



BENDING THE FRAME

Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen

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CHAPTER 1

The Useful Photographer

It was once thought, at least in democracies, that a photographer of the documentary or journalistic persuasion who witnessed a horrific event or situation, or a painful one, would record what it looked like in order to alert society, so that society might respond. The intrepid photographer was thought to fill an essential role in providing such visual descriptions and, quite often, in provoking readers (and at times governments) to confront issues that might not otherwise have been of concern. Despite being inevitably interpreted and framed according to the photographer's own point of view, a photograph, no matter how unfamiliar or even grotesque its depiction, was considered difficult to refute given its status as a reliable trace of the visible and the "real."

The obverse was also true—*without* a photograph (or a video), it has been difficult to get people to respond; the urgency and relevance of an event, its importance, and sometimes even the fact of its occurrence might be called into question. The photographic image of a young girl being napalmed in Vietnam, of a black man being menaced by a police dog in Birmingham, and of a hooded man with wires attached to his extremities being forced to stand on a box in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, all led to outcries over American policies. Photographs could be effective, viscerally so, when words alone were not enough.

The photographer's sanctioned role as a societal scribe meant that the imagery was received as more than voyeurism, or what is sometimes now crudely labeled as "violence tourism." Photographs indicating various kinds of injustice were allowed and even solicited to inform both members of society and their elected representatives—even those made by soldiers, from Abu Ghraib prison, surfaced with enormous clout. Professional photographers were expected to serve as active witnesses, and for many of them their encounters with various manifestations of the human condition, some excruciating, were thought of as both necessary and central to their responsibilities.

To borrow a term from the late John Szarkowski, longtime director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, photographs could act as “windows” onto the world—in the case of photojournalism, windows that were able to nearly demand that one look through them, both as a prerequisite of citizenship and as a moral obligation. Although never as transparent as a window, the photograph was able to evoke a response that approximated that of actual seeing; when the photograph was published in a newspaper or magazine, the seeing became collective.

These sets of relationships, however, have become the stuff of the rearview mirror. As a cascade of screens submerges viewers with enormous numbers of images, including billions of their own photographs and videos, imagery of a larger societal significance has a much harder time surfacing, let alone demanding attention. One’s Facebook page, Instagram account, and Twitter feed typically connect with various snippets and streams from other like-minded individuals, not with a menu of overriding issues (formerly a “front page”) that far-flung eyewitnesses and their editors would have considered crucial to a contemporary understanding of the world.

But mainstream media has itself added to the confusion, often choosing the low road when it comes to image, in order, paradoxically, to enhance their own. By repetitively relying on imagery of celebrities (and noncelebrities treated as minor ones), on innuendos of sex, displays of explicit violence, and other forms of the spectacular, many publications have abandoned a large part of their commitment to looking as a means of engaging with events. Rather than working over a period of time as attentive observers, photographers are now frequently placed in the position of setting up imagery (as in “photo-ops” or “photo-illustrations”) to get a desired result, or can be expected to act like paparazzi, on the trail of the incendiary.

While the embrace of the facile has always been a powerful tendency, and editorial imagery has nearly always been treated as illustrative, as secondary to words (although some frustrated writers may not agree), diminishing readerships and drops in advertising have exacerbated the predicament. Partially as a result, more photographers have chosen to work independently on long-term projects, applying for grants to sustain themselves in the field, or attempting to collaborate with nongovernmental organizations. Liberated from the constraints of mainstream media and able to “author” their own work without editorial interference, they now have the challenge of finding somewhere, other than their own websites, to publish—and yet another challenge: to be paid for their work.

Today nonprofessionals have found that they can post photographs and videos that are not so very different from those of mainstream media, if at times considerably quirkier and more immediate. A politician’s gaffe at a private fundraiser, a somersaulting cat, or an actress working out at a gym can become the subject matter for anyone

with a camera, provided at no cost to the viewer. Work by mainstream professionals (likewise distributed mostly for free) is often more static, showing what must be seen according to an accompanying article. But these images can also be appropriated, quickly becoming part of a recontextualized mix. Information, as the saying goes, wants to be free, and the notion that professionals provide essential information that should be reimbursed has met with only modest success.

The photographic print, an object, now commands record prices, but the photograph as information has comparatively little value. In the 1970s, when I began my career, it was the opposite: one looked at documentary photographs for the vision of the world they articulated and for the details of existence that they recorded, but never thought of *buying* the prints. (If one did, each might have cost five or ten dollars.) The validation of the photographs was in their publication and distribution to a larger audience, a more extensive viewership than a photographic print could ever attract.

The photograph's documentary status has been altered, in part, by its transformation from a physical object derived from chemical processes to an expression of digital code. Rather than being viewed as the result of a recording process in which anyone present would have seen something similar, the ephemeral and easily malleable online photograph (digital-imaging software is pervasive and highly efficient) can be increasingly considered an expression of a particular point of view, a commentary on events that is more akin to writing than it is a definitive rendering.

Certainly nearly everyone working with photographs, including those in mainstream media, has always known that all images interpret rather than laying automatic claims to the truth. But photographs were also thought to contain useful information captured via the lens, including some that had escaped the photographer's control—recalling Garry Winogrand's famous phrase: "I photograph to see what things look like when they are photographed."

