

What is Documentary Photography?

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Introduction

In explaining why he became a photographer Joseph Rodriguez said “*as a kid I was always told to shut up, you know be quiet and speak when spoken to. I could never get my voice out. Photography is my voice*” (Light: 142).

For many people this is the reason why we are photographers: photography is our voice, our way of understanding the world and communicating with it, and documentary photography would appear therefore to be an obvious form of practice. This essay discusses a personal documentary photographic project in Tibet and goes on to explore more broadly the question: *What is Documentary Photography?* In doing so a number of interrelated themes are discussed:

- Is documentary photography a distinctive area of practice
- What is the relationship between documentary practice and social change
- What is the ethical and practice relationship between the photographer and the photographed
- How important is the photographers aesthetic in the production of documentary work
- What is the relationship between documentary photography and art

My recent photographic practice has been based on what may be called the ‘flaneur’ approach: wandering in visually interesting locations, producing individual photographs of chance encounters, driven by the aesthetic quality rather than content and thinking about the meaning later. I have produced a short monograph from some of this work (Purcell 2005).

The project on Tibet was different and had several motivations. The intention was to produce a coherent visual narrative that explored the effects of ‘globalisation, mass tourism and Chinese occupation on Tibetan culture’. There were several reasons for doing this: to produce material for an exhibition, to raise the issue of Tibet and Tibetan refugees, work on understanding the social and cultural processes at play in Tibet, and explore my own photographic practice.

This was a difficult piece of work in that the documentary approach requires getting under the surface of the subject. In Tibet the Chinese population are understandably indifferent to westerners. In the cities the Tibetan population are cautious knowing that their relationship to foreigners is under scrutiny. In the

month I spent in Tibet I was not able to make the personal relationships that may have enabled me to explore Tibetan culture at a deeper level.

I was careful not to simply produce propaganda either through the construction of the image or through the wording of captions. Jacobson comments on the importance of text to the documentary *"It should be absolutely clear to everybody that brilliant images are not enough. You need the text, you need great headlines, great captions, great introductions, good text to amplify and expand the sense of what the pictures are doing and give them context and meaning"* (Light: 181). Photographs are semiotically interpreted in various ways by the viewer. How captions are used can significantly influence the readings of the photograph. These Tibetan photographs can, for example, be read as documenting oppression and cultural imperialism or as successful modernisation and development. For a recent exhibition of the work the captions were limited to identifying the place of the photograph. In the book (Purcell 2006) the captions are the same with a short narrative that provides a context to the pictures.

There is a further difficulty in trying to get beyond producing stereotypical images. The people in the photographs are portrayed as Chinese, Tibetan, and western tourists. What is this supposed to mean, what can we tell from photographs of ethnic groups? Tibetans play pool which they learnt from the Chinese who obtained it from the USA. Playing pool may or may not replace Buddhist practice for some individuals. Is this good or bad and on what and whose terms do we make this judgement? Although the photographs may show us that particular places in Tibet look something like this, do the photographs tell us anything other than confirming what we thought already? Sontag (1977) goes further on this point and using the analogy of Plato's Cave suggests that photography can only ever represent a 'shadow' of reality.

The following discussion of the photographs is based on trying to see them through a social theory lens, drawing on ideas around the practice of everyday life (de Certeau 1998), representations of space and the space of representation (Lefebvre 1991), the Spectacle (Dubord 1992, 1998) and flows of people, capital, culture, etc (Castells 1977). Alongside this analysis of content is the aesthetic construction of a photograph that makes it work as an image. As we see in the literature discussion, the creative tension between the content and aesthetic is the core of a successful photograph (Friday 2002) but difficult to achieve. In this body of work I was, at times, more concerned with the content (telling the story) than the strength of the image as a piece of art. On reflection I think if I had adopted my usual photographic wandering method I may have produced stronger photographs, but a weaker documentary product. This probably reflects the level of my ability; I'm sure Walker Evans would have managed to successfully encompass both.



