GASLIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

ARCHIVES

Tag : Musings

Genres

The first section of the course asks us to look at genres within photography, a term that I've always disliked because of its prohibitive nature. To me it's always felt like a constraining term in the sense that you must shoot either Documentary, Landscape or Portraiture for example; much like my days at school, many years ago, when things had to be done a certain way or else it was wrong. Given that some of my teachers, in maths in particular, were very set in their ways this caused the occasional spot of friction! It's this firm categorisation that has always raised my hackles, not just in photography but in any field or social issue.

The course notes go on to describe genres as "simply a way of categorising certain areas of interest" which is less constraining but categories, almost by definition, are restrictive. In other fields such as film-making this categorisation allows the public to understand what **kind** of film it is, allowing them to make decisions before viewing it. In photography this is less important and simply creates a shorthand for discussion or, in the case of Bate's book, *Photography: The key concepts*, a traditional framework that he uses to structure the book. Here he uses the traditional genres Landscape, Portraiture, Documentary etc whereas the course notes refer to fields within these traditional genres:

- ·   Tableaux
- ·   Personal journeys
- ·   The Archive
- ·   Psychogeography
- ·   Conceptual
- ·   Genre hopping

Rather than considering them as fields the notes suggest, these terms "… *refer more to certain narrative structures … used by artists to define and position themselves more specifically …. than the more traditional terms might allow for*".

Whilst discussing environmental change and "politics of the environment" Wells (2004) further explains this as *"genres are defined not by uniformity, but by clusters of characteristic themes …revitalised through experimentation and new issues".*

Combining these two viewpoints together creates a much more flexible, realistic view of genres within photography, simply allowing the discussion of new themes arising from the changing photographic landscape but also creating the opportunity for alternative ways of looking at one's own work.

In my particular case I mentioned my plans for my Body of Work portfolio, looking at the "*Tourism Space*" (Kowalczyk, 2014) of Windsor Great Park. Traditionally it could be argued that the images, or at least the initial and imagined images, fell into the Landscape genre with a touch of Documentary. More realistically they could be discussed as a personal journey or psychogeography or even a new genre "Analytic" based around the analysis required to create the concept in the first place.

In fact looking at genres in this way rather than the traditional, prescriptive method used in film-making actually *enables* rather than *inhibits* the discovery required during the early stages of defining a portfolio.

The course notes for this section suggest that that we might like to use them to think about the different branches of photography and how we might like our work to sit in relation to them. Alternatively they suggest that we might be drawn to one and repulsed by another. In fact I think that this is totally the wrong way to look at them. By all means look at the different genres to get ideas, meander through the categories, imagine your work being defined by them but by categorising your work *before* completing your portfolio immediately suggests a lack of imagination, a self-imposed constraint. Surely it's better to have knowledge of the genres being discussed, of the type of work described by each and then go off and produce, only in the latter stages identifying with a genre ?

The course notes ask us to look at some of the genres in more detail so I'll go on to do that in further posts.

Gaz

References

Bate, D. (2008) *Photography: The key concepts*, New York: Berg Publishers.
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BODY OF WORK / **OCA**   12:35 , JULY 9, 2016   0

PHOTOGRAPHY BLOGS

Beginning Body of Work

So here I am, after a slow meander through the OCA Photography path I've now arrived at the level 3 module, *Body of Work*. In many ways this is the culmination of the whole pathway, creating a single body of work to showcase my "talents" or, failing that, showcasing everything that I've learnt in the earlier modules. I've skimmed the notes a couple of times, just to get a feel for what's needed and I think that I'm going to enjoy this. The iterative way of working, building on ideas is very much how I worked on those early assignments that interested me the most so I can empathise with the course already. I just need to translate that way of working into a longer, more in-depth and wide-ranging (if that's not an oxymoron) area or theme.

One thing that's clear from the course notes is that there's no requirement to decide on a theme at this early stage. In fact the implication is that would be totally wrong, far better to allow the theme to develop naturally. Again this approach suits me well since I have both no idea of which way to go and, at the same time, too many ideas. The early part of the module looks at genres and investigates some

USEFUL SITES

META

examples , not of traditional genres such as Landscape, Documentary etc but more of narrative structures that have been adopted by photographers to define their work e.g. tableaux, psychogeography or conceptual.

Again, this works well for me since my only concern with the course is the need to focus on one genre when I've enjoyed so many through the other modules. Thinking about the end product in this way removes that concern, especially when the section ends with the concept of "genre hopping".

> *"Please don't feel restricted to one genre or style. As you can see from the genres touched upon above, the approaches are multi-layered and the boundaries become very blurred. Documentary may veer into tableaux and conceptual photography may merge with the archive, for example. These outlines are meant to trigger inspiration and you're free to pick and choose from whatever style you are drawn to. The most important thing is to use the style that best suits the work."*

Again, this sounds like fun.

To get started I went through some portfolios from earlier modules, just to clarify in my own mind what it was about these portfolios that had piqued my interest. These are under "portfolios" above and aren't necessarily those portfolios that I felt were my best, just those that most interested me. The only common theme was that they all tried to tell a story, usually of a place, which I guess is what a portfolio is really all about.

In addition, the critical review from the documentary module interested me. There I wrote about the effect of culture on photojournalism and I'd like to develop some of the ideas from that essay , primarily around semiotics, in this body of work.

Overall that sounds like a suitably vague place to start and see where this takes me.