The rawer, first- and second-person images on social-media sites referring to "me" (the photographer) and "us" (the photographer's friends, family, and community) are viewable as at least as authentic as the aesthetically harmonious, more indirect third-person photographs made by journalistic professionals. Not only must professionals frequently produce images that fit the needs of publications—which have their own particular styles and worldviews—they also have to try to conceal, for the most part, their own personal reactions to the situations they experience. And they must attempt, despite often having little time on site, to create documents that are somehow emblematic of the unfolding situation, or at least depict several of its major components. As a result, the images they produce can seem impersonal, or borrowed from iconographies used by others in very different situations (the war in Iraq being photographed to look like World War II, for example).

The more fluid, participatory images coming from the owners of cellphones, rather than staking a claim to being definitive, can often be easily supported or contradicted by contrasting them with the many others made of the same scene. Most important, they tap into the local knowledge and experience of the phones' owners. During the 2011 uprisings in Cairo, for example, while professionals representing international publications photographed the major conflagrations, locals made images of smaller-scale activities, such as demonstrators wearing eye patches in honor of the sacrifice of fellow protester Ahmed Harara. As *Al Akbbar* reported in November 2011: "Harara, who lost his right eye on January 28 during protests leading up to the ousting of former President Hosni Mubarak, lost his left eye on November 19, according to social media activists. 'I would rather be blind, but live with dignity and with my head held up high,' Harara was quoted as saying on Egyptian activists' Facebook pages."¹ Many protestors were similarly disabled during the demonstrations, when certain police were said to have specifically targeted their eyes.²

Rather than claiming a doctrine of journalistic objectivity or neutrality, the very subjectivity of nonprofessionals, their transparent self-involvement and lack of financial incentive, can be reassuring—many viewers may empathize with the motivations of these ordinary citizens, which are possibly similar to their own. These images constitute, to a certain extent, a common, diaristic dialect based on showing and sharing with cellphones—a language that is more detail-oriented and everyday, with fewer elaborately constructed attempts at the larger, synthesizing statement.

The collapsing boundaries between author and reader—a collaborative coauthoring that literary deconstructionists have been theorizing for decades—opens up the expectation that the greater media world now may function in more of a conversational rather than simply a hierarchical, mostly top-down system. With digital image-capturing devices on some one billion portable telephones (a new iPhone advertisement refers to "one billion roaming photojournalists"), and the Internet increasingly available, access to the means of production and to channels of distribution is hardly exclusive. No longer are there rigorous requirements to master the "craft" of photography. Yet the medium is easily personalized, with minimal additional costs to produce enormous numbers of new images, and software that enables the photographer to efficiently, and often undetectably, modify the initial record. In the digital environment, lens-based image making has become a form of communication nearly as banal, instinctive, and pervasive (or profligate) as talking.

For the small minority of image makers who strive to work professionally as visual witnesses, the migration from paper to screen has created new challenges, most of them still unmet. As newspapers and newsmagazines have become less indispensable and are perceived as less credible, the photograph as societal arbiter has lost its most persuasive

platforms. There is little question, for example, that a photograph printed as a cover or double-page in a print publication once constituted a focal point in ways that the more transient, cluttered online environment does not often allow. (Photographs are rapidly replaced, and content-management systems are usually too formulaic to allow designs that highlight images or amplify synergies among them; short videos are more self-contained.) For example, the photograph printed on the front page of the *New York Post* on December 4, 2012, with the headline “DOOMED: Pushed on the Subway Track, This Man Is About to Die,” was widely discussed (and condemned); prominently displayed on paper, it existed in the physical world for an entire day.

Adjusting to the digital environment has been challenging for all those professionally involved in the journalistic enterprise. A 2009 survey, “Photojournalists: An Endangered Species in Europe?,” found that the three major crises for photojournalists were low pay scale, competition from nonprofessionals, and the protection of authors’ rights—issues that trouble photographers in many regions.³ The paradigm shift in thinking required to take advantage of the newer possibilities of digital media is difficult to accomplish. Even for major publications such as the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Time*, much of the most interesting photographic work and commentary are published on blogs—“Lens,” “Photo Booth,” and “LightBox,” respectively—rather than integrated into the main body of the publication, reflecting an unwillingness or inability to experiment with some of the ideas expressed in these offshoots.

The planning required to innovate in a digital environment can be considerable: among the challenges are allowing for meaningful interactivity and a mixing of media that is synergistic—amounting to more than the sum of its parts—creating narratives that can be sustained among all the hyperlinks, and providing sufficient context for the curious. Some innovations can be much easier to implement, such as a roll-over that allows the reader to place the cursor on a photograph to see another one underneath, augmenting or contradicting the first (the subject in her office and at home, say, or the photo opportunity as it was intended and what it looked like from the side)—for simpler strategies like this one, the hurdle is conceptual.

