

The Open College of the Arts. Photography 2: Documentary

Assignment 4 Critical review

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**HOW CAN THE DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER GO BEYOND
HIGHLIGHTING ISSUES, TO CREATE CHANGE OR BENEFIT TO THE
COMMUNITIES THEY PHOTOGRAPH?**

Documentary photography has long been used as an eyewitness to issues, for social narratives, and as a space for photographers with reformist ambitions. So how can a photographer go beyond recording, sharing, and even commenting, as Ritchen asks, *“to include the making of imagery that is more proactive, serving to alleviate future suffering in advance?”* (Ritchen, 2020). I will explore elements in documentary photography that I consider enable real impact such as intent, contextualising evidence, long term commitment, testimony, fund raising, training and education, collaboration as well as strategies including considered use of audiences.

Raising awareness

In the past there have been many socially concerned photographers, for example Lewis Hine, who has shown things that needed correcting (Franklin, 2016:59). However, commentators have questioned the extent of their impact; Susan Sontag wrote that whilst photography can goad conscience, this sentimentalism allows viewers to disregard the basis of the suffering (Stallabrass, 2013:211). Renzo Martens, who filmed poverty in the Congo agrees, photographs can *“offer an initial spark, and that can be good”* but only enough to please consumers, and distracts from addressing real issues (Martens, 2010:212).

Documentary photography raises awareness to different degrees, but some goes further to benefit the communities they photograph. Sergio Larrain’s work photographing street children in Chile, *El rectangulo en el mano* (1963), was produced *“with the specific intent of raising awareness and bringing societal change”* (Franklin, 2016:66). This contrasted with many photographers of street children who weren’t photographing to change things. To secure engagement for change Larrain

provided context and direct appeals in his book such as “We only have 3 houses 49 more are needed...IT DEPENDS ON YOU” (Larrain, 1963).



Figure 1. Larraín (1963)

Intent is important. Nick Danziger's goal when photographing the disadvantaged and dispossessed is “to give voice to those who rarely feature in the media” (Widewalls, 2013). In 2005 he was commissioned to study the impact of war on women in poverty in eight countries to document progress towards the *Millennium Development Goals* set by the United Nations to eradicate poverty by 2015 (Danziger, 2021). Initially a one-off project, in 2015 he revisited those whose stories he'd previously captured, and was able to report that some have, with help, been able to improve their lives. Strong intent is crucial, as is long term commitment to projects to achieve impact for a community.

Laurel Chor is a photojournalist who turned her eye to a local issue, the protests in Hong Kong. She recognised that the movement was already visually media savvy but sought to “reach out and open dialogue with other countries with similar rights problems” (South, 2020). To facilitate this Chor wrote a story which was published in the National Geographic (Chor, 2020); her use of context, personal testimony and opinion are engaging showing that subjectivity and passion are valuable when raising awareness.

Direct giving to communities

Raising awareness of issues with focused intent, long term commitment, context, testimony, and a lack of objectivity are all vital for creating change. Benefit can also

be given to the communities by giving directly to them. Sebastiao Salgado's work on famine in Sahel Africa with the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) *Work Without Borders* was used by the NGO not just to increase understanding but also funds; proceeds of his book *Sahel: The End of the Road* (1986) went to organisation to help refugees (Ritchen, 2013:103). Mark Neville produces work that "*actively seeks to serve the community he captures*" (Neville, 2020). This began with his *Port Glasgow* Book Project photographs of a community (2005), where he gave the resulting book free to the 8000 residents. Neville ingeniously suggested the local football club distribute it, to receive the fourteen thousand pounds distribution would have cost instead.

Direct assistance can go beyond money. Photojournalist Susan Meiselas believes in giving back to communities, this may be as simple as giving prints as payment. However, when invited to photograph a woman's refuge she developed a collaborative project through workshops in creative writing, collage, photo diaries, cooking then interviews. This resulted in a book, but the process empowered women to engage, reflect, fundraise, look forward to supporting themselves, and encourages other women to use the refuge (Meiselas, 2017).