The first image is of the Barkhor; which is both a square and part of a major pilgrimage circuit. The photograph is taken from the roof of the Jokhang Temple the centre of Tibetan Buddhism. In the distance is the Potala the ex residence of the Dalai Lama and the government of Tibet. The Barkhor is a significant space: it is the end point for pilgrims to Lhasa, it is the site of protests against Chinese occupation and where several protestors have been killed, it is under constant surveillance by security forces and CCTV, it is the focal point for tourists and a world heritage site, it is where traditional Tibetan Lhasa ends and the new Chinese city starts. The photograph represents flows of people, culture and power, religious practice and faux tourist spectacle, and where the everyday practice of Tibetan Buddhism can be seen as resistance to occupation. Aesthetically, I think the photograph works because of the reflections on the wet stone, the splashes of colour and the portrayal of people in Lowry style.



Outside the Jokhang Temple pilgrims are arriving and praying in front of the main gate; as they have done for several hundred years. This is a site and a practice of considerable social, cultural, religious and political importance for the Tibetans. The Chinese have labelled the site as a ‘world heritage’ and promote it as tourist spectacle. In the photograph a Chinese tourist captures the scene on a digital camera. The woman in the centre of the frame is caught as if submitting to Chinese hegemony, becoming a symbol for the wider social change and political oppression in the process.



This is another photograph within the Barkhor space. Featured is a large incense burner that marks part of the pilgrimage circuit. I think it has a certain timeless quality and could have been taken (in black and white) in the 19th century, although the workers Toshiba jacket places the scene firmly in the 21st century. The smoke from the burner can be seen both as tradition, ritual activity and resistance against the attempts at the suppression of Buddhism. On the other hand it becomes a tourist spectacle to be photographed.



A family grouping in the Barkhor: in the middle ground Tibetans can be seen walking the kora (pilgrimage circuit) in the traditional clockwise manner; the exception being a Chinese photographer walking in the opposite direction (from indifference or ignorance?). This space used to be the centre commerce and social activity in Lhasa, but the control exercised over the area by security forces now gives it a sterile feel. It is now a managed 'world heritage site' which gives it a new set of myths and meanings. The flags are celebrating 40 years of Tibet being part of China. They have replaced the traditional prayer flags that usually adorn religious buildings; making a new space and form of political repression and contestation.



Behind the scenes: a fruit and vegetable stall in a Tibetan residential courtyard with a Chinese flag imposed on the scene as a statement of political power.



In the old quarter and traditional trading area of Lhasa a Tibetan worker carries his new purchase into the frame of the photograph: a Chinese made DVD. In the background traditional Tibetan crafts are being sold, a monk and shadows of other Tibetans are disappearing from the frame. The DVD package suggests the dominance of new imported glitzy superficial global products and culture at the expense of solid, traditional craft goods and religious beliefs and practices.



Waitresses in a western tourist orientated night club (The Crazy Yak) perform a pastiche of traditional Tibetan dance against an idealised Tibetan landscape. The pose represents submission to tourism and the debasement of the traditional culture. However, the facial expression of contempt by the right hand waitress is perhaps the only form of resistance available to her given the economic and political realities of her life. The photograph was made by direct in-camera flash; partly from necessity, but also playing on the mode of tourist photographs being made at that time.



Pool is major street pastime of Chinese men and has been taken up by unemployed Tibetans. Entire streets of shop units in the Tibetan area of Lhasa have been turned into small pool halls. Symbolising global cultural penetration, the pool table sits in contrast to the mass produced religious posters and the auspicious painted symbol on the door. The economic conditions are indicated by the poor state of repair of the building and broken sofa. An atmosphere of desolation is created by the significant absence of the Tibetans themselves.



A clothes and material shop in old Lhasa. The majority of the garments being made in Chinese owned factories. The white western mannequins stare out like an alien race in a strange land: a metaphor for western tourism to Tibet? The regimented display adds power to the composition.



This photograph features a young Tibetan boy watching a DVD on a street stall. The DVD's on sale promote Chinese pop music and movies. A selection of 'shoot em up' video games is also available. In the next stall fake designer sunglasses are being sold. Maybe the flames on the boy's clothes suggest the destruction of his culture by his interest in a global electronic future?



This is night time at the interface between old and Chinese Lhasa. Bus shelters hold brightly lit advertisements for Chinese goods and other products are promoted through a line of posters. Behind this frontage people can be glimpsed in a shop doorway, and another in an apartment above. The photograph suggests that behind the consumerism of the new city people are living mostly hidden lives; what do they do, how do they live, what do they think? Photographs may pose these questions but cannot answer them.