Potentials such as these are, for the most part, ignored. Photography, like other media, is made to continue fulfilling a role not unlike the ones it was assigned prior to the current media revolution, with single captioned pictures and a de facto adoption of the old-fashioned slide show as the preeminent presentation strategies for images online. These images and the ways in which they are presented can seem stodgy compared to the less tradition-bound work seen on social-media sites (invigorated by biting comments and “likes” by a coterie of collegial, often supportive observers). Uploaded by a wide gamut of people, including “citizen journalists” (the catchall term used for anyone ranging from Arab Spring revolutionaries to neighbors concerned about

something happening next door), whose approaches may stray a good distance from journalistic norms, the photographs and videos presented can be overwhelming in their emotional tenor, or silly, or enlightening, or distracting and addictive (it is hardly coincidental that viewers of the Web are called “users”). The vastness of the ever-expanding social-media archives feeds the perception that there is always something, somewhere, of potential interest if only one is willing to spend the time looking for it.

The word *magazine* comes from *magasin*, or store, which itself evolved from *mab-san*, an Arabic and Hebrew word meaning warehouse. It is as if we want to circumvent the filtered publications to forage more serendipitously in the warehouse of the Web—we prefer, in short, the experience of wholesale to that of retail. Certainly the Web still features brand names, but they hardly constrict one’s choices—there are so many other opportunities just a click away. It is now likely that a search engine, having analyzed one’s predilections, including previous searches, will lead one astray.

The very enormity of the Web, with its promise of revelation, recalls the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges’s 1945 short story “The Aleph.” Borges describes the protagonist’s encounter with the Aleph, in the home of the cousin of a woman, now deceased, whom he had loved:

The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror’s face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me.⁴

The Web, at this point, still has a considerable distance to go to resemble Borges’s confrontation with wondrous knowledge. While instantaneously providing an impressive array of examples and answers, a cacophony of possibilities, it lacks a similar reverence for (or indeed any sense of) mystery’s unveiling. A reason may be found in a rabbinical commentary on why the “aleph” itself, a letter that has no sound when pronounced, was chosen to begin an entire alphabet—because, the commentary goes, before the sound there must be the silence. Silence—visual or any other kind—is not something at which the Web excels.

What then is the difference between a professional and a nonprofessional photographer? The question was asked to major figures in the photojournalism industry several years ago at a New York University forum. The answer that slowly emerged to start the discussion, from an editor at the *New York Times*, was that one could trust a professional’s work not

to be fabricated. (We also later talked about certain professionals' abilities to build more complex narratives with their images.) But given the vast number of staged events into which only professionals with press passes are allowed, for example, such trust may be misplaced (think of George W. Bush's infamous 2003 "Mission Accomplished" appearance on an aircraft carrier). It is difficult to record a photo-op without being at least somewhat complicit in a fabrication, even if that fabrication is of someone else's devising.

Today, if a photograph does emerge from the media haze with something essential to say about contemporary events, there is a growing probability that it was authored and distributed by one of the legions of amateurs with digital devices. For the moment at least, the work of these nonprofessionals—making awkward, raw, and frequently intimate imagery—is often perceived as more "authentic." (And, without even the slight hindrance of an assertive authorship that might include a claim of copyright, it may be more likely to go viral.)

Rather than advocating for a publication's worldview, the amateur may be explicitly advocating for his or her own. In 2011 computer programmer and blogger Azyz Amami, from Tunisia, spoke at the Rencontres d'Arles photography festival, pointing out several ways in which his practice and that of his colleagues during the Arab Spring differed from that of the media professional. To begin with, Amami and his cohorts were clearly motivated by their personal stake in the future of Tunisia as a democratic society. His interest, as he explained it, was not in framing a scene—taking the time to frame might mean being spotted by the security forces, and subsequent arrest. Nor was it in photographing the dead and injured—a citizen journalist would likely try to help fellow protestors who are hurt, whereas the professional is often dependent on making more shocking photographs of casualties in order to come away with saleable imagery for the international press. On the other hand, a citizen journalist might have less compunction about inflating the number of people at antigovernment demonstrations in a caption, if it might help to attract new recruits to the revolution (although, it could be added, professionals quoting official counts from ill-informed or biased authorities often get the numbers wrong as well).

That same year I curated an exhibition of photographs of the Libyan revolution by Bryan Denton, who had been working there as a freelancer for the *New York Times* over a six-month period. Denton is nearly fluent in Arabic, has lived in Beirut for several years, and had devoted himself to making imagery that explored, as best he could, the complexities of the general uprising, quite a few of which appeared in the *Times*. (He is also a former student of mine.) After a slide show of his recent work that Denton presented in a public forum at New York University, where the exhibition was held, I turned to a young Libyan woman on the panel—a student pursuing a career in health sciences—and asked her to comment. She began by thanking all who had made

photographs of her country's revolution, and then referred to a specific photograph of her grandfather in Libya that she had received only the day before as being the one that was most important to her. She described it as a cellphone image of her grandfather, posing with the corpse of former dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi in a meat locker. In the photograph, she said, her grandfather was smiling for the first time in forty years.

Aside from this photograph, there were no other specific images to which she referred. The young professional photographer next to her, who had just braved war-time violence to serve as a witness, was made to realize that a family's cellphone image, for a young Libyan woman living in New York, was apparently the most consequential. But it is also not surprising: like everything else (to borrow the title of photographer Eugene Richards's recent book), war is personal.

