—most especially the central contradiction in those criticisms outlined by David Campany:

The photographic theory then emerging in Britain and North America was developing a powerful critique of the ideological underpinnings of the illustrated press, but the mistake, dangerously widespread at the time, was to assume that documentary ‘was’ its mass media manifestation. Many critics, commentators and

---

educators were set on denouncing the medium's truth claims and commercial illusions as equally dubious tricks. Impatient with just how ineffable and demanding images can be, the terms of the discussion were often reductive. Faith in the reality of images or faith in their unreality. Naïve realism or real nihilism.23

***

In 1987, German photographer Michael Schmidt published the book *Waffenruhe*, whose title translates in English to the term ‘ceasefire.’ The Berlin Wall had not yet come down, and thus Germany—and more specifically Berlin—continued to exist under a profound state of division between the imperial ambitions of the Soviet Union in the East, and the free market liberalism of its American patrons in the West. *Waffenruhe* is a book about national political identity, the foundational elements of that national identity in then modern Germany, and the complexities of addressing the nature of that identity in a cultural moment when the trauma and the shame of the Holocaust was still tightly repressed.

Though Schmidt was both aware of, and well versed in the work of Walker Evans, his formal approach in *Waffenruhe* bore no meaningful relationship to the frontal strategy Evans employed. A more appropriate antecedent to Schmidt’s formal strategies would be the work of Robert Frank in *The Americans*,24 whose photographs are frequently oblique, foreshortened and off kilter in compositional and tonal terms. Where Evans’s images orbit around the ostensibly neutral qualities of documentary form, Frank’s insist on their partiality. Both worked in black and white, however, in keeping with Frank, Schmidt favoured a strategy of consistently obscuring the view, or reducing neutral distance to an intense and often discomfiting intimacy—insisting on an aesthetic that emphasised the subjectivity of his seeing.

---


In *Waffenruhe*, Schmidt establishes a distinctively fragmentary quality to his compositional form as a central basis for the language of the book. He does this early, and with a beguilingly elliptical tone. The early photographs consist of imprecise foreshortened close ups of ostensibly incidental urban landscapes, which are littered with walls and distorted industrial forms that obtrude into shallowly focused photographic frames. This repetitive elusiveness sets forth a modality driven by the habit of looking in from the edge of the periphery, suggesting both anxiety and marginality—helping to develop a stance according to which we viewers are both hidden and restless occupants of a landscape comprised of barriers, barbed wire, and the silent patterned voices of graffiti. This formal approach implies that we as viewers might also be subject to some unspecified convention of repression.

The walls Schmidt photographs are covered in a cacophony of sprayed names, distorted graphic figures and a recurring sequence of painted marks of erasure that serve as a visual analogue for the political norms of repression in post-war German culture. Schmidt focuses repeatedly on the constitutive significance of the Berlin Wall, and the sordid history of the Holocaust as integral questions in the on-going formulation of German national identity. However, he does this in a photographic methodology governed by a tempered and oblique representational form, so that the grim and imprecise qualities of the specific photographs continually evoke and yet never fully describe an anxiety that is far more metaphorical than literal.

In the eighth image of the sequence, a photograph that immediately precedes the first spread in the book containing a portrait, we see a small reproduction of a photograph ostensibly made through a partially obscured window streaked by warped strands of barbed wire. Behind the flattened shallow depths of the window in the upper third of the photograph, two figures–
likely men—lie side by side, legs bent at the knees on the grainy surface of the earth. Their faces are obscured, the arms of one man wrapped tightly around himself as the other reclines in deep shadow. The darkness, the harsh quality of the contrast and the conflation of barbed wire and blocked windows invoke the image, and thus the history, of the overfilled trains of imprisoned Jews who, in the blackest period of German history, were ferried to their deaths with ruthless, mechanical efficiency.

Rather than render such a metaphor in a pristine manner, Schmidt opts for a visual form characterised by a literal obscurity, which serves to reiterate the moral complexities of this pivotal moment in national history. The double-spread that follows this image reveals a young blonde man seated in a state that oscillates between distraction and dejection, blurred slightly and brightly flash-lit, gazing down past his crossed hands and across the gutter toward another bright, oblique landscape of a wooden fence shrouded in a chaotic tangle of brush. He is an optimally Aryan blonde, but this fact does not seem to bring him joy at least in the manner of his depiction, and his conjunction with the slumbering figures in the previous image combines the idyllic and the decrepit in a gesture that critiques foundational myths of Nazi German identity. They are literally folded together by their appearance on the recto side of the book, so that to reach the young blonde man we must first look past the two slumbering men.