Tibetans waiting for a bus. The photograph suggests poor environmental conditions, passivity and powerlessness. Although the people may have many things in common there is no interaction; individuals lost in their own concerns and thoughts. This photograph was a 'grab shot' from inside a Toyota Landcruiser. Although this resulted in an unsharp image, it also reflects the transitory and distanced nature of western involvement in Tibetan life.



A photograph of a group of monks at a debating session where concepts of philosophy and religion are being explored. The photograph suggests community and fellowship. The Chinese have tried to control the activities of monasteries through imprisoning many monks and limiting their numbers. Living as a monk can be seen as an act of resistance and sustaining traditional beliefs and culture.



On the other hand Tibetans adopt and use modern technology. This monk interrupted his teaching to take a text message. Was the text about religious affairs or a personal matter? The photograph poses a question about the interrelationship of the traditional and the new.



Young novice monks dressed in ceremonial robes are rushing to practice a traditional ceremony. The tension can clearly be seen in their faces and the repeating pattern of hats, arms and faces give structure to the picture. The ceremony is to greet the Panchen Lama (the second highest Tibetan Buddhist position). However, the ‘real’ Panchen Lama has been arrested by the Chinese and his whereabouts are unknown. The Panchen Lama who is visiting is the son of a communist part official. The ceremony implies the legitimization of political power by religious tradition; but functions instead as an empty spectacle.

In viewing the completed work it became clear to the author that with the addition of various labels, captions and text, the photographs could be repositioned and framed as an ethnographic study of contemporary Tibetan culture with little reference to the wider political dimensions of Chinese occupation, or a smaller visual sociological study of, say, the social networks of monks. It could also be divided up into a series of traditional photojournalistic stories; for example the adoption or pool as a major Tibetan pastime, the increasing use of DVD’s and computer games or a quaint piece about Monks, mobile phones and txting. It is also possible to play the postmodern art pastiche game and on one level present the photographs as a documentary project but uses provocative captions to unmask or deconstruct another set of implied meanings (see Grundberg 2003: 169). Or simply resort to limited edition fine art ‘Monk Portraits’ to be sold through private galleries. Behind all these approaches are ethical questions about the consent and exploitation of the subjects.

Discussion of Literature

A Sociological Overview

Howard Becker explores various approaches to photography from a sociological perspective. He comments “*visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism, then, are whatever they have come to mean, or been made to mean, in their daily use in worlds of photographic work. They are social constructions, pure and simple*” (1995). These constructions are based on organisational convenience and historical precedent and deliver their own associated myths. Thus the same photographic work can be labelled differently depending upon purpose and application; not because of its inherent nature. Alluding to the confusion created by the use of labels, he comments that documentary works “*combine a journalistic and ethnographic style with a self-conscious and deliberate artistic purpose*” (1974: 5).

Documentary photography for Becker can be a rather mundane activity, reflecting the reformist motivated practice of Riis and Hine (indeed Hine catalogued his photographs into one hundred functional topics with eight hundred subtopics), recording the social order (Sander) or as an artist recording the present (Atget). Becker thinks that much documentary work is superficial: “*social documentary photography is not analytically dense the reason may be that photographers use theories that are overly simple. They do not acquire a deep, differentiated and sophisticated knowledge of the people and activities they investigate. Conversely, when their work gives a satisfyingly complex understanding of a subject, it is because they have acquired a sufficiently elaborate theory to alert them to the visual manifestations of that complexity*” (1974: 11).

To put it another way, documentary photographers may act out of a general social concern or political motivation, but the production of the photograph is more likely to be informed by artistic sensibility than social science theory. Even Hine thought that “*in the last analysis, good photography is a question of art*” (quoted in Dyer 2005: 13). Perhaps this is the distinction between the photographer and the sociologist. The writings of Magnum photographers discussed below tend to confirm Becker’s view.

On the other hand Becker sees photojournalism being based around mythical characteristics of: “*Unbiased. Factual. Complete. Attention-getting, storytelling, courageous*”. Weegee and Capa operate here as stereotypes that are reflected in the media; for example Nick Nolte in *Under Fire* (photographer as hero in Nicaragua). Or as Sontag commented “*we want the photographer to be a spy in the house of love and death*” (2003: 50). By making the photographer the action hero it is easy to avoid discussion of the economic power that controls the commissioning and distribution of such work, and the mundane everyday depiction of the status quo as normality. Although as Farrar (2005) makes clear photographs are not politically neutral or value free. Using Lefebvre he argues that on the one hand photographs depict ‘representations of space’, but they also contain ‘spaces of representation’ that lead to diverse and complex readings. Such

readings according to Chaplin (2005) are micro semiotic interpretations within a macro Foucauldian discourse. It is rare for documentary or photojournalistic works (although not art photography) to openly explore these issues, instead they take the meaning of the photographs as self evident and universal.