Of course, while there was never any assurance in photography's short history that the photographs made by social documentarians would arrive at their intended result, at times they did, and effectively. "I'm sure I am right in my choice of work," documentary photographer Lewis Hine wrote more than a century ago, in 1910. "My child-labor photos have already set the authorities to work to see 'if such things can be possible.'" Interestingly, he added: "They try to get around them by crying 'Fake' but therein lies the value of the data and a witness. My 'sociological horizon' broadens hourly." Therein also lies, of course, the value of the photographs themselves—Hine's exposé stimulated legislatures to pass laws against child labor. Similarly persuaded, readers of W. Eugene Smith's 1951 photo-essay in *Life* magazine on Maude Callen, a dedicated African-American nurse-midwife serving, with few resources, a large, impoverished rural South Carolina community, spontaneously donated so much money that a new clinic was built that she said "looks like the Empire State Building to me."⁶

With the collaboration of his wife, Aileen, Smith also made a series of photographs in the early 1970s on the impact of mercury poisoning in Minamata, Japan, due to industrial pollution. The work, showing the grotesquely mangled limbs of victims, the polluted water being discharged, and government and company officials, was published first in *Life* magazine and then in a 1975 book, *Minamata*. The photographs served both as excruciating evidence of the effects of industrial waste on the local population (Smith was himself severely beaten by employees of the polluting factory) and also to spur on the larger environmental movement. Living in Minamata for three years, he and his wife had become, in a sense, hybrid citizen-journalists, both witnesses and advocates: "This is not an objective book," Smith writes in the prologue of *Minamata*. "The first word I would remove from the folklore of journalism is the word 'objective.'" He continues: "My belief is that my responsibilities within journalism are two. My first responsibility is to my subjects. My second responsibility is to my readers."⁷

Environmental concerns had been sparked a few years earlier by a man we might now call a "citizen journalist," astronaut Bill Anders. On Christmas Eve, 1968, at the end of an enormously turbulent year rife with political upheaval, Anders photographed the Earth from his perch on an Apollo spacecraft, for the first time depicting our planet as fragile and alone in the cosmos. *Earthrise*, as the photograph was called, was placed on a U.S. postage stamp and inspired Earth Day, celebrated for the first time by millions on April 22, 1970, sixteen months after Anders made the image.

Both for their impact on morale and for the damning evidence that they may gather, one of the most contested and restricted purviews of professional photographers has been the coverage of war. It is also, of course, at least in hindsight, one of the most celebrated of photography's domains. The modern turning point in war's portrayal, transitioning from the heroic to the excoriating, was that of the Vietnam War. Allowed a large amount of freedom to cover almost anything they wanted by officials who initially thought the photographs would serve a public-relations effort, the photographers in the field—by making images, such as one of a grimy, exhausted G.I.; a Vietnamese father cradling his young, injured child; a Vietcong prisoner executed at point-blank range; terrified Vietnamese children running down a road away from a napalm attack—effectively contested the U.S. government's claims about the nature and progress of the conflict.

In response, during the first Persian Gulf War photographers were largely marginalized by governments. In an effort to avoid what President George H. W. Bush called "another Vietnam,"⁸ U.S. policy was to keep photographers as far away as possible; perhaps the most memorable images from that conflict show the roof of a building in the cross-hairs of a camera linked to a bomb about to strike it. Photographs that spoke directly to the consequences of the violence were negated in the "image war" that enveloped the on-field battles. For example, the pictures of a bunker destroyed in central Baghdad by an American Tomahawk missile were quickly obscured by a cloud of questions meant to nullify their impact: Were the Iraqi dead civilians or soldiers? Who was at fault? Was the claim that the victims were civilians a propaganda ploy by Saddam Hussein? As a 1991 front-page headline in the *Los Angeles Times* put it: "Images of Death Could Produce Tilt to Baghdad." The actual death of individuals was not the focus, apparently, but the fact of the image and the ways in which it might be used.⁹

The restrictive policies for photographers were modified for the second Gulf War, but still with an eye to controlling any potential fallout: photographers were now required to be "embedded" with troops, and had contracts stipulating under what circumstances photographs could be published. The limitations of embedding, along with a facile tendency to initially see the war as a battle between good and evil,

contributed to the circumstance that the most revelatory photographs to emerge from that conflict were those made by soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison.

But even before the current crises in journalism and the diminished opportunities for editorial support, the approaches of many documentary photographers and photojournalists had already evolved significantly. Declining to rely so heavily on the camera's recording function, and borrowing from techniques usually attributed to art photographers, they came up with hybridized strategies to report on contemporary issues. In some ways these methods resemble the "New Journalism" first identified by Tom Wolfe in 1972, combining methods of the journalist with those of the novelist.¹⁰ Writers such as Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Gay Talese, and Wolfe himself speculated on the inner thinking of their subjects, or placed themselves in the situations on which they were reporting, using conventions from fiction in their own cross-disciplinary narratives. Similarly, many documentary and journalistic photographers departed from the mythic status of the photographic document as "fact" to explore reality as a much more contested and nuanced phenomenon—an implicit critique of traditional documentary function.