Such a sequence trains the eye in on the difficulties of penetrating a clouded view of political history, and furthermore obligates the viewer to disinter linkages that are simultaneously fundamental and oblique. Paul Graham explores an overlapping question in his seminal book *New Europe*, published six years after *Waffenruhe* and five years after *In Flagrante*—two works with which Graham was very familiar. In Graham’s book, a sequence of four large

---


horizontal colour photographs straddle the gutter in lockstep with the four closing lines of the first stanza of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The epic and stentorian tone of Eliot’s verse is at least mitigated by the loose, and episodic informality of the photographs that accompany it. However the biblical resonance of ‘dust’ in Eliot’s poem points back to the very making of man by God, which in turn inflects the first photograph of the book. In it, a man stands half-shirtless, left arm amputated at the bicep, facing the sun, gazing steadily and inscrutably toward a dense panorama of stout modernist high rises lining the horizon. He is the first figure found in early light on the desiccated surface of a hill smattered by boisterous patches of thistles and weeds—a new Eden in Graham’s New Europe, a land in which miniature Hitler and SS figurines march in goose step out of the plastic wrapping of history.

Thus from the earliest phrases of the work, Graham invokes the spectre of overlapping registers at once epic and mundane, secular and biblical, in order to increase the likelihood that as we read these relatively informal photographs, we read them against the influence of history and mythology on the urbane surfaces of modern European cities. Just as Schmidt sought to yoke together the soundless voices of German walls with the figure of the murdered Jew, so Graham ties together the question of European modernity with its recent fascist history.

A nattily dressed middle-aged man in a camel-coloured leather coat stands gazing upward, his right hand blocking the left side of his face from the camera, and the bright light of the midday sun. His portrait is followed by a photograph of the dark yellow surface of an iron girder, on which the Star of David has first been haltingly inscribed and then violently scratched
out. The crossed verticals of the marks of erasure repeat the compositional shape of the preceding image, creating a resonance which doubly combines the repetition of colour and theme that runs across both images.

In the portrait of the man gazing upward, face protected from the sun, the hulking glass office block of Siemens shimmers in the background, its sunlit surface reflecting an idyllic blue and cloudy sky. A question begins to form as to whether the man blocking his eyes from the camera blocks his vision from the anti-semitic symbolism etched into the following image, or whether his polished inattention to the conjunction he is forced into somehow mirrors a deeper flaw in German culture. We cannot know from the image whether the man pictured is even German, however the specificity of his nationality is never postulated so much as intimated by the nature of the sequence.

In this way, a combination of symbolism and gesture is developed across spreads and pages, as well as through their serial linking. This helps to open up and complicate thematic concerns that revolve around identity, history, political ideology and memory. Just as the portrait that follows the Star of David shows a woman in the blurred throes of some intense intoxication, suggesting a desire to escape the history that precedes her, so in Chris Killip’s *In Flagrante* a marginal community is shown stretching at the limits of its own precariousness, finding escape in drugs and brief orbits of intoxicated oblivion. Each of the three photographers work to find a cumulative and internally dynamic form through which to draw the complex interactions of national identity and political ideology to the surface of the everyday world in which they make their work.

***
In Flagrante constructs a story about community and neglect from photographs made over a nine-year period in two small towns in the post-industrial northeast of England. In Skinningrove and Lynemouth, Chris Killip worked with a 4x5 view camera to depict the skeletal landscape of two areas that had once been active elements in the ship-building and coal-mining industries that had long defined the identity of the region. As art critic John Berger writes in his introductory essay with Sylvia Grant:

The coal trade began in this area in the thirteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century George Stephenson started his ironworks in Newcastle. The first locomotives were manufactured there. Ships from Tyneside were famous in ports all over the world. The docks exported coal, iron, steel. Around these activities there developed fine skills, special kinds of courage, prides, struggles, solidarities, which were passed on from generation to generation.