There is also a current trend to label photographs of the 'exotic' or minority sub cultures as ethnography or visual anthropology. Part of this is fashion as the term documentary can be seen to be dated. The term ethnography or visual sociology can also be attached to a work to suggest objectivity and rigorous analysis. But it is never that simple. Writing on modern photo-ethnographic practice, but relevant for all photographers, Pink recognises that photography as a mode of cultural production operates as a subjective representation of knowledge. She comments that *"Ethnographers themselves are members of societies in which photography and video are practiced and understood in particular ways... influenced by a range of factors, including theoretical beliefs, disciplinary agendas, personal experience, gendered identities, and different visual cultures"* (2004: 29).

Photographers Narratives: The Documentary Tradition

Running through the writings of documentary photographers are several ambiguities. Does documentary photography objectively record events or is it a subjective interpretation, is it a selfless act of witness or a device that functions to give the photographer a meaning to their life, is it a unique approach to photography or simply journalism or art?

Peter Howe sees documentary photography and photojournalism as overlapping activities. The difference Howe believes is that the photojournalist reports what is happening, whereas the documentarian puts their own interpretation on these events based on their personal beliefs and sensibilities. In particular *"the act of witness is very important. Without journalism, there's no democracy. Without journalism, there's no freedom"* (Light: 177). Jacobson agrees that photojournalism is reporting with a camera. In contrast he thinks documentary photography is culturally driven, for understanding people and a record for posterity of a particular time (Light: 182).

The traditional case for documentary photography was put by Cornell Capa in 1968 for the introduction to his book *The Concerned Photographer*. He wrote: *"The role of the photographer is to witness and be involved with his subject. There are many concerned photographers all over the world whose work will provide the visual history of our century. The concerned photographer finds much that is unacceptable that he tries to alter. Our goal is simply to let the world also know why it is unacceptable"* (quoted in Light: 192-3)

Kerry Tremain picks up on this theme *"the best documentary photographs...conveyed an invaluable, if imperfect truth..."* *"a transformation occurs when you see something important that is denied by those who have not or will not see it"* *"You attempt to tell the truth, is how Eugene Richards described it, you try to find the tools, the metaphors, the shapes, the shadows to translate the event as truthfully as possible"* (Light: 3-5)..

Documentary photography to some people is therefore more than a job; it is a way of life and a route for total involvement in the world. Sebastiao Salgado believes that in documentary photography *“you photograph with all your ideology”* (Light: 108). Michelle Vignes commented they (Magnum) taught us how to believe in what you do and to *“live fully with your camera”* (Light: 43). Donna Ferrato commented that *“my feeling is it’s not what you’re going to get. More like what are you going to give? What are you going to learn”* (Light: 135). Peter Magubane a photographer for the South African magazine Drum that campaigned against Apartheid commented *“I would not be sorry if I died doing this. I would be dying for the cause. I would be dying trying to liberate my country and myself”* (Light p 58). As a result of his photography Magubane was beaten by the police, imprisoned in solitary confinement for 587 days and then banned from meeting with more than 1 other person at a time for 5 years.

Aspiring to use photography for social change is one thing; actually producing change is something else. As Joseph Rodriguez commented *“social documentary for me is very personal. And even though I would like very much to change things, over the years, I’ve been a little disillusioned to see sometimes it doesn’t really turn out the way I’d like it to”* (Light: 142). Indeed documentary work need not have a progressive intent at all. Nash (2006) points out some of the pre war documentaries celebrated what he calls ‘colonial modernity’ and the beneficial effects of British rule on ‘exotic’ people (for example see the work of the GPO Film Unit for the Empire Marketing Board)

A factor mentioned by many documentary photographers is the stereotyping and labelling of the subjects in the photographs: refugees, hungry children, victims of violence, men of war, gangs, drug addicts, drug pushers, etc. The media outlets, many photographers claim, are not interested in exploration of people, their lives and different cultures. Instead the media want images that reinforce these stereotypes.