Gaz

BODY OF WORK / **OCA**   **12:10 , AUGUST 14, 2015   0**
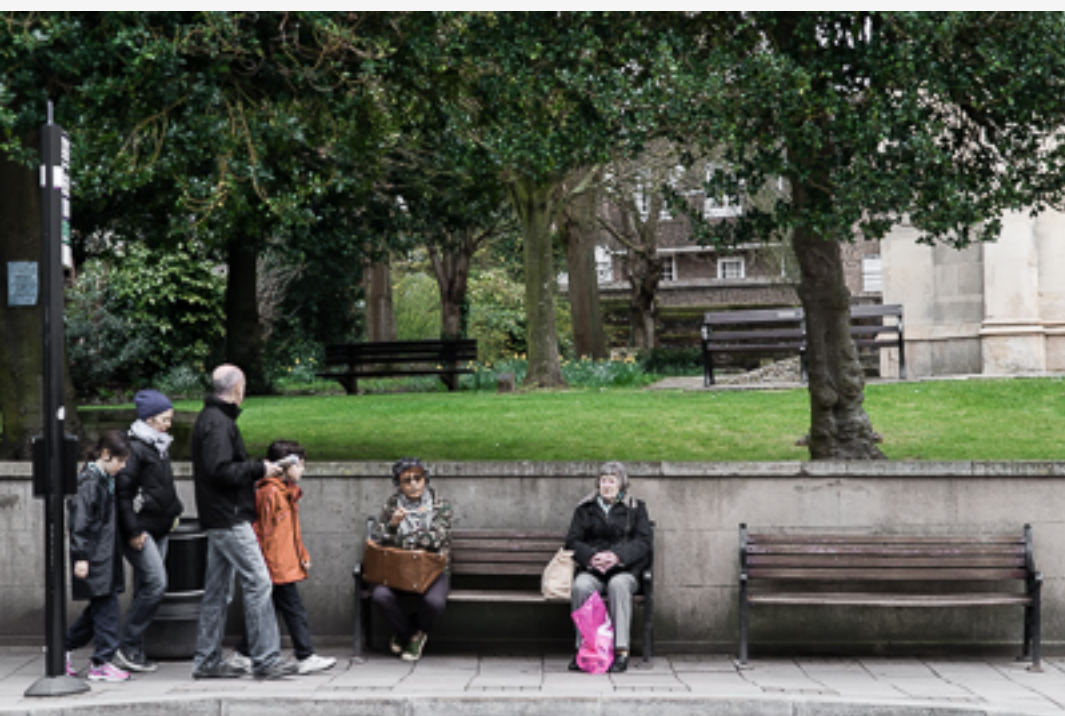
Section 6 : Rework – General Presentation

In many ways I found this section to be the most interesting part of the module since it involved going back over the first five assignments and re-evaluating them, both from the perspective of my tutor's comments but also, more interestingly, from my revised perspective. This revised perspective is what convinces me that I have actually learnt something from this module.

Probably the most important "lesson" that I've learnt is to maintain my focus throughout any body of work, not to lose track of my objective. I found that in some of the assignments I'd set of with one idea and this would develop as I produced the portfolio. Of course there's nothing wrong with this approach, in fact I'd say that it was essential. What I did do wrong was that the final portfolio might contain elements of both my starting concept and my final, revised concept with any number of diluted elements in between.

Presentation for the assessment is something else that I obviously need to focus on at this stage. Originally I was going to print all of the assignments on the same paper at the same size (A3) but, on

reflection that's not the way that I'll do it. I'll use Permajet A3 for all of the assignments but each will be printed slightly differently to suit the portfolio.

Assignment 1 works well with Permajet's Fibre Base Royal with a 3cm border. The border gives a good sense of isolation for handling and inspection whilst the semi-gloss brings out the detail.

Assignment 2's images are square but again work well with the same paper but the square format lent itself to a slightly larger print (in height) but with larger side borders. Again the slight gloss finish enhances the detail and gives a good contrast with the shadow that is in all of the images.

In many ways I prefer my portfolio for Assignment 5 to the others and, as such, the automatic reaction would be to print it larger for the assessment to bring attention to it. Instead I found that printing it slightly smaller on Permajet's Fibre Base Gloss enhanced the concept of isolation or abandonment, focussing concentration on the image. The gloss finish, not being over the top, also helped to make the image stand out from the wide borders.
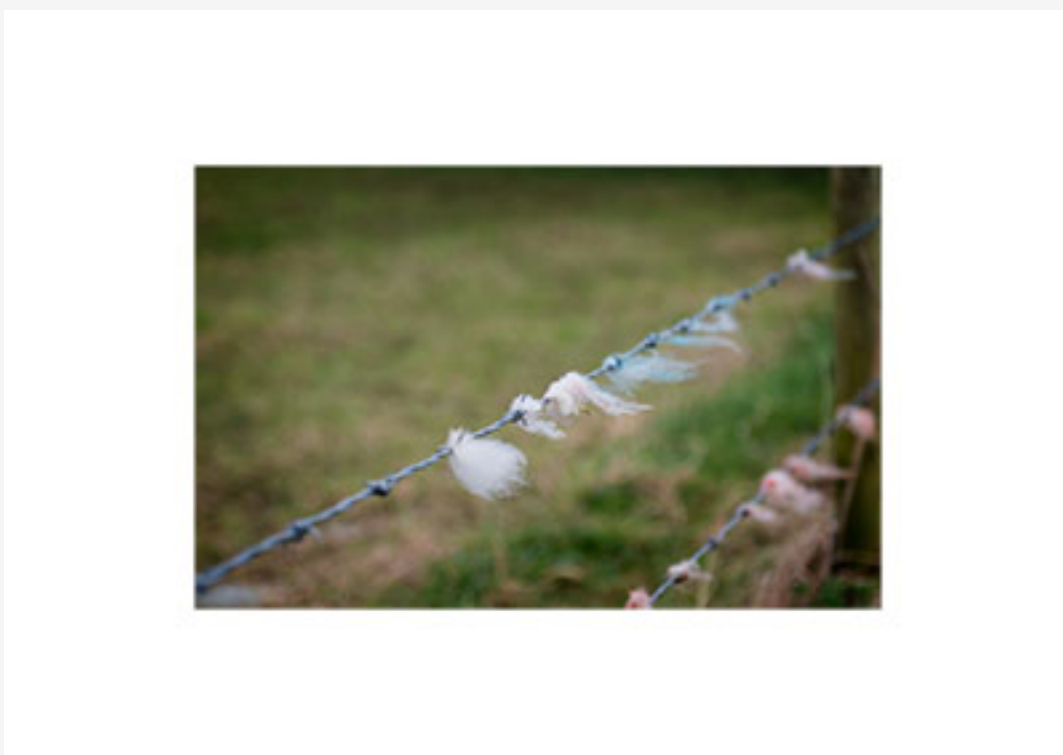
For this assignment I've only printed 15 images as required my the course. The complete portfolio has been included within a photobook which I'll include with the submission. This was the first photobook that I've produced where the blank space, both margins and complete pages, seemed to be as important as the images themselves.