In his five sentence introduction to the work, Killip writes that “[t]he objective history of England doesn’t amount to much if you don’t believe in it, and I don’t, and I don’t believe that anyone in these photographs does either as they face the reality of de-industrialisation in a system which regards their lives as disposable.” Working at the edge of a part of the country that still bore the deep legacy of England’s imperial ambitions, Killip photographed two communities in which the prospect of employment had become so scarce as to demand that families of steel-workers and blacksmiths move into trailers along an empty stretch of beach, to collect the washed up scraps of coal from the now dead mines located farther up the coast. The hollow depths of despair characteristic of this bleak way of life—a way of life in which one generation retrieves and sells for scrap the labour of its ancestors—are counterpointed throughout the work by a genuine and abiding sense of community, and of togetherness against an improbable struggle for survival.

---


In a group portrait of a family at the beach, an activity so characteristic of English national sensibility as to have become a local comic trope, Killip pictures a moment of blankness and relative discomfort as each member of the family struggles for repose while pressed up against the scruffy wall of a pier. Sunlight rakes across the frame diagonally, brightening the hairy shoulders of the shirtless man at far left, furrowing the brow of the youngest woman at far right, and directing us toward a centre in which an old lady’s feet blur as they rise or fall above a pounded section of sand. A sense of frustration is contained in this incidental gesture, which somehow reverberates along the line of each figure in the portrait.

Killip’s subjects are not dressed for leisure, but rather seem to have come from other activities elsewhere, their clothes more formal than the setting in which they have accommodated themselves to the beach. The youngest woman wears stockinged feet, the young man beside her has his trousers rolled up above his knees, the eldest man still wearing shiny brogues and dark socks, and the woman beside him absently scratching an elbow as her cardigan rests on the back of a sun chair.

In the following image, a young man arches his head steeply to the left as his left arm rests on the roof of a car, his right thumb tucked into his jeans pocket, eyes tightly screwed shut, zipper bulging open at the top. Inside the car sit two men, only one of whom is clearly visible, his fingers lightly interlaced, his gaze travelling left and out of the frame toward the beach we see an edge of in the upper third of the photograph. In sum, four men are waiting in or around two cars, but the overarching note of the portrait is one of impatience and slight disdain: the curl in the lip of Bever, whose name is tattooed on his neck between four hearts, suggesting an emotion that sits somewhere between displeasure and scorn. We learn from Killip’s subsequent
discussions that Bever has been released that morning from jail, and that he has re-joined these
men in this fishing village as they await the turning of the tide, in order to set out onto the sea.

In neither the group portrait of the family nor the other of the waiting men are we shown
any sense of renewal or hopeful expectation. Crucially, both images have been rendered either at
sites traditionally associated with the heroism or quaint beauty of the English way of life: men
setting forth onto the high seas, or families reclining in shade on England’s sandy beaches. In
both portraits there is a consistent sense of anxiety, weariness, tension and apprehension as
collectively these individuals face the day.

The following two double spreads show single images, the first of a steep pile of Heinz
Beanz on “Free Offer’ at 18\(1/2\)p,” the second of a group of young skinheads who appear to have
been caught by the lens somewhere between revelry and pandemonium. An imperfect seaside
retreat turns to a tense wait for the turning of a tide, a tide that bears cheap mass-produced goods
and a chaotic scene of homoerotic violence.

Across the sequence of these four images, Killip elaborates a commentary on the
precarious virtues of community, the modest pleasures and intense anxieties of daily survival,
and the lightly contained forces of violent disorder that are created by the desperation of the
circumstances of his subjects. He shifts in and out of a proximity that generates intense intimacy,
as he leads us through the differentiated tenor of community that animates the lives of his
subjects. His photographs never seek to flatter, or to ennable his subjects in such a way as to
alleviate the anxiety that his representation of their lives might create in those of us fortunate
enough never to live similarly. As Berger and Grant write:

Chris Killip is adamantly aware that a better future for the photographed is
unlikely. The debris visible in his photos, the debris which surrounds his
protagonists, is already part of a future which has been chosen – and chosen, according to the laws of our particular political system, democratically.\(^{29}\)

It is in this sense that Killip, Graham and Schmidt avail themselves of the elliptical qualities of the photographic book. Had their works been the traditional subjects of photographic essays in the conventional picture press, exhaustively specific captioning would likely have been used to simplify the abstracted qualities of their narratives. A traditional use of such images would have favoured a layout and captioning strategy in which ‘meaning always arrived,’ “guaranteed by the transparency of rhetoric and the finality of photographic truth.”\(^{30}\) The particular virtues of their more open-ended approach lie in the interpretative responsibility that they confer on the viewers of their images, but more than this, their use of the photobook affords them a freedom of political expression (and space) unmatched by the typical picture presses of the day.