Documentary and the World of Art

There is the question of whether the pure (all content no aesthetic) documentary photograph ever existed. Garry Winogrand said he liked to *“work in areas where content almost overwhelms form”* (Dyer 2005: 15), yet his photographs still have a strong aesthetic construction. Grunberg comments that *“however much we admire (Walker) Evans as a documentarian, as the photographer of ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men’, as a ‘straight’ photographer of considerable formal intelligence and resourcefulness, one cannot help but notice in studying his work of the 1930’s how frequently billboards, posters, road signs, and even other photographs are found in his pictures”* (2003: 175). Bill Brandt is also often cited as a positive example of this creative tension in practice, whose work has been described as the product of *“documentary artist with all the paradoxes and interpretative difficulties that entails”* (Campany 2006: 61). Martin Parr is another photographer whose work (especially in his use of colour) has pushed the boundary of aesthetics in documentary practice. Even within a supposedly

straight documentary work there is a running text of signs (both real and semiotic) that take the reader to a different place.

Documentary photography (like all photography?) therefore, can be seen as a product of the tension between the aesthetic and content of the photograph. This has been discussed by Friday who suggests that art itself is a product of the culture from which it was produced. As he put it “*photography is a representational art because it possesses expressive qualities that capture aesthetic attention and extend it to the representational properties over which they are spread*” (2002: 83). Creative tension though suggests some kind of balance. Too much content over aesthetic and the photographs may be descriptive but are visually uninteresting. Too much an emphasis on aesthetics and the photograph will fail to convey the message about the social situation that was of concern.

In the UK the Mass Observation project operated under the guise of an ethnographic study of hidden Britain (hidden to the ruling classes?). The resulting photographs ranged from ‘straight’ social observation to surrealist preoccupation with the bizarre (Mellor 2005). It is suggested by Campany that surrealism has made an important contribution to the development of documentary work, through the recognition that the photographic document is not a statement of truth but a “*charged, enigmatic fragment that left as much as it revealed coaxing the viewer back onto their own judgement and imagination*” (2006: 54).

Taking an overview of documentary approaches that encompasses photography, film, painting and installation Barson (2006) suggests that the traditional notion of a dichotomy between documentary and art is false. Her article explores the movement and cross fertilisation of key players between various media. She suggests a more fruitful line of analysis of documentary work is through the consideration of a range of perspectives including the:

- politics of social observation
- position and relationship of the observer and the observed
- authority of the document
- indexical character of the medium
- relationship of the real to empirical appearance
- relationship between documentary practice and avant-garde Modernism

From the 1970’s in the UK Barson suggests the focus of documentary work shifted from class (and to a lesser extent the resistance to fascism) to gender and then race. The argument is that feminist documentary and the search for black identity exposes the social construction of reality, whereas traditional forms of representation simply reflect the dominant social order of discourses of knowledge. The nature of this work is more personal and comes from within the subject rather than white male photographers observing from the outside. More recent developments have expressed the interior feelings of individuals (Gillian Wearing for example) family albums, portraits and other ways of exploring notions of identity

Mary Ellen Mark commented that *“the best documentary images, like all great photographs, have always had a place in the world of fine art”* (Light p83). However, Susan Meiselas a committed and self defined social documentarian warns that in this climate *“there is a challenge for us, as documentarians, to continue to be committed and engaged, while at the same time innovative. I fear we have deadened out. You see this in exhibitions, which are often handled in precisely the same manner”* (Light:105).

Becker also comments on the way photography appears in museums as reverential pieces of art. He complains that photographic exhibitions: *“often show us something that might well have been the subject of a documentary photograph (poor kids standing around a slummy street, for instance). But they seldom provide any more than the date and place of the photograph, withholding the minimal social data we ordinarily use to orient ourselves to others, leaving viewers to interpret the images as best they can from the clues of clothing, stance, demeanour and household furnishings they contain. What might seem to be artistic mystery is only ignorance created by the photographer's refusal to give us basic information”* (1995). On the other hand Chaplin (2005) comments (as we noted above) that captions introduce a further range of socially constructed information that shifts attention and analysis from the photograph to the text itself.