The Assignment that caused me the greatest problem with presentation was Assignment 3. As I described in the earlier posts I originally felt that the presentation worked best in black and white which gave a consistency to the portfolio. Having experimented with numerous formats, both monochrome and colour I reverted to colour which was probably a good thing given that the course asked for it to be in colour !

For assessment the images would be printed on A3 to maintain consistency across the assignments but the size of the individual images took a lot of experimentation to achieve the impact that I wanted. The balancing act between the size of the images being small enough to become part of the tableau rather than an individual image against being large enough so that they could be inspected was one issue which then had to be balanced against the overall size of the tableau within the A3 print ! Doing it on cheap paper only took it so far and a lot of paper was wasted trying to get the correct balance shown by the example here !
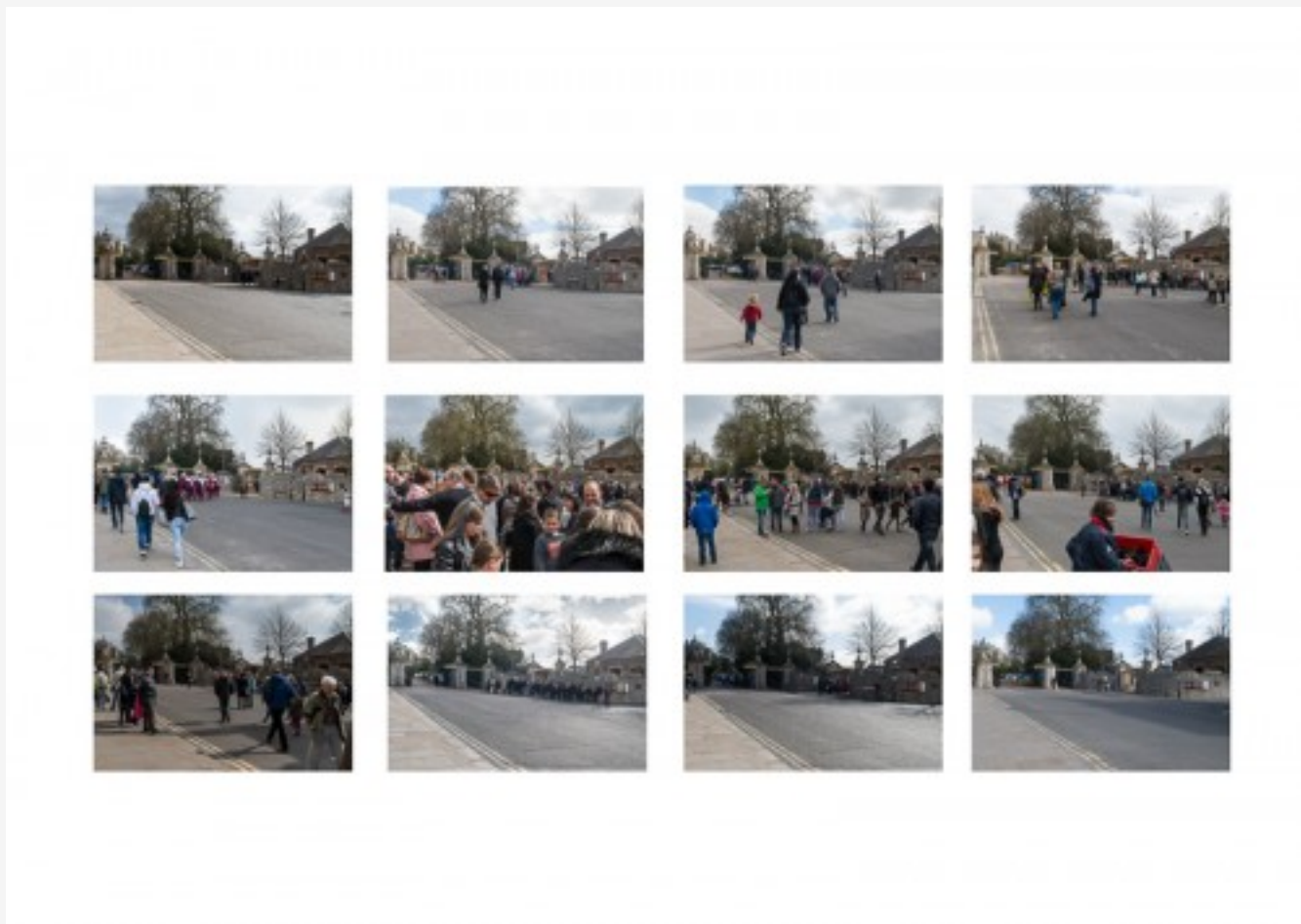
Now to pack it all up to be couriered to the OCA for assessment !