These photographers have enhanced the role of conjecture and intuition, some of them using a visual vernacular to achieve imagery that could be at times deceptively bland (Robert Adams, Bill Owens, Sophie Ristelhueber, Celia Shapiro, Stephen Shore, and Alec Soth, to name but a few), while others deployed evident formal flair, more explicit in their points of view (included among these are Bill Burke, Raymond Depardon, Jim Goldberg, Jeff Jacobson, Gilles Peress, Sylvia Plachy, and Eugene Richards). Some, of course, belong on both lists. Others, like Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, have been quite explicit in their critiques of documentary activity and the ways it purports to frame and describe reality. Despite a "just the facts" appearance of much documentary work, there have always been numerous formal approaches in operation, some better concealed than others; indeed, the blandest imagery may be the most deceptive.

Photographic histories tend to conceptualize a significant divide between the documentarian and the artist without exploring overlapping strategies, whereas, when visiting contemporary galleries, one can only be struck by the variety of documentary work being shown—although one's reading of the imagery can be colored by its commercial appeal. An obvious exception to the lack of historical attention was Szarkowski's 1978 survey *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* at the Museum of Modern Art, in which the most interesting photographs were those that the curator could not place either in the category of art (inward-looking mirrors) or documentary (the outward-looking windows, mentioned previously), but that belonged to a third, hybridized approach—acknowledging the ongoing dialogue between inner and outer states that has always made photography, like writing, much more than a mere recording.

That overlap is evident in the work of many of the most important photographers exploring social issues, and helps to bridge some of the perceived gaps in contemporary imagery—between, for example, photojournalist and “citizen” journalist. Henri Cartier-Bresson, for one, believed that photojournalism was “keeping a journal with a camera”: a diarylike, personal activity, and a way to combine his leanings as an artist (he initially aspired to be a painter) with those of a journalist. While Cartier-Bresson was not known for photographing his breakfast or other minutiae of his day, his stance straddles those of today’s professional and amateur: “As far as I am concerned,” he once stated, “taking photographs is a means of understanding, which cannot be separated from other means of visual expression. It is a way of shooting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one’s own originality. It is a way of life.”¹¹

Similarly, Walker Evans argued that while his straightforward photographs of Depression-era tenant farmers in Alabama may have been taken as evidence to define a period, they were also an expression of an inner lyricism—leading him to characterize his own work as “documentary style.” (Szarkowski commented in 1971: “It is difficult to know now with certainty whether Evans recorded the America of his youth, or invented it.”)¹² His tenant-farmer photographs and James Agee’s text, initially assigned by *Fortune* but ultimately judged too unwieldy for publication in the magazine, were instead released several years later as a book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), today a classic. It was a work in two distinct voices, with a section of Evans’s images grouped together so that they precede rather than illustrate Agee’s text (on certain points, in fact, the text and photographs strongly disagree).

Endeavoring more pragmatically for solutions to the problems they observe and depict, in recent years some photographers have chosen to work in concert with humanitarian organizations to advance the goals of these groups. (Although, as some have pointed out, certain imagery may serve more for “branding” purposes than for an exploration of what is actually occurring—a broader question concerning the operations of NGOs, as shall be discussed further.) As editorial publications suffer from reduced funding and limit their coverage of news, humanitarian organizations have taken on a larger role in documenting the world’s hotspots, combined with advocacy.

Doubt as to the eventual impact of one’s images has long been central for many of the most talented and committed observers. Even during that most visually explored of conflicts, the Vietnam War, the title of Don McCullin’s book of excruciating war imagery—*Is Anyone Taking Any Notice?* (1973), or *The Destruction Business* in the British edition (1971)—reflected the photographer’s enormous misgivings as to the efficacy of witnessing in media: misgivings, along with guilt, that still remain with him forty years later. A small 1968 book by David Douglas Duncan, called *I Protest!*, was a condemnation of U.S. military policy in Vietnam from a photographer (and former

Marine) known for his glorifying imagery of soldiers' valor in World War II and the Korean War, as well as in Vietnam. (Philip Caputo's 1983 novel *DelCorso's Gallery*, pits a Duncan-like character named P. X. Dunlop, seeking heroes, against a McCullin-like character named Nicholas DelCorso, haunted by the horrors of war, each despising the other's approach.)

Philip Jones Griffiths's 1971 volume *Vietnam Inc.* was accomplished after two and a half years of photographing in the field with only several days of actual assignments. Griffiths, who originally trained to be a pharmacist in Wales, presents some of the expected images of heroism in war, but they are powerfully undermined with critical juxtapositions of photographs, as well as with highly sardonic captions ("U.S. combat troops arrive, outnumbering the enemy 3 to 1 and possessing the most sophisticated military hardware; the job seemed easy. Earlier, spirits were high among the troops, intoxicated as much by the spectacle of their own strength as by the cold beer delivered to them daily"). The 1966 discussion by a pilot of napalm that he cites is horrific: "We sure are pleased with those backroom boys at Dow. The original product wasn't so hot—if the gooks were quick they could scrape it off. So the boys started adding polystyrene—now it sticks like shit to a blanket. But if the gooks jumped under water it stopped burning, so they started adding Willie Peter (WP—white phosphorus) so's to make it burn better. And just one drop is enough, it'll keep on burning right down to the bone so they die anyway from phosphorus poisoning."¹³

Griffiths also included in the book what might be the first domestically published photographs of American soldiers in the act of consorting with prostitutes while fighting a war, as well as a section on young girls joining the sex trade. *Vietnam Inc.*, remaindered shortly after its publication, was acknowledged as a classic decades later—one of the earliest books of photojournalism in which the photographer effectively contextualized and recontextualized his imagery through his own editing, page design, and text.