It is crucial to note here that my reading of these sequences is a function of my personal sense of the symbolism at work in their images, and since neither the images nor the books themselves confirm these readings in specific detail, I am compelled to argue for my sense of the work with others to establish the particular virtues of my interpretation. In this way, openness can call for discussion and debate, whereas a rigid and foreclosed use of the documentary image calls for little more than passivity. In Tagg’s further discussion of Evans’s *American Photographs*, he celebrates this specific attribute of the photographic sequence on terms precisely congruent with those I have just outlined:

The conclusive meanings characteristic of journalistic contrasts are thus withheld. The relationships of image to image are not those of thesis and antithesis but of rhyme, repetition, discrepancy, and reversal. No image finally adjudicates any


other. The order is deliberate, but the process of reading is not curtailed in advance.\footnote{31}{John Tagg, “Melancholy Realism: Walker Evans’s Resistance to Meaning.” 2009, p. 131.}

In the end, the specific virtues of this way of working cannot be reduced to the aesthetic possibilities they offer for formal invention. At issue in these photographs is the complexity of finding a representational means to invoke the inequities and contradictions of socio-political and economic norms, which each artist understands to be ranged in opposition to basic freedoms. This is to say that both form and content are equally at stake in this documentary form, the one informing the other in a reciprocal and dynamic fashion, so that the legibility of the images and sequences is consubstantial with the viewer’s burgeoning interpretation of the complex political norms at stake in the world being pictured.

While documentary photography most certainly found itself deposed from the primary position of disbursing an authoritative model of the world, photography (more widely construed) continued to participate in precisely that effort. In everything from automotive advertising to political campaigns, images were increasingly employed to normalise profound changes in the make-up of an increasingly globalised capitalism. Thus, for an alert and politically engaged documentary photographer, the question of form was not limited in its relevance to the desire to generate an aesthetic thrill, since the very legibility of the price being paid by those least adapted to these changing norms was itself both a photographic and a socio-cultural problem. Put another way, if old models of traditional documentary form were no longer suited to an environment in which that genre was being debased and marginalised, new formal inventions were necessary to continue to raise similar questions in a rapidly changing cultural and visual landscape.

***
Waffenruhe, In Flagrante and New Europe were published in a relatively brief six-year period from 1987 to 1993—a period in which the Soviet Union collapsed, and a divided Germany was rapidly reintegrated into the ‘common’ European project of a single currency union and an ostensibly congruent European community. These changes occurred during a period in which Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had initiated a deep and rapid retrenchment from the liberal social and economic policies of the preceding decades, a period characterised by Reagan’s identification of government as the problem, and by Thatcher’s declaration that “there is no such thing as society.”

In parallel with these vast transformations of political, cultural and economic norms, the accumulative processes of modern capital were seeking increased returns at lower costs by moving manufacturing operations ‘offshore’ to third world countries with few or no labour laws, and abundant stores of natural and human resources. Europe, for so long the imperial ‘center’ of the modern industrial world, sought through its project of integration to facilitate and accelerate the financialization of its economies—a process according to which a national or regional economy no longer needed to produce domestically, but simply extract rents and profits from production sites in far flung territories. The principle business of a buoyant first world domestic economy was to be consumption, not production. A unified European Union was to be understood as both a competitor and counterbalance to the dominant strengths of the United

---

32 This statement is a paraphrase of an answer Thatcher gave to a question she rhetorically asked herself in an interview with Woman’s Own on September 23rd, 1987 at 10 Downing Street. Her statement ran as follows:

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand ‘I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!’ or ‘I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!’ ‘I am homeless, the Government must house me!’ and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business and people have got the entitlements too much in mind without the obligations, because there is no such thing as an entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation….
States, and the question of whether a common set of political ideals were already in place to buttress this new union was of markedly lesser importance than the prospective viability of the economic model being created.