The increasing presence of documentary photography in museums and galleries has attracted strong criticism. *“Documentary photographers, (art) critics said, are voyeurs who profit from the misery of the poor by stealing and prettifying their visages, then parading them in exhibitions for the privileged. And photographic realism.. perpetuates the myth that photographs are objective, rather than projections of the cultural values of those who make and distribute them”* (Light: 7). A further issue is raised by Anne Wilkes Tucker who comments on the reluctance of museums to exhibit work on current issues. This she suggest is based on the culture of curators who do not wish to get involved in controversy and prefer to reflect ‘coolly and dispassionately’ on retrospective work; to see photographs in terms of form over content and to promote the act of creating over the meaning of the content. They need not worry, for as Becker points out the context of viewing the photographs gives it meaning. If it is in a gallery its art; so there’s no imperative for the viewer to be concerned or to take action regardless of the content of the photographs. Graciela Iturbide comments *“the people that see my photographs in a show.. its not like they’re going to have a social conscience after that”* (Light:121). If this is so has the documentary purpose been lost?

There are various strands that may be explored as new channels for distributing documentary work: the internet for personal photoblogs, on-line galleries and web based magazines such as Blueeyesmagazine.com, small circulation print magazines like Foto 8, dedicated photographic galleries as well as public and private art galleries and museums. It remains to be seen if these new sites will affect how photography is perceived and used.

Case Study: Magnum

There is a question of how far the above theoretical debates and perspectives actually influence photographic practice, as opposed to discourse on photography by critics and academics. The autobiographical text from *Magnum Stories* (Boot 2004) provided source material for a text analysis to identify how photographers themselves described their practice.

Current members of Magnum are now more likely to simply describe themselves as photographers than photojournalists compared to the pre 1970 membership. Although a majority of the photographers said they were concerned about the human condition or that they produced stories about people lives, no one commented on any political or social theory informing their practice. More important for these photographers was the discussion of photographic aesthetics. Where social content was prioritised this was described in terms such as story telling, making statements, showing what is going on in the world, recording for history, personal essays. Particular emphasis was made across the texts on the importance of photography for personal reasons:

- the importance of photography as part of constructing a personal identity,
- a personal way of living,
- giving meaning to life,
- using photography as a front and protection for the shy and insecure,
- expressing curiosity and love of life,
- exploring the world through being non judgemental

The following table summarises the statements of selected Magnum photographers. It identifies how they describe their activities and gives a feel to how they see their work:

Photographer	Self Description	What they say they do
Chang Chien-Chi	photographer	- photographing what I need to, what I have to do, exploring what's going on
Carl De Keyzer	photographer	- subjects rooted in time and relationship to art, but creating fiction not reflecting reality
Luc Delahaye	photographer	- visual emotional exploration, pure photographic discovery
Thomas Dworzak	photojournalist	- making a record for history even if it does not change the present
Stuart Franklin	photojournalist	- narrate a sense of history, human condition

Bruce Gilden	photographer	- personal essays
Constantine Manos	personal documentary	- poems about how the photographer feels, moments (people) and believability (truth)
Eli Reed	photographer	- meditations on being a human being
Lise Safati	photographer	- narrative allegory
Alex Webb	photographer	- visual emotional exploration, pure photographic discovery

Democratic Documentary perhaps

The professed purpose of traditional documentary photographers was to explore social and economic conditions with a view to promoting reform and change. In this respect there are parallels with traditional developmental work. Also like development work much of this activity has been undertaken by white western professionals on behalf of poor non white people. In a philanthropic sense this is fine, but there are wider issues of power and control, of developmental and political agendas, and as Foucault might have said imposition of knowledge discourses. In a broader sense it is about local people being portrayed as *objects* according to the photographers interests and sensibility; rather than being *subjects* exploring their own material situation. Ethical issues generally, for example questions over whether the people in documentary photographs should own their image rights, are seldom discussed because the focus of attention is usually on the photographers intent. The passive role of the subjects is taken as given and the rights of the ‘socially motivated’ photographer unquestioned. In the development professions this is no longer good enough; is there a better way for documentary photography practice where people visually explore their own experience?

Some photographers recognise these issues and are attempting to work in new ways that give more power to the people in the photograph. For example Fazal Sheikh photographs refugees in Kenya, Somalia and Sudan using large format Polaroid film. His self description on his web site states that he is an ‘artist-activist’ (www.fazalsheikh.org). Sheikh is concerned by the ethics of photographing refugees and his method suggests one way to avoid the possible exploitation of poor people by art photographers. “*Many of the images I make are formal portraits...The act of photographing becomes an event in the village. We construct the image together. Many of the people have never been photographed before, and...the discussions that follow in which the residents of the community offer their opinions on how the documentation may unfold*” (Light: 156). The resulting photographs are formal portraits within which Sheikh claims “*the strength of the sitters gaze and an entire life lived in their bodies speaks for itself*” (Light: 157).