Research : Documents of conflict and suffering – continued

After posting the last entry on "*Research : Documents of conflict and suffering*" the August edition of BJP arrived. In the special issue to mark the anniversary of WWI a number of articles present an alternative view of war photography. Melanie Friend took an interesting view of the seemingly innocuous air show, public events where the RAF and others display the skills of their pilots. Although a holiday event in the UK, a typical destination for a bank holiday weekend, it does show how we Brits take militarisation for granted.

In her images Friend shows the reactions of the families ranging from oblivious to enthralled, from bored to rapt. Her images vividly depict the contradiction between that family acceptance and the horrors faced by families underneath an aerial bombardment.

Interestingly there's an historical aspect to many of the displays with a number of historic or obsolete aircraft used in some performances alongside the modern craft. As Friend points out, we're currently in a transition phase with drones now

having a major impact on how wars are fought. In just a few years all of the aircraft at these shows might well be historic, relics of a bygone era before the "*advancement*" of war.

In the same BJP issue, in total contrast to Friend's subtle imagery, is Christoph Bangert's explicit imagery of war. These are images that Bangert himself has, in the past, self-censored or editors have deemed too gruesome for publication. Now he has published them in a a new book, *War Porn*, published by Kehrer Verlag. The title is a deliberate acknowledgement of those who accuse him of voyeurism, possibly of provocation or of an acknowledgement of the fine dividing line, but as he says [3] "*You can call this work whatever you want …. but you have to look at it*".

In the same article Bangert explains his reasons for publication. Firstly, he felt that he was failing as a photographer by taking photographs but not showing them. More importantly in the context of this article he wanted "*to start a conversation about how we frame images of horrific events*", much as Sontag did in *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

Bangert again mirrors Sontag when he suggests [3] "*How can we even begin to think of preventing [wars], if we can't even truly look at them*" echoing her views [4] "*To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell … it seems a good idea to acknowledge …. how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is the world….Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists …. has not reached moral or psychological adulthood*".

In his book Bangert has taken an interesting approach, some of the folios have sealed edges, to be opened with a knife. The reader naturally expects some of the worst images to be protected from casual viewing in this manner. However, some of these hidden images are innocent such as the close-up of a plate of food. The remains are of a lavish lunch betweens representatives of various parties in the Iraqi conflict, demonstrating again the importance of context and that we can be fooled by our eyes and imagination.

Friend and Banghert are joined in the BJP issue by a number of other "alternative" portfolios and essays. Emine Gozde Sevim's work, *Embed in Egypt*, captures the disconnect between everyday life continuing around the corner from historic events. Kiril Golovchenko focusses on the barricades shielding Ukrainian demonstrators form the authoritarian forces. These approaches offer an interesting insight to different aspects of conflict but all are affected by Tim Hetherington's "*feedback loop*". He coined the phrase after some of his images were inadvertently used out of context by *Vanity Fair,* suggesting that servicemen echo fictional depictions of war and vice versa. His collaborator, Sebastian Junger, explained

"*You had this idea that young men in combat act in ways that emulate images they've seen – movies, photographs – of other men in other wars, other battles. You had the idea of a feedback loop between the images and the world of men that reinforced and altered itself as one war inevitably replaced another in the long tragic grind of human affairs.*"

This concept of a feedback loop acts as a counterbalance to the views of Sontag and Banghert above when they say people need to be aware of these events.It's possibly a stupid thought but just how many demonstrators have consciously or subconsciously imitated Susan Meiselas' Sandanista image (*above*) via such a feedback loop ?

Gaz

References

1. Friend, M., Home Front, 2009-2012, Available online at http://www.melaniefriend.com/thehomefront/

2. Bangert, C., available online at http://www.christophbangert.com/index.htm

3. Bangert, C., "*Invisible War*", British Journal of Photography, august 2014:62-64. print.

4. Sontag, S., 2004, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, St Ives, England

Ex 21 : Surrealism and Documentary (continued)

The 19th century poet, Comte de Lautréamont, famously described a young boy as [1] "*beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table*" . Nearly sixty years later, André Breton, one of the founders of Surrealism, published the text of Lautréamont's *Poésies* in April and May 1919 in two sequential editions of the magazine *Literature* ensuring that Lautréamont became acknowledged as one of the greats of Surrealism. Around this time Breton was credited with taking Lautréamont quote and defining surrealist art as "*the juxtaposition of two more or less disparate realities.The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is remote and true, the stronger the image – the greater its emotive power and poetic reality* " though the original quote is from Pierre Reverdy as Breton acknowledges [2].

Of particular interest to this section of the course is Man Ray's *L'énigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse), created in 1920.This work consists of a sewing machine, wrapped in a blanket and tied with string and was inspired by Lautréamont's quote: the title referencing Lautréamont's real name, Isidore Ducasse. Ray took the surrealist interpretation of Lautréamont's quote (umbrella – male, sewing machine – female, dissecting table = bed) and replaced it with mystery or an enigma.

This was typical of Ray's work in crossing boundaries but it was his alchemical work in the darkroom that, for me at least, has left the greatest impression.

He used juxtaposition as quoted by Breton in a number of images, possibly the most famous being *Noire et Blanche*. Here, Alice Prin, Man Ray's mistress who was better known as Kiki of Montparnasse, rests her head on the table with her eyes closed. Next to her Ray placed an African Baule mask from the Ivory Coast. There are a number of juxtapositions in the image from black/white, vertical, horizontal, animate/inanimate, eyes closed/eyes open etc but the overriding message of the image relates to the sexual and racial mores of the time . This image is only one of a set of over twenty images in the set Noire et Blanche though it is probably the most famous having been used in Vogue

magazine. Interestingly Ray explored the racial and sexual issues by creating tonal negatives of some of the set including this image. These negatives would directly attack the preconceptions of race and beauty that the original images engendered.