The consequences for those in Skinningrove and Lynemouth, or the implications of this New European unity for those recently emerging from Soviet control, especially in light of the continuing reverberations of the Second World War and the Cold War, were of relatively modest political import. The ever new, always sophisticated image of modernity was more persuasive than the reality of the historical and economic inheritance on the grounds of which that image was to be constructed. Writing in his afterword to New Europe, curator and critic Urs Stahel observed as much of the grammar and substance of Graham’s photographs:

These signs are not in themselves a reference to the past, much more they alert our awareness, our memory. They do not look back, but manifest history, show how we deal with it today, how it casts a shadow on daily life, sometimes going almost unrecognized, sometimes violently disputed, occasionally even trivialized, ending up as children’s toys. It is history exposed where it is thrust from the depths of time to the surface, whether we stumble over its gravestone, heedlessly walk away or contemptuously spit on it.\(^{33}\)

Stahel correctly observes the manner in which the violent, conflict-ridden history of European progress both litters and remains invisible within the landscape that Graham photographs. Of course this profusion and invisibility can be argued to be rhetorical qualities of the manner in which Graham photographs these subjects. However the persuasive quality of the photographs stems in large part from the very real historico-political amnesia toward which they point us as readers. The horrors of General Franco’s dictatorship in Spain continue to be subject to widespread suppression in academic and popular culture even today, just as the slogans of Nazi Germany continue to be barred from public discourse on pain of legal recriminations.

The messy inheritance of history is, in other words, in a constant state of repression, which validates a narrative of national identity that either does not feature or wilfully misrepresent those who have suffered the excesses of power. This, in turn, reconfirms the subjugation and marginality of those who have suffered the most, or been most greatly exploited by the institutions of power who ostensibly serve them. It is for this reason that Berger and Grant observe of Killip’s work, in a bitterly ironic tone, that “the debris which surrounds his protagonists, is already part of a future which has been chosen–and chosen, according to the laws of our particular political system, democratically.”

Killip’s, Graham’s and Schmidt’s use of the camera to invoke questions of political representation is pointed precisely because they are doing so in functionally democratic states, with an instrument that, more than any other invention of modern industrial technology, promised at least the prospect of full inclusion. In keeping with their numerous antecedents in documentary photography, Killip, Graham and Schmidt are insisting on interrogating the gap between the reified public image of national identity, and the lived daily experience of democratic social norms. Graham and Schmidt focus more on those middle class citizens better positioned to enjoy the benefits of increased prosperity–tending, in their work, to question their subject’s awareness of the wider forces at work in society. Killip focuses squarely on those most marginalised by deindustrialisation, addressing himself to economically specific character of the violence visited on his subjects, even as he foreshadows the roiling tensions in those who are the least protected victims of this neoliberal policy.

(Fig. 3 & Fig. 4)

---

In each of the three books, there is at least one image of a kind of revelry characterised by a mixture of blankness and intoxication. In Killip’s book it is the group portraits of the skinheads fighting in a bar under the harsh glare of flashlight, in Schmidt’s it is the portraits of middle class youths enjoying the advent of rave culture and hallucinogenic drugs, as is the case in a number of Graham’s portraits in *New Europe*. Crucially, both Schmidt and Graham were members of the social circles they frequently photographed during these moments of excess and intoxication, Schmidt going so far as to include a portrait of his adolescent daughter in punk attire, before closing his book with a portrait of himself.

(Fig. 5 & Fig. 6)

In other words, these photographers were not only concerned with the wider public’s experience of a changing culture, but reflexively also with their position in that larger process. The brief flowering period of rave culture, and its relation to the punk movement of the 1980s, can in this context be understood as being part of political rebellion without a program for redress, or even a specific and essential set of common grievances. The flight into dissolution and drugs is presented here as more of a gesture of resignation than as the foundation for a transgressive or revolutionary political program.

The fact that each photographer observed and reflected on rage, anomie and stupefaction—extending that observation in two instances to the lives of their friends and family—suggests a willingness to consider the implications of their own subjectivity in a disparate and unequal culture. Where Killip acknowledges that subjectivity in his introduction, Schmidt and Graham incorporate it into the substance of their images. In this they resist the conventional
model of photojournalist documentary practice that sets itself up on the model of a report from a benighted territory that is in some fundamental sense disconnected from the reality shared by the reporters and readers themselves.

***

A further continuing critique of documentary photography has been levelled at the privileged stance of the photographer in relation to his or her traditional subject, a privilege typically understood as both economic and class-based in nature. The ascension of documentary photography into the high arts is in this context understood to reinforce the inequalities of privilege, and to facilitate a process through which the documentary subject is constituted as Other (as in Sally Stein’s analysis of Jacob Riis’s portraits).