Susan Meiselas is also concerned to link her work directly with local communities. Expressing an overview on current practice she commented: *“photography no longer explores people on the edge.. it has to evolve to find a new language more inclusive of self ...can we find strategies to document lives in new ways in the context of a society only interested in itself.. a society where people are only interested in photographing themselves”* (2006). In Portugal after producing her commissioned work Meiselas equipped and delivered photographic workshops for local young people, resulting in an exhibition of local issues around racism and poverty. She has developed the habit of making banner size prints of photographs and then hanging them in the location of where they were taken: for example scenes of battles in Nicaragua. These banners become a visual reminder of recent history and a focus for discussion. In commenting on the use of banners Meiselas said *“who owns the work, the photographer or the subject, it is their reality”* (2006). It could be argued though, that this is still the photographers view being presented back to the community as a selective interpretation of their reality.

From visual sociology and development practice we have the method of photo-novellas and photovoice. Both of these approaches are based on individuals and groups photographing their own daily experiences; thus becoming subjects in their own right. For example a recent photo-novella in which the author was involved encouraged teenagers in a small Scottish town to photograph their activities during the evenings; to explore what they did and why that was important for them. Photovoice is a development of the novella approach based on theoretical perspectives derived from critical education, feminist theory and documentary photography (see Wang et al 2004a, 2004b and Webb 2004).

The Internet may hold a democratic future for documentary photography. The LensCulture web site notes that *“Martin Parr and Gerry Badger have concluded that online photobooks contain the real “secret history” of photography”* (www.lensculture.com). A Google search for photoblogs gives 15.8 million results. Within these self focussed sites containing hundreds of millions of photographs are serious documents of family life, communities and cultures. The majority of this work probably privileges the content over the aesthetic, although it appears that an increasing number of skilled / professional photographers are using this route to distribute their work. Increasingly, if slowly, these sites appear to be experimenting with new forms of representation linking text to photographs and video; although, subjectively to the author, the best work still appears to be rooted in the traditions of street photography. The problem is how to find individual work that tells new things about social groups, communities, cultures and activities, or uses photography in new ways, in amongst the mass of personal photographic sites.

Conclusion

There is a lot of photography about. Nash writes “*The proliferation of documentary art is both an indication of the productivity of the form and the symptom of an underlying failure. The very form which developed to enable us to think about history and social change has almost turned into its opposite – we are now in a mode of iteration, an accumulation of information that can render us informed but paradoxically unable to act*” (2006: 49). It is also be argued by postmodernists that all there is representation as there is no underpinning meta narrative explanation or deeper truth. Documentary photographs are simply representations of representations and little or no social change will result from this activity. Perhaps documentary photographs are just the personal expression of the photographer, at best an act of empathy and witness. It is doubtful if the more democratic forms of documentary where people photograph their own lives opens more possibilities for change, although they may give us a deeper insight into everyday experiences of the world.

Returning to the opening questions in the light of the analysis of the photographs and discussion of the literature, the following conclusions are offered:

- *Is documentary photography a distinctive area of practice:* Documentary photography is whatever goes under that label. More likely the traditional concerns of documentary photography will be presented as journalism, ethnography or art depending on the best marketing opportunity.
- *What is the relationship between documentary practice and social change:* Documentary photography can bear witness and raise issues, but there is little evidence that it actually directly contributes to significant macro change. There are however localised examples of change, for example Eugene Smith and his photographs of Minamata.
- *What is the ethical and practice relationship between the photographer and the photographed:* There appears to be a general acceptance of the position that photographing people who are suffering, without their consent, is acceptable if the photographs are used for social ends. Is the selling of these photographs as fine art prints ethical?
- *How important is the photographers aesthetic in the production of documentary work:* Photographs are the product of the creative tension between aesthetics and content. So aesthetics cannot be removed from creating or understanding a photograph.
- *What is the relationship between documentary photography and art:* If the photographs are displayed in an ‘art’ space or labelled as art, then that is what they become. By presenting the photographs in this way their effectiveness in conveying a social message may be reduced.

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