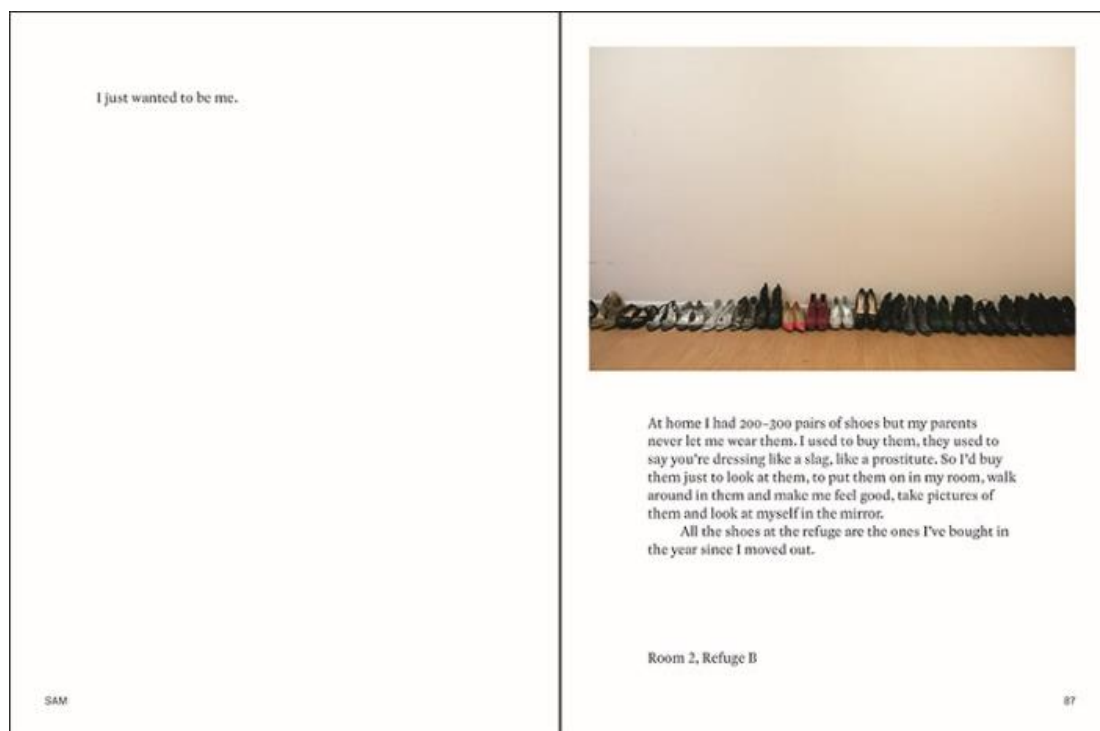


Figure 2. Meiselas (2017)

Photography collectives

Photography collectives are another excellent example of how photographers can empower and upskill members of communities to make a difference. Reuters photographer Nancy McGirr founded the *Out of the Dump* program (1991) working with Guatemalan children living and working in the city garbage dump; she urges children to raise their expectations (Ritchen, 2013:115). The program has now worked with 1000 children, helping them to develop employable skills to break the cycle of poverty. They learn basic photography, computer skills and creative writing to document their issues, and then teach others; a direct impact is that some are now working as cameramen, editors, and teachers (Fotokids, 2009).

The UK *Café Art* social gives disposable cameras, basic photography training from the Royal Photographic Society, and commissions the homeless to take photos on the theme “*My London*” (Café Art, 2017). Their work produces a calendar annually raising money for the art materials, but importantly the program empowers people affected by homelessness; proving to help them to change their lives and has stimulated similar projects worldwide. I would argue that empowerment and upskilling are more valuable long-term than direct monetary gains.

Collaboration with NGO's

Another type of collaboration, that with larger often global NGOs, has proved successful in making improvements for communities. Photojournalist Gideon Mendel who uses art and advocacy, to pursue political goals, believes that photography “*has the ability to make positive change in the world*” (Tank Magazine, 2012). His work on flooding “*Drowning World*” (2007- 2018), gives subjects a direct accusing gaze at viewers to challenge collective detachment on climate change. Whilst his art exhibited in many galleries and magazines, he also collaborated with climate activists Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion so that his work had socio-political impact (Mendel, 2021). Mendel worked with Doctors Without Borders, The Nelson Mandela Foundation and local health departments over twenty years, showing the positive side of the ARV drug program providing “*a model that others could learn from and a reason to begin or expand similar programs*” (Ritchen, 2013:136). The final chapter of this work *Through Positive Eyes* was a global collaboration giving subjects cameras to tell their stories to the reduce stigma that slows the take up of

medication. The director of communications at UNAIDS wrote to Ritchen that Mendel's work helped them to reach 8 million people who are on treatment today (Ritchen, 2013:136). Mendel reflects that the 500 copies of 13 *Framing Aids* posters "*which were widely used and distributed and was arguably one of the most effective works I've done*" (Smith, 2016). Focused and collaborative documentary photography can be empowering, additionally showing the positive side of an issue and routes to resolution intensifies its impact.



Figure 3. Mendel (c. 2000)

Photojournalist Ed Kashi describes himself as a storyteller, not an activist, recognising that to effect change he must partner with the right organisations. For his work on oil exploitation in the Niger Delta he partnered with Oxfam, Amnesty International and other NGO's and academia. Oxfam used images from his book *Curse of the Black Gold* (2008), to advocate for transparency in gas and mining industries to influence a pending bill in the USA, which was subsequently passed. He was commissioned by The Vietnam Reporting Project to report on the genetic effects of Agent Orange; this resulted in a film paid for by Ford, which compelled Congress to finance the clearing of a contaminated pond in Vietnam (viipphoto, 2020). To increase the benefits of advocacy photography, Kashi formed a non-profit company for his advocacy work so that large percentages of money raised for issues were not

wasted on taxes (Smith, 2018). This is something I would hope all photographers aiming to effect change are aware of.

Photographer Robert Knoth and reporter Antoinette de Jong documented the impact of nuclear radiation in Eastern Europe between 1999 and 2005. Collaboration with Greenpeace and UNICEF enabled the project to increase resident's awareness of the risks and speak out about future development (Gilmullin, 2005). Greenpeace reported many impacts of the work, including relocating people away from contaminated locations.