In each of Killip’s, Schmidt’s and Graham’s books, their subjectivity, and their power as tellers of their tales are both interrogated by their images. It matters little that neither Waffenruhe nor New Europe identifies those friends and family members of the photographers by name in this context. What seems of far greater importance is their willingness to incorporate into their work a critical reflection on the privileges of the social circle to which they themselves belong.

The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position; especially the latter, now that even the veneer of social concern has dropped away from the upwardly mobile and comfortable social sectors. (…) It is both flattery and warning (as it always has been). Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind. (It is them, not us.)

The process of othering to which Rosler refers depends in large part on establishing a distance between the likely viewer of documentary photographs and the subjects depicted within

---

them. It relies, in this sense, on a principle according to which those who are depicted in the process of suffering an injustice are simultaneously understood to be separate from, or other than, those who bear witness to that depiction. This is to suggest that the privilege of spectatorship inevitably reconfirms the subjugation of those who suffer inequality. But furthermore this implicitly suggests that only those whose freedoms are curtailed, or whose rights are destroyed, are the victims of the violence that their disenfranchisement produces.

However, if we were to revise our conception of the responsibilities that spectatorship impose on those of us in a position to see and read such images, we might recognise our complicity and our common grievances with those who are subject to the processes that perpetuate the reality that such documentary images engage. To contend with such complicity, Graham and Schmidt photograph those who are typically excluded from much conventional documentary work: the middle classes, to which they as artists in some sense belong. Furthermore, they incorporate a repetitive figuration of those symbols that represent institutions of political and corporate power. In this they resist the process of distancing that is essential to the ‘flattery’ and fetishization that Rosler is critiquing.

(Fig. 7)

The notion that spectatorship comprises ethical responsibilities has been little emphasized in the short history of the photographic medium, except according to a convention in which the very sight of suffering acts as an automatic moral compulsion. However Ariella Azoulay’s formulation of the work of rendering meaning from images argues that this responsibility is

integral to the act of photographic reading, and thus refuses the uncomplicated model of privilege implicit in Rosler’s criticism:

Linking the photograph to the situation and act of taking the photograph doesn’t mean ignoring what John Berger describes as an abyss ‘between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph.’ On the contrary, it means not giving up on the urgency of restoring and re-establishing as many links as possible between the photograph and the situation in which it was taken. The aim of this effort is to enable us as spectators to re-position ourselves in relation to the disaster we are watching and to let us be engaged with its happening, its victims – our fellow citizens, its lingering effects on its victims and on its perpetrators, as well as on its accomplices – we the spectators.37

Chris Killip frames his book In Flagrante with two images that insist precisely on this necessary self-awareness of both the privilege and responsibility of viewing his images, in a pair of horizontally opposed photographs of the same subject. In the first, an apparently middle-aged woman is slumped over herself, seated on the edge of the pavement with her hands clasped in front of her knees over a pair of ripped tights. The light is full and harsh and frontal, so that she is bordered by deep shadows, while at her feet we see the shadow of the photographer himself, a false lens pointed left and out of the frame to disguise the lens that is directed toward her in this moment of forlorn desperation.

The second image, a horizontally inverted frame of the same space, shows the woman now curled up in a fetal position, her head disguised by her rear as her feet point back toward the camera. A young man in bell-bottomed trousers with a dog stands facing her, slightly left of center, with a stick held in his right hand. Again, the photographer’s shadow looms over the feet and calves of the apparently comatose woman–in this instance his intrusion (by shadow) mirrored by that of the man and his dog.

---

Killip’s five line introduction precedes this opening image, and in it Killip writes that “[t]o the people in these photographs I am superfluous, my life does not depend on their struggle, only my hopes.”38 Each of these two images insist on literally figuring not only the intrusion of the photographer in the daily life of his subjects, but also the relative power and ethical complexity that that gesture of intrusion imposes upon him as its author. We cannot know whether Killip’s use of the false lens was a subterfuge necessary for him to make these two photographs, just as we cannot reliably know the condition of their subject from the two instants in which we have seen her photographed. But we are placed in the position he took up in every image within the book, and these two photographs seek to establish that fact as a constitutive element in the reading of his work.

(Fig. 8 & Fig. 9)

We must determine for ourselves not only the veracity of the life we see rendered before us in documentary photographs, but also the virtues (moral, cultural, aesthetic and otherwise) of the narrative that they deliver. To do this responsibly, we must inevitably also see ourselves in the shadow of the photographer who crafts these images, even if only to reject the model on which they are constructed. It is on the basis of the photographer’s choices, and the intimacies afforded to them as they work, that we are provided the opportunity to engage with and reflect upon the life that they render. It will be on the basis of our choices and instincts that we establish the meaning, and the specific significance of the work he has made.