Possibly Ray's most famous photograph was *Le Violon d'Ingres*, the back view of a woman in a turban with two "clefs" added to her back creating the impression of a cello. These images are one of the reasons why I dispute the need for humour in surrealist photography. The humour in the last two images is debatable (or is just me) but the surrealism of the images is undoubted. Similarly it can't be said that *Noire et Blanche* doesn't have a place in documentary given it's statement on the mores of the time, especially with Ray's tonal negative versions.

As a side note, one of Ray's most successful images *Tears* (1932) contains glass beads pasted onto the face of the model to simulate exaggerated tears. The Getty Museum [4] claims that it's a mannequin but everywhere else claims that it's a real person – who's right ?

Finally it wouldn't be right to leave this blog entry without a mention of Ray's Rayograms. Made without a camera these images were mad by placing objects directly onto photographic paper under the enlarger and exposing them. Feathers, springs, whatever took Ray's fancy were captured in semi-abstract compositions, allowing Ray's surrealistic tendencies to flourish. It's interesting to compare some of these Rayograms with the x-ray work of Nick Veasey [4] or Hugh Turvey [5], the structure and content are very similar as are the artistic intentions – it's just the technology is 80 years apart.

Gaz

References

1. Poésies, comte de Lautréamont, Online at http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16989, Accessed July 2014

2. A Breton, First Manifesto of Surrealism, 1924. Online at http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Manifesto.htm. Accessed July 2014

3. Getty Museum, Man Ray, Online at http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=44253 Accessed July 2014

4. Nick Veasey, http://www.nickveasey.com/#/machines-vespa/4570763102

5. Gustoimages, Hugh Turvey, http://www.xrayartist.com/

DOCUMENTARY / MUSINGS / OCA / RESEARCH   14:27 , JULY 24, 2014   0

Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance

Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance, was something that I'd heard about but had never watched until an American friend mentioned it recently.   Having watched it I felt that it touched upon a number of subjects relevant to this section of the course even if it is produced as a film. Much of the film consists of very small clips, almost photographic in their intent, and the remainder is built around time-lapse photography. There's no dialogue at all so the issue of context as covered in the early part of the course becomes relevant. Here the only context is the position of the frame within the overall sequence of the film, the title and the three Hopi quotes at the end of the film (*see below*). As a documentary it's further complicated by the film's director, GodfreyReggio, who himself said [3]

"*Koyaanisqatsi is not so much about something, nor does it have a specific meaning or value. Koyaanisqatsi is, after all, an animated object, an object in moving time, the meaning of which is up to the viewer. Art has no intrinsic meaning. This is its power, its mystery, and hence, its attraction. Art is*

free. It stimulates the viewer to insert their own meaning, their own value".

In the past some people have taken this to be a failing of Reggio's work, "*camera work in search of a subject*" was one quote that I found, but Reggio's quote seems slightly disingenuous as the same meaning seems to have been perceived by most viewers. Reminiscent of Edward Burtynsky's work, Oil [2] it shows the devastating impact of man's presence in the environment. Furthermore three Hopi prophecies are sung by a choral ensemble during the latter part are translated just prior to the end credits:

- "If we dig precious things from the land, we will invite disaster."
- "Near the day of Purification, there will be cobwebs spun back and forth in the sky."
- "A container of ashes might one day be thrown from the sky, which could burn the land and boil the oceans."

The final part of the context comes from Philip Glass' score which is a good example of minimalist composition. This minimalism complements the simplicity of Ron Fricke's cinematography, agian focussing the viewer on a single message contrary to Reggio's assertion.

Another point that is relevant to this section of the course is the surrealist element. I'm never totally sure how to define Surrealism in the context of photography – the course notes suggest that "*Humour is an essential quality of the surreal image.*" but I've never felt that this was necessary. I much prefer the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) definition of surrealistic photography [4] as "*The use of procedures such as double exposure, combination printing, montage and solarisation dramatically evoking the union of dream and reality*" . It's that union of dream and reality that strikes me as a better definition of surrealism in photography and, indeed, in Koyaanisqatsi since the latter certainly invokes a dream-like experience.

The inclusion of reality in that definition also fits with Abigail Solomon-Godeau's views in her essay [1, p169-183], *Who is speaking thus?*, where she discusses the definition of documentary photography and asks "*Is documentary to be narrowly defined as as an investigative or didactic enterprise or broadly defined to include all nonaesthetic and informational uses?*". She suggests that this question and others converge around the problem of reality arguing that realism needs to be "*factored into the photographic field*".

So, from MoMA and Solomon-Godeau I'll say that Koyaanisqatsi is an example of surrealist documentary {note 1} but it also just tells an environmental story, something that I'm looking at for the next assignment.

Overall I found the film to be useful for many aspects of the coursework, surrealism, documentary, story-telling etc as well as the fcat that I just enjoyed watching the film !

Gaz

Note

1 I hadn't come across the phrase "surrealist documentary" before so went searching to see if it was a valid term. A number of hits come up including "F" for Fake, Orson Welles. 1974 film. Panned at it's original release this film seem to have gained recognition over the years but to me the interesting aspect of it is its investigation of the validity of authenticity – something that I want to look at later in this course.