As these and other photographic works gradually emerged, providing reference points for individuals' developing moral landscapes, photography became an increasingly compelling medium for those interested in social issues. Young people in growing numbers embraced photography as a career over the following decades, hoping to provide eyewitness testimony that might play a role in raising consciousness about social issues, if not in actually solving them. But especially among the more articulate photographers, sharing the complexity and nuance of what one had witnessed by publishing only a few selected images in magazines and newspapers was often frustrating; hence the numerous gallery and museums shows, along with the shelves of books published in recent years, by a generation of serious photojournalists and documentarians intent on providing a more comprehensive sense of what they had witnessed in their own voice (a migration that preceded the current one into the online world).

Paradoxically, however, as their images have gradually begun to play a less pivotal role in societies experiencing a surfeit of images, in a less influential journalistic media environment, some of these photographers have been plucked from behind their bylines and celebrated as heroes—the author at times overshadowing his or her subjects, the messenger supplanting the message. Society seems to find some reassurance that there are those running considerable risks to bring back strong images, even if the response may be more awestruck than effective. One European photographer, for example, having long been frustrated at not finding sufficient magazine venues for his in-depth work on serious issues, recently pointed out in a conversation the irony that, due to his growing fame, magazines are now eager to display his work—not because of the importance of the subject matter, but because he is its author.

In the current shift, publications, trying to become more consumer-friendly, have been reconceived at least in part to respond not to what editors think readers should know, but to what they think readers might *want* to know. It is a transition that diminishes the journalistic focus on policy matters, for example, and elevates that on diets, celebrity divorces, personal health, and political scandals. The potential political clout of readers/viewers is diluted in order to concentrate on arousing and satisfying their self-interest as consumers, rather than as citizens. (Undoubtedly this is what advertisers, if not readers, prefer—although many advertisers have since abandoned such publications, leaving them behind for the more selective reach of search engines plugged in to even more individualized interests.)

Images that might provoke new thinking, or that might aid in the search for even a partial solution to societal problems, tend to be displaced by those that are more vividly exotic and render problems as somewhat remote, concerning “others.” Compare, for example, the intense interest in covering demonstrations by the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street—especially those involving police brutality—but the very few visual explorations of the underlying economic and political issues that gave rise to those demonstrations. What, in this country, do we really know about the diverging strata of rich and poor beyond a few easy stereotypes? Compare also the history of war photography, with an enormous number of exhibitions and books devoted to it, to that of the unrecognized genre of *peace photography*, which might be conceived of as an attempt to proactively diminish potential conflicts, to concentrate on rehabilitating individuals and rebuilding societies, and to avoid the voyeuristic spectacle of war. (We will explore these ideas further in chapter 5.)

Segments of the world, or “causes,” may momentarily surface in the media. A few, like the shooting of elementary schoolchildren in Newtown, Connecticut, are just too close to home and too horrific to ignore. More distant events or issues may temporarily attract attention due to the commitments of particular celebrities (consider

George Clooney in Darfur, or Angelina Jolie as ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Or they may momentarily emerge due to a targeted, narrowly focused video like *Kony 2012*, a controversial thirty-minute indictment of Joseph Kony, head of the Lord's Resistance Army guerrilla group operating in several African countries.¹⁴ But without an ongoing and assured interest in the outside world, it can be difficult for social documentarians to find access to an audience. ("Your work is too depressing," or "People are not interested in that now" are standard refusals—although it is likely that, if it were solely up to the picture editors themselves, much more important and hard-hitting work would be regularly published.)

Even when there is interest from a publication, the character of the venue itself might seem to trivialize the imagery: photographer Bob Adelman once described, for example, how he had a gun pointed at him while covering the U.S. civil-rights movement for *Life* magazine, noting that he would not have considered putting himself in that kind of danger on assignment for a more celebrity-oriented magazine such as *People*. Lacking appropriate platforms, many photographers feel in a similar bind today, not wanting their work to end up only on blogs that are seen by few, and—if it is the photographer's own blog—may be viewed as both self-promotional and solipsistic.

The fault, of course, does not lie just with the publications. Stephen Mayes, formerly a longtime recording secretary of the Amsterdam-based World Press Photo Awards (to which now more than a hundred thousand images are submitted annually for consideration), was more broadly critical in a talk he gave upon resigning his post in 2009. As Paul Lowe reported online at *Foto8*, Mayes reiterated one juror's point that 90 percent of the pictures submitted were about 10 percent of the world. According to Lowe, Mayes then went on to question

why most photojournalism investigates a very limited series of tropes in a very limited series of visual approaches, becoming a self-replicating machine that churns off[f] copies of itself in perpetual motion, which [Mayes] described as a "feeling that photojournalism, rather than trying to reinvent itself, is trying to copy itself," and that the industry is in essence reactionary and unrealistic in its understanding of the changes in global media and society. Too many photographers are "reflecting the media not as it is but as we wish it was" and assuming that it is the world that must come to them, not they that must go to the world.¹⁵

There is also a wider sense from outside the photographic community that a diminished visual vocabulary is not helping. For example, in his 2010 book, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, Richard Dowden condemns the repetitive kinds of imagery disseminated by journalists and aid workers alike. "Persistent images of starving children and men with guns have accumulated into our narrative of the [African] continent,"

he argues. "However well intentioned their motives may once have been, aid agencies have helped create the single, distressing image of Africa. They and journalists feed off each other." It is a criticism that has often been applied to the depiction of Africans in particular, linked to consequent distortions not only of outsiders' perceptions of the continent but of the policy making that results.