While on a number of fundamental levels it is clear that Rosler and Azoulay disagree about the appropriate model of viewing with which to understand the documentary photograph,

they are in agreement that seeing itself is of primary importance. Their sense of the pivotal significance of the ways in which we model our understanding of the world, and of the primal activities of images in establishing that framework, unites them at an essential level that precedes their subsequent disagreements.

For us, I would argue, seeing and knowing are inescapably linked, however imperfectly. Therefore, a far greater measure of attention to the character and force of that linkage is necessary to reduce the distances that seem to separate us from one another and that distract us from the immensely powerful forces ranged against our freedom and betterment. Such an attention would help to clarify the extent to which we make the world over in the image of our own conceptions, and in that sense might help to “to rupture the false boundaries between ways of thinking about art and ways of changing the world,” as Rosler herself argues.

III. The Virtues of Documentary Photography

This essay began with the etymology of the term ‘political’, which in its derivation draws from the basic principle that politics are a matter of things ‘of or relating to the people’. Such a definition may seem impossibly broad, but in its essence it argues that our actions implicitly reflect a specific viewpoint on our relationship to the world we live in, and that consequently we live a politics of our own whether we define it consciously or not. Martha Rosler notes that “[a]ll art, from the crassest mass-media production to the most esoteric art-world practice, has a political existence, or, more accurately, an ideological existence. It either challenges or supports (tacitly perhaps) the dominant myths a culture calls Truth.”

Thus not only in the course of our daily lives, but for artists even in the course of our practice of making, we tacitly or explicitly endorse a specific relationship to ideology and political belief. If, as I have argued, the creation of images affords the artist and their viewer both a privilege and an ethical responsibility, then those privileges and responsibilities should be understood as integrally related to political norms in our culture. When we find ourselves in the terrain of documentary photographs, we are thus inevitably negotiating specific political conceptions of the nature of the world we live in.

A signal triumph of the most influential strands of modernism in our academic and cultural institutions has been the suppression of this integral relationship between art and politics. In contrast, such modernism has encouraged a conception of art as a reified and inherently depoliticised zone. This has facilitated the creation of the category ‘political art’, which somehow construes only particular works with a powerfully articulated oppositional, or critical

---

stance toward culture as being a distinct form of art. This particular taxonomy struggles to reconcile the complexities (and ontological antinomies) of documentary photography, since it cannot evade the objective relationship these images bear toward the world they render.

The solution to this contradiction has been to favour a strong emphasis on form, technique and vision over and above the explicitly political characteristics of the manner in which such photographs frame the world they image. As Rosler states it:

> The poetics of form can lead to a reception of images as poetic, a form of personalized address that escapes either responsibility or reportorial accuracy, though it may of course increase the force of truth, but as subjectivized witness rather than objective reportage.\(^{41}\)

In this way, a depoliticised model of documentary photography places emphasis on formal invention as the essential virtue, and thus evades the political, economic and sociological implications of the condition of the world such photographs render. This convention is perhaps best illustrated in the definition of documentary photography employed by MoMA curator John Szarkowski, when prefacing the highly influential exhibition *New Documents*\(^{42}\) in 1967:

> In the past decade, this new generation of photographers has redirected the technique and aesthetic of documentary photography to more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life but to know it, not to persuade but to understand. The world, in spite of its terrors is approached as the ultimate source of wonder and fascination, no less precious for being irrational and incoherent.\(^{43}\)

Szarkowski here subtly but clearly separates critique from photographic observation, and does so in such a way that this new model of documentary photography can be understood as disinterested in the political quality of the observations its photographs engender. In order to

---

\(^{41}\) Martha Rosler, “Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?” 2004, p. 211.

\(^{42}\) An exhibition of 90 photographs by Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, on view from Feb 28\(^{th}\) 1967 until May 7\(^{th}\) of that year.

further solidify this distinction, Szarkowski contrasts this new form with the intentions and qualities of documentary work made during the infancy of the genre in the 1930s and 1940s. Describing the ethos of that earlier work, he writes of those earlier photographers, “it was their hope that their pictures would make clear what was wrong with the world, and persuade their fellows to take action and change it.” By contrast, Szarkowski declares of these ‘new documents’ that “[w]hat unites these three photographers is not style or sensibility; each has a distinct and personal sense of the use of photography and the meanings of the world. What is held in common is the belief that the world is worth looking at, and the courage to look at it without theorizing.”

