

The Lens as a Witness: Photography as Advocacy in the Struggle for Human Rights

Abstract

This paper is a discussion of photography as a preventative and alleviating approach to human rights abuse by portraying during and post conflict issues. The politics of representation, (including responsibilities, risks, the effect of distance, proper and fair representation, and what a photo can actually convey) along with the relationship between awareness and change on the ground will be discussed. What context should photographs be shown in to maximize effectiveness? What is the relationship between photographer and subject? Viewer and subject? Many references to Darfur will be used as examples, as it has been given a relatively good amount of media coverage (at least to one who is looking for it), with few political victories. The paper will also focus on projects and organizations involved in photography