A sizeable number of photographers no longer believe that anyone can make a substantive difference; indeed, those who still strive to impact society in meaningful ways seem Old School. "I'm not going out doing campaigning photojournalism, because nobody wants that anymore," Martin Parr told David Walker of *Photo District News* in 2008. "There is the old approach, whereby you try to change the world. Nobody is going to obliterate war, famine, AIDS, and all the other things that are the usual subject matter that more campaigning photojournalists would be attracted to." What did one of the world's most sought-after photographers, a global expert on the history of photographic books, and a member of the Magnum Photos agency, suggest? "I shoot interesting subject matter but disguise it as entertainment. That's what people want in magazines."¹⁶

Do photographs still actually help anyone? Or is this an unfair expectation in the world of images?

The expectation that the subject should benefit remains at the forefront for many, although photography's impact is difficult to measure. Nor is it always predictable. For example, South African photographer Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for his photograph of a small, emaciated girl being stalked by a vulture as she tried to make her way to a feeding station in the Sudan. After winning the prize, the photographer was roundly criticized with hundreds of letters for not having picked up the child to make sure that she made it. The messenger was lambasted for choosing, as one of the more polite notes put it later, "to be an observer rather than a participant." As photographers are increasingly viewed as being part of the story, it is a criticism one hears more often. Paul Velasco, another South African photographer, saw it otherwise at the time: "If that picture hadn't played, today we still wouldn't know how to spell Sudan. It became the catalyst for incredible awareness for change."¹⁷ Evidently both the *New York Times*, which published the photograph, and the Pulitzer committee similarly believed in its power to evoke a horrific situation.

Previously, Carter had been covering, on a daily basis, the South African struggle to overthrow apartheid. Just after he received the Pulitzer, he lost one of his closest colleagues, Ken Oosterbroek, killed by crossfire in a town outside Johannesburg. Dealing with his own issues, including drug addiction and guilt, Carter was distraught. He felt that with numerous children starving all around him it would have been impossible

to save them all—and as a journalist he was there to observe and report so that other, more powerful forces could be of help. Carter committed suicide in July of 1994, leaving a note explaining that he was “depressed . . . without phone . . . money for rent . . . money for child support . . . money for debts . . . money!!! . . . I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain . . . of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners.” And then he added: “I have gone to join Ken if I am that lucky.”¹⁸

Carter’s stance was a reference point for several critics of the 2012 *New York Post* cover photograph of a man seconds before his death on a New York City subway track. Many people asked why the photographer, R. Umar Abbasi, had not physically intervened and attempted to pull the man up. (Abbasi’s response was that he flashed his camera multiple times at the train conductor to warn him, and the man on the track was too far away to reach in time, although other bystanders might have helped—some then stood photographing the aftermath.) Earlier in 2012, the *Guardian*—reacting to the case of two journalists videotaping rather than intervening in a sex attack on a busy street in India in which no one interceded as a laughing mob of men attacked a teenage girl over the course of approximately forty-five minutes—published several responses from photographers who had been in situations where it was difficult to decide whether to photograph or to intervene.¹⁹ “What’s it like to witness a mob attack, a starving child or the aftermath of a bomb, and take a photograph instead of stopping to help?,” the article begins. The collected responses express the anguish of the photographers’ personal dilemmas. One in particular is striking in its resemblance to Carter’s situation—while also revealing the influence of such pictures on the behavior of the subjects themselves, who now may pose for the camera. Photographer Radhika Chalasani, a New York native, wrote:

Some photographers and journalists have a very absolute point of view that you never interfere, because your job is as an observer and you can do the most good by remaining one. I decided a long time ago that I had to do what I could live with in terms of my own conscience, so when it felt appropriate to try to do something, I would. There are certain situations you struggle with. We’re interfering with a situation by our very presence, and that automatically changes the dynamic. At one point, I was photographing a woman carrying her son into a feeding centre. He was extremely malnourished, and I was photographing her as she walked along. All of a sudden, these Sudanese people started directing her for the photos. They had her sit down and were indicating how she should hold her child. I ran to get a translator, and said, “Tell her to take her child to the feeding centre. She should not be stopping because I’m taking a photograph.” . . .

I’ve been in situations where it’s been a hard call, though. On one occasion, a group of photographers went into an abandoned refugee camp and found a

massacre site. There were some children who had survived. There were two baby twins in a hut: I tried to get one child to take my hand and realised it had been chopped off. We didn't know how long they had been there. And it's in the middle of a civil war, so you're not sure how safe things are.