References

1. Solomon-Godeau, Abigail (2003). *Photography at the Dock*. Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 4th ed, 2009

2. Edward Buttynsky : Oil Online at
http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/Oil.html Accessed July 2014

3. Koyaanisqatsi Online at http://www.koyaanisqatsi.org/aboutus/godfrey.php . Accessed July 2014

4. Museum of Modern Art. Online at http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phsr/hd_phsr.htm . Accessed July 2014

Ex 10 : Research (continued)

Dorothea Lange (May 26, 1895 – October 11, 1965)

The natural successor to Ulmann in this post has to Lange who, like Ulmann,studied at the Clarence H White School of Modern Photography. More pertinently she also started out as a portrait photographer in the same way as Ulmann and carried this through into her early work documenting the terrible effect that the Great Depression had on the people. Her image, White Angel Breadline, San Francisco, 1933 is typical of her work from this period; using her experience as a portraitist to capture the hopelessness and despair. This period is, to me, Lange's strongest – capturing so much of the atmosphere at the time. Despite this she is obviously more well know for her work for the Resettlement Administration (to become the FSA) again following in Ulmann's footsteps.

Interestingly given the discussions on truthfulness throughout this course her Migrant Mother image from her FSA work was retouched to remove Florence Thomson's thumb from the tent post and would therefore be disqualified from most reportage competitions now. More importantly Lange showed some of the images from the Migrant Mother sequence to her editor back in San Francisco who informed the authorities about the conditions at the camp. As a result aid was sent to the camps to alleviate the conditions – whether this was just to avoid the publicity, who knows – it worked.

In 1942 people of Japanese origin or descent were rounded up in the aftermath of Pearl Harbour and interned. Lange used her portrait expertise to record their experiences and some of these images have been held as examples of judgement without trial. Not surprisingly many of these images were confiscated by the Army.

Pinned to Lange's study door was a quote from Francis Bacon "*The contemplation of things as they are, without error or confusion, without substitution or imposture, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of inventio*n." The image of the Migrant Mother, irrespective of the retouching, is a case in point. Lange has done nothing except capture Thomson as she is and allowed that to tell the story.

Walker Evans (November 3, 1903 – April 10, 1975)

Not surprisingly the next photographer in this brief research list has to be Walker Evans who also worked for FSA. In many ways his work there complemented Lange's (Fisher, p131) "*Where Evans was thought of as the guarantor of honest observation, with his flat-lit frontal shots, Lange was lauded as the keeper of documentary's compassion*". Admittedly Fisher was emphasising Lange's role from a

feminist viewpoint but the comparison is valid. For the FSA Evans chose a variety of subjects, many of them complex.

The barber shop interior is a stark but complex image, packed with the detail of daily life at the time contrasting with the portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs which became almost as much a symbol of the Depression as Lange's *Migrant Mother*. In both images he exhibits the realism that Fisher noted but also the "tender cruelty" that Lincoln Kirstein noted in his work.

Incidentally, this quote lent itself to the title of the first exhibition at the Tate to be dedicated wholly to photography – "*Cruel and Tender*". This exhibition in 2003 included work by Evans as well as Sander, Eggleston, Gursky and others.

As he was finishing with the FSA Evans started a project to surreptitiously photograph people on New York's subway system. These images were to be published much later (in 1966) as "*Many are Called*". The candid nature of the images combined with the surreptitious method (Walker had the camera under his coat and the lens poking through between the buttons) means that technically many of the images are not of the highest quality but make up for this in the way they take the everyday and ordinary but elevate them into a something extraordinary. The rawness and candid nature of the images influenced a new generation of documentary photographs just as his "*American Photographs*" of 1938 had done at the time.

Gaz

References

Fisher, Andrea (1987) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women*, Lonfon, Pandora

Ex 10 : Research

Not really an exercise but the notes ask that we research "*socially committed B&W photographers discussed so far*" so ...

Jacob August Riis (May 3, 1849 – May 26, 1914)

It seems sensible to start this with a look at Riis, the earliest of the photographers suggested in the notes but this is made more difficult by the number of subjective comments and views to be found about him. Many have criticised his motives suggesting that he was driven by middle-class sensibilities rather than a sympathy for his subjects. It's also been suggested that his subjects lived as they did through choice; to save money for relatives to travel to the States and join them. Similarly the aesthetic quality of his photography has been criticised when compared to later photographers such as Hine (see below). Despite this his work as a social documentarian and reformist have

Lodgers in a Crowded Tenement

been universally acknowledged. His gritty images of real life situations show the over-crowded and often filthy environments of the immigrant workers with no attempt at sympathy or "art". His messages of hope reside in any accompanying text rather than the images themselves and he was one of the very first adopters of flash to get these images. This rudimentary flash photography only served to emphasise the grittiness of the environment. Rosler (p304) describes how he came upon the idea of using it to obtain the images that he needed to accompany his writings on the subject.

"We used to go in the small hours of the morning to the worst tenements... and the sights I saw there gripped my heart until I felt that I must tell of them, or burst, or turn anarchist, or something... I wrote, but it seemed to make no impression. One morning, scanning my newspaper at the breakfast table, I put it down with an outcry that startled my wife, sitting opposite. There it was, the thing I had been looking for all these years. A four-line dispatch from somewhere in Germany, if I remember right, had it all. A way had been discovered, it ran, to take pictures by flashlight. The darkest corner might be photographed that way."

Theodore Roosevelt befriended Riis during the former's presidency of the Board of Commissioners of the NYPD and this friendship continued when he became President enabling Riis to influence Roosevelt's social reform policies.

Overall Riis simply viewed his photographers as evidence to back up his writings, his strengths and legacy lying more in his overall reform work rather than in the quality of his images.