September 2001 - TATARIAN KARABOKA/RUSSIA
The village of Tatarian Karaboka was contaminated with radioactive material when the cooling system of the Mayak Chemical Nuclear complex exploded in 1957, blanketing an area of 25,000 square kilometres. Many villagers developed radiation related diseases.
© Robert Knoth/Greenpeace
GREENPEACE HANDOUT - NO ARCHIVING - NO RESALE - OK FOR ONLINE REPRO

Figure 4. Knoth (2001)

I believe that collaborating with NGOs when photographing communities, takes impact to the next level, by facilitating access to subjects, locations, audiences, and offers possibilities for extending campaigns worldwide.

Anchoring meaning

Context and text are key factors when creating results for communities with photography. Susan Meiselas includes in the ethical responsibilities of photographers “*an obligation to consider how their images are distributed and used*” (Borge, 2019:145). Many of the photographers I have already mentioned use a multi layered approach combining stills, film and other media to establish impact. For work in any of these forms to be effective, contextualising information to anchor meaning is necessary; Meiselas combines historical and social data with her photography (Marien, 2014:421). Gilles Peress, known for his frank photographic reportage on human rights transgressions and the effect of war is another who uses extensive historical chronologies to support his photography (Marien, 2014:421). Michelle Borge photographer and author states that text, captions and back stories are essential for responsibility and accountability (Borge, 2019:159). I suggest full context increases the persuasive power of images.

Targeting audiences

In my opinion this is the critical factor in producing change. New technologies, communications tools and literate audiences are opportunities for photographers seeking to maximise impacts of photographic work for communities; but they must strategize, consider their mediums to target specific audiences. Books are one way to reach an audience. Mark Neville directs his books to benefit people in the communities he photographs, asking himself “*how can they benefit from what I’m doing?*” (Neville, 2020). His *Battle Against Stigma* project (2014) concerning mental health issues in the military, was to support veterans with PTSD who had not asked for help. After four years fighting for funding and permissions, he delivered his books which included photographs, essays and testimonies to mental health charities, veteran and military mental health centres, and following a message placed in the Independent, to veterans themselves. Documenting the Eastern Ukraine where two million people have been displaced because of the war, Neville intends to distribute 2,000 copies of his book *Stop Tanks with Books* (2020) free to policy makers, parliament, and those involved with Minsk Agreements. To those who can galvanize peace talks (Campany, 2020), he feels strongly that books are hard to ignore (South, 2020).

Marcus Bleasdale who focuses on human rights abuses, uses other ways to target decision and policy makers globally, to ensure positive impact. He believes it's important to have a defined legal framework and act with human rights lawyers and advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch to work at a diplomatic level (Durbanova, 2017), and that books are just one of the platforms that can be used to make impact. Bleasdale's previous career in banking and a master's in International Relations gives him insight into the financing that drives conflicts and how to reach useful audiences (Bleasdale, 2021). He deliberately exhibited his project on the exploitation of goldminers in the Democratic Republic of Congo *The Rape of a Nation* (2009) to the financiers of Africa's Gold industry, in Geneva, to show them the effects of exploitation on people (Ritchen, 2013:105). Bleasdale is clear that a photograph is only the start of the process, saying it is what you do with it, and who you engage with it that makes it powerful, so when the images are seen viewers "*scream for change*" (Bleasdale, 2013). Danzinger's 2018 work on substance users and treatment centres was similarly exhibited for policy makers at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, where he hoped they would see the effects that treatment can have (Anyone's child.org, 2018). These strategies of insightful targeting people in influence are vital if real benefits are to be brought to communities.



Figure 5. A child gold miner in North Western Congo. Bleasdale (2004)

There are occasions when although a photographer's work initially has limited outside effect, it may later be used with an audience to strengthen its beneficial impact. This happened with the work of Ron Haviv on ethnic cleansing before the Bosnian war; the images published originally in major media had little impact but were later used to indict and convict people in war crime trials (Borge, 2019:152). Neville's work *Deeds not words* (2011) about the effects of toxic waste disposal in Corby was sent to every councillor in the country as a tool kit for them to use; the response then was poor. However, after an exhibition at The Photographers Gallery in 2013 which led to a channel 4 coverage, by 2020 the work had influenced government policy (Smith, 2017).

Conclusion

There are many ways that socially committed photographers can create change and benefit for the communities that they photograph. Some of the approaches are relatively simple such as intent and commitment, however others require sophisticated understanding that *"every image is the result of a complex interplay of circumstances that are not only photographic or iconographic, but also involve political and medial relationships"* (Ritchen, 2020a). From the approaches that I have outlined above I believe the most critical component is to strategically target audiences that have the power to make change for others. Photographers can be great advocates for change but are particularly beneficial when they choose effective partners, and smart methods and platforms to tell visual stories. Images are just the beginning for photographers who want to make local, global, social and political impact; art and advocacy can work well together when there is a strong purpose, and something greater than the photographer is at the centre of the work.

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Total word count: 2311, minus quotes of 171 words and title of 19 words = **word count 2121.**