Myself and another photographer wanted to take the kids out of there in the car. Several of the other people didn't think it was safe, in case we got stopped at a checkpoint, and they wanted to get back for their deadlines. In the end, we didn't take the children. We found the Red Cross and reported the situation to them, but I found that another photographer went there the next day and found another child who was a survivor. To this day I think that I didn't necessarily do the right thing.

I do believe that our main contribution is trying to get the story understood. And sometimes, when you think you're helping, you're actually making a situation worse. But, for me, you try to do what you can live with.²⁰

A fictional version of this nightmare—one might call it the revenge of the subject—occurs in the setup of the novel *The Painter of Battles* by former journalist Arturo Pérez-Reverte. A Croatian man, who has been depicted in a prizewinning photograph seen worldwide on the cover of newsmagazines, later tracks down and confronts the novelist's protagonist, a photographer-turned-painter. The Croatian blames the image, which had been made during a desperate retreat by new recruits in Vukovar, for the unimaginably sadistic deaths of his wife and son and his own lengthy torture by Serbs, who he says were motivated by the image's fame to greater cruelty: "You took a photograph of a soldier you crossed paths with for a couple of seconds. A soldier you knew nothing about, not even his name. And that photograph traveled around the world. Then you forgot that anonymous soldier and took other photos. Of other people whose names you also didn't know, I imagine. Maybe you made them famous the way you did me. It's a strange profession, yours."

"Why have you come looking for me?" the former photographer asks a few moments later. "The visitor had put down his glass and was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Because I'm going to kill you.'"²¹

Too often the well-meaning motivation of those involved in the enterprise of making and publishing photographs about issues of importance is considered sufficient—whether or not the imagery has the desired effect is frequently not the focus. And, as nearly anyone in the field will admit, it can be difficult to foresee with any precision the eventual effect of particular imagery—although this is certainly not a reason to avoid such reflections. *Life* magazine readers responded surprisingly generously to the difficulties of nurse-midwife Maude Callen, and *New York Times* readers and others shocked many journalists with their vitriol for Kevin Carter.

Part of the problem is that, while advertisers spend large sums of money testing the impact of visuals on potential consumers—as politicians do with voters, and as movie producers do with films before the final cut—there is much less thought given in journalistic and documentary circles to the kinds of images that might be most helpful in particular situations. Nor, with the global reach of the Internet, do we sufficiently factor in the cultural, political, and economic differences of various potential audiences. A larger discussion of these issues is now emerging within the field, spurred on in part by the many independent photographers wanting to be of greater use to society, and by the increased adoption of such imagery by humanitarian organizations with specific goals in mind.

Yet another difficulty is that even when photographs do prompt a strong response from readers, their effect on those depicted may not always be helpful. Mary Ellen Mark's photographs of the homeless Damm family, for example, published in *Life* magazine in 1987, elicited an outpouring of monetary donations from readers totaling some nine thousand dollars, as well as two used cars, toys, and job offers. But as *Life* later reported: "It looked like the hard times were over. Four months later, the Damms were on the street again. The money was gone; the cars and furniture were gone, trashed or sold for drugs." In 1995, Mark published a follow-up photo-essay that showed how far the Damms' situation had spiraled downward in eight years. Daniel Okrent, the magazine's managing editor, addressed well-meaning readers in an accompanying editorial:

Eight years ago, *Life* published a series of wrenching photographs by Mary Ellen Mark of Linda and Dean Damm and their two children—a homeless family in Los Angeles. Our readers rose to the occasion: You sent money, household goods, offers of help. You opened your hearts, and your wallets, to a family in need. As journalists, we try not to insert ourselves into our stories, but in this instance our human instincts took over. We sent your contributions on to Dean and Linda Damm.

In this issue we publish some new photos of the Damms . . . Things have changed for the family over the past eight years—almost all for the worse. It's now clear to us, as it will be to you, that at least some of the money sent to them was spent for drugs.

An editor has a responsibility to play it straight with readers. We were wrong in 1987 to think that the Damms could handle receiving a large amount of money at one time. But you were right. Getting involved is always right. I will be sending a personal check not to the Damm family but to the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse . . . one of many organizations that spend their money well, on children who can and must be helped.²²

The questions that arise are diverse and increasingly urgent, with repercussions for individuals and the larger communities in which they live, as well as for the image

makers and their readers trying to help. Can photographs assist societies to transition to more just, democratic systems, as has been attempted during the Arab Spring and other recent upheavals? Can they help communities recover from, or even avoid, certain kinds of disasters? What are the rights of subjects, and how can they be protected? Is a new code of ethics required for photographers and their colleagues? Should a new form of "front page" be devised as a way to filter the enormous amounts of information now constantly available? How does one better engage the reader as a collaborating author, and the citizen journalist as a collaborating producer? Should photographs be labeled, like writing, as either *nonfiction* or *fiction*, or are they always a hybrid of the two?

More broadly, how can the digital environment be utilized for new forms of more effective witnessing and storytelling? What are the landmarks emerging for those in the field? How can an image maker feel useful?

N.B. All websites cited in this volume's notes were accessed December 2012–January 2013.

NOTES

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