Lewis Wickes Hine (September 26, 1874 – November 3, 1940)

By contrast, Hine, who started taking images at the beginning of the 20th century used his images of similar subjects to impart hope. Trained as a sociologist he started as a teacher and quickly realised that he could use photography as part of his teaching method. In particular he took his classes to Ellis Island where he came to realise that his photographs would have more impact than the hand drawn sketches that accompanied newspaper articles at the time.

Later he treated the city's labour force in the same way as he'd treated immigrants. Commissioned to document the construction of the Empire State Building his classic photographs of the perilous roles of the workers are now famous though the image with which he would appear to be most associated, *Lunch atop a Skyscraper*, is both staged and, almost certainly, not Hine's.

Either side of his Empire State work he photographed for the American Red Cross, both in Europe and in the Deep South but eventually became poverty stricken as he lost government and corporate sponsorship. Despite the success of his reforming work hew people were interested in actually paying for it. His work had become unfashionable and Jeffrey (p162) suggests *"Hine had reshaped his art in terms of the mechanistic aesthetic .. By 1930 this aesthetic, and everything it stood for .... were suspect"*.

Despite their very different backgrounds and methods Riis and Hine are often grouped together through their status as early pioneers of photography as a social reform tool but Hine is regarded as the more genuine photographer. Rosler (p334) is blunt in this regard

"*In quoting Jacob Riis, I am not intending to elevate him above other documentarians (particularly not above Lewis Hine, whose straightforward involvement with the struggles for decent working hours, pay, and protections, as well as for decent housing, schooling, and social dignity, for the people whom he photographed and the social service agencies intending to represent them, and whose dedication to photography as the medium with which he could best serve those interests, was incomparably greater that Riis's, to whom photography, and probably those whom he photographed, were at best an adjunct to, and a moment in, a journalistic career*"

This attitude always seems unfair to me and I'm curious as to how Riis would have been regarded as a photographer if he had access to the same equipment as Hine

Doris Ulmann (May 29, 1882 – August 28, 1934)

Mr & Mrs Newt Mann of Holston

Jeffrey (p162) continues the above quote "*The result was a shift to a form of pastoral documentary in the thirties and the first major photographer in the new mode was Doris Ulmann*".

Ulmann was a wealthy New York portraitist with subjects such as Yeats, Robeson, Pavlova among her subjects but two books used her images from the South, Peterkin's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and Eaton's *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*. Although not a social reformer like Riis and Hine, Ulmann's work eulogises the rural life of the area, emphasising the real-life nature of the area compared to the "half-born men" of society at large. Her images seem to set the scene for Dorothea Lange's work for the Resettlement Administration that was to come.

Interestingly Ulmann was educated at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School as was Lewis Hine. Also, she was further educated at Clarence H White School of Modern Photography where Dorothea Lange studied.

More to follow on this in the next post

Gaz

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DOCUMENTARY / **OCA** / **RESEARCH**   **13:25 , NOVEMBER 3, 2013   0**

A Brief History of Documentary Photography

Given photography's ability to "record" it's unsurprising that documentary photography arrived early in the history of the subject even if the term "documentary" was first used by John Grierson in 1926. Well before that, in 1851, the Mission Héliographiques, five photographers selected by Commission des Monuments Historiques were dispatched to all corners of France to to aid the Paris-based commission in determining the nature and urgency of the preservation and restoration of work required at historic sites throughout France.

Shortly after that Roger Fenton, a student of the painter Paul Delaroche and now Vice-Chairman of the Photographic Society of London, was one of the first to make the distinction between reportage and High Art, predating Sekula's comment (see Ex 1 : What is Documentary Photography) by 120 years. Fenton (Jeffrey, 1981) was extolling the virtues of *English Views*, an 1857 series of country scenes, characters and occupations by Paul Grundy against the "High Art" of Oscar Rejlander.

Fenton had already practiced some of this approach by photographing the Crimean War, probably making him the first war photographer, a role Felice Beato replayed during the Opium Wars a few years later.

 John Thomson took this a step further in the 1860s when he produced some of the earliest images of the newly discovered Angkor Wat in Cambodia. It's interesting to compare Thomson's
images such as the one reproduced here with the work of John McDermott whose images can be seen online here. More importantly for this brief history was the work that he went on to produce, *Illustrations of China and its People*, which was probably the first photographic attempt to document an entire culture, an exercise repeated by Edward S. Curtis who, in 1896, began a survey of Indian Life in North America.

The 1930s saw the Farm Security Administration funded a number of luminaries to record the plight of farmers during the Depression. These photographers, including Walter Evans, Ben Shahn, Dorothea Lange and others produced "*the most important example of a state-funded documentary project in the world*" (Wells p97) and included iconic works such as Lange's *Migrant Mother*.

Cartier-Bresson took documentary in a different direction with his works such as A Decisive Moment. Whilst much of the book covers much of the world outside France: India, America, Indonesia, it's probably his image from 1932 in which a leaping man is caught just before touching the water that has almost become synonymous with the phrase. Whereas documentary is generally a long term project his work, probably better called photo-journalism, can consist of a single image. These single images or glimpses capture the French Society of the time better than anybody except, possibly, Robert Doisneau.

Doisneau was central to an interesting episode in documentary photography (Barrett, pp 109-111). His image, *At the Café, Chez Fraysse, Rue de Seine, Paris. 1958*, was taken with the consent of the subjects and published depicting cafe life. It was later used, without the consent of Doisneau or the subjects, to publicise the dangers of drink by a temperance society and later in an article on prostitution again without consent. The man in the image sued the publications, the agency and the photographer. The first two were found guilty but Doisneau was acquitted since the misappropriation was done without his consent and knowledge. This comes back to the issue of veracity in documentary photography as covered earlier in this blog.