Thus Szarkowski foregrounds a model of politically neutral and critically uninflected observation, and holds it up as emblematic of the new mode of documentary photography. He does this, moreover, at precisely the juncture when postmodernism and critical theory had begun to critique this anti-political strain of modernism as fundamental to the perpetuation of normative ideology. Szarkowski’s influence over the field of documentary photography was foundational and sustained. For him to divorce seeing from critical theorizing about the nature of what was being seen was to open up a legitimated space into which many photographers could retreat from politics into the more abstracted and esoteric realm of form.

It is against this convention that Rosler targets her earlier remark, and while I am in agreement with this well-measured critique, it should not be taken to devalue the virtues and strengths of Arbus’s, Friedlander’s or Winogrand’s work. The political character of photographs is not settled by the manner of their definition, even if the basis on which they are defined comes to represent an institutional consensus. Tagg, Rosler, Sekula and others recognised precisely this

---

opportunity in their earliest critical writings, and their criticisms helped to gradually move conventions away from the temptations of a purely illusory political neutrality.

That being said, the particular attractions of a depoliticised conception of photography continue to exert influence in our contemporary artistic culture. It is as much in the example of the work of Killip, Schmidt and Graham as in the theory and criticism already cited here that I find a genealogy from which to draw strength and inspiration in the making of my own work. The moral and social complexities of reconciling privilege and ethical responsibility are manifold, particularly in a historical moment like our own, which is characterised by such profound inequality and violence. To evade the task in favour of the relative security of neutrality (or in an effort to curry favour with a powerful institutional consensus) seems like a refusal to engage the particular strengths and complexities of the documentary form. Adrian Piper speaks of artists who have willingly diluted the political characteristics of their work, arguing that:

They thereby sacrifice freedom of expression for the material rewards of institutional legitimacy. They knowingly subordinate the self-expressive function of their work to its function as a currency of market exchange; and—like artists and writers in the former eastern European countries under Communism—exchange clarity for ‘subtlety’, forthrightness for ‘understatement’, and political protest for ‘irony’.45

It may be true that an art practice that embraces its intrinsically political characteristics also inevitably stands in opposition to precisely those institutions on which it might best depend for financial support or creative legitimacy. It may be true that the profound devaluation of public discourse, of public resources and of public space has substantially reduced the scope for precisely the open dialogue that documentary photographs depend upon. It certainly may be true

that what photographers working in this mode have to say is no longer equipped to compete with the perpetual din of distraction and empty spectacle that characterizes our wider visual culture. But it is also true, in my opinion, that “art is one of the primary human activities” and that “it can succeed in articulating not just the imposed or constitutive social or intellectual system, but at once this and an experience of it, its lived consequence.”

What is at stake, in the end, is the quality of our readership: the nature of our habits of self-projection into the image, and the substance of our interactions with it. If documentary photographs, and just as crucially the quality of the conversation that contextualizes and surrounds them, can encourage a model of viewing more in keeping with the solidarity at the heart of Azoulay’s conception, we might more readily engage our capacity to see in others our own vulnerability before the forces that govern us so unevenly. We might see past guilt to common dangers, past difference to fundamental equalities, past anxiety to mutual opportunity. The lesson of documentary photography for me has been to see, to do so clearly, purposefully, and with a passion equal to the scope of the challenges and opportunities that the world affords.

---

IV. Illustrations

Figure 1.

Margaret Bourke-White, “When the Flood Receded, Louisville, Kentucky,” February 1937
Figure 2.

Walker Evans, “Negroes in the line up for food at mealtime in the camp for flood refugees, Forrest City, Arkansas,” February 1937.
Figure 3.

Chris Killip, Untitled photograph, *In Flagrante*, 1988
Figure 4.

Chris Killip, Untitled photograph, *In Flagrante*, 1988
Figure 5.

Paul Graham, Untitled photograph, *New Europe*, 1993
Figure 7.

Paul Graham, Untitled photograph, *New Europe*, 1993
Figure 8.

Chris Killip, Untitled photograph, *In Flagrante*, 1988
Figure 9.

Chris Killip, Untitled photograph, *In Flagrante*, 1988