Whereas most of the documentary photography of the earlier years was non-judgmental, or at least purported to be so, in the 1970s it became more political with many such as Allan Sekula using the medium to publicise their sociological beliefs. Sekula (cited in Barrett, p 191) criticises photographic postmodernism as *"a cynical and self-referential mannerism …..a chic vanguardism by artists who suffer from a very real isolation from larger social issues"*. This emphasis on social issues became a focal point of works such as Fred Lonidier's, *Health and Safety Game* (Frieze Magazine).

The environment now seems to have overtaken socio-political issues as a focus for documentary work with Burtynsky's *Oil* being a prime example together with *Vanishing Landscapes* edited by Nadine Barth which brings together many environmental strands including work by Burtynsky again.

Many of the elements listed above will be covered in greater detail as the course progresses so I'll draw a line on this brief history and continue in further articles.

Gaz

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Assignment 1: Local Communities

The aim of this assignment is to "*produce a small photo essay of 10 images that demonstrates your engagement with the lives, experiences and histories of your local community and its people*".

In addition "*you're encouraged to be a participant-observer in the situations and activities that you photograph. By limiting your field of action to your immediate surroundings, you'll develop the ability to find the extraordinary in the ordinary – the things that may go unnoticed when you're familiar with a place*".

The concept of community becomes an issue here since the area in which I live has little sense of community except across the whole town. The communities that most people of the town refer to are those of social interfaces as described in Lee and Newby 1983. As they say (p47) "*Community , in other words, is becoming dissociated from locality*". Since that's the idea of "community" that I share it's not much use for this brief. Luckily there's another view of community that coincides with place or locality. The problem with this concept is that there's no real sense of interaction which, for a documentary exercise, leads to a pretty bland portfolio !

However, this community of locals is in a small minority for most of the year as the town, Windsor, is home to about 7 million tourists a year and these could be considered to be forming a much larger, potentially swamping, community. I thought that it would be interesting to look at the interactions of these two communities especially since I would be building the portfolio with a marked interest in one of the communities as opposed to the other. This would force a more reflexive approach as I analysed my images which would seem to be a key objective of the module; i.e. showing awareness of my own perception of the scenes and situations that I photograph.

Having adopted that approach as a starter for the assignment I thought that I'd better do some research and soon found a whole raft of references to this issue of local communities interacting with tourists to the extent it seemed to have a standard name "host-tourist interaction" Just searching for that exact phrase in Google gets around 50,000 page hits if you include the mirror (t-h interaction) – so much for original thought on my part !!

A plus point for it being an original idea is that all of the references that I could find relate to interactions where there is a large discrepancy between the two communities whether it be geography, wealth, culture or all three. In the case of Windsor it's very different with the town generally being considered to be as affluent and cultural as the home of the tourist which led to very different interactions compared to, for example, the t-h interactions in Ladakh as described in Gillespie (2006). Interestingly Gillespie is concentrating on the photographer relationship which is relevant to this assignment. In particular he refers to the way in which tourists criticise other tourists for taking photographs of the local community because it's "degrading" but do so themselves if they can do it unobtrusively …. or at least they believe that it's unobtrusive. An event that he refers to early in the paper (pp 3-7) shows a Ladakhi woman turning the tables on an obtrusive photographer by photographing him repeatedly. Whilst in no way implying that the tourists in Windsor are obtrusive (at least not until a group of 20 take it in turns to stand in the middle of the road to take a photograph :-)) in the same way I thought that it would be interesting to perform a similar act and photograph the tourists interacting with the local "community".

Something like this is going to take a number of forays to amass enough material so it's going to be a case of continually wandering along to see what I can find, looking for interactions (or not) that I hadn't noticed before. Some of the interactions are the exact opposite, i.e. non-interactions or avoidance, as the local hurries past the leisurely tourist but others are more overt, probably through

mutual gain. I've used a couple already as featured images on earlier posts and I'll continue doing that but I'll create a new blog entry to relate any progress rather than lengthen this one any further.

At the moment I'm looking to do the portfolio in black and white, not because that seems to be the norm (or cliché) for such images but because it seems to concentrate the view on the interaction rather than the overall scene.

Anyway, that's enough for now. To be continued ....

Gaz

 <Continued>

The brief for the assignment suggests reading "The Photographic Brief" (Short, pp.20–26) and it's very useful. I don't think that it comes out with anything new or radical but it does clarify the way that I work on these assignments. Some of the items mentioned, particularly with regard to a student brief are

- Identify the key points to be addressed
- Clarify my learning aims
- Practice verbalising ideas which helps organise my thoughts

In addition Short suggest that responding to such a brief is an iterative process. Start with an idea however minimal, get a result, look at the result. At that point there might be a glimmer which goes of on a tangent or departs radically from the original intent and leads elsewhere. This approach could almost be regarded as auto-brainstorming with one idea leading to another through experimentation and linkages.

The example images above and in the earlier posts are still valid in that they demonstrate the clash of cultures between the hosts and the tourists with me projecting myself in the role of the host subject of the images. The exercise is helping me to see interactions that I would never have noticed earlier – invaluable in a documentary course – but I've got the feeling that it's too safe or mainstream, too easy in other words.

  I've already suggested that the community around here is based around social interfaces which might be a possibility for something different. Alternatively I was looking at the work of Alan Bennett (SPR) who's approach to a similar brief was to photograph objects thrown into a garden by passers-by. His work "seeks to investigate the idiom that one man's trash is another man's treasure. It explores notions of possession while examining the beauty in the discarded". His images could also represent the limit of my interaction with the local community so images such as these might have a place.

Anyway, off to take some more host-tourist images while I think on this.

Gaz

For the sake of brevity I've continued this entry at Assignment 1: Local Communities (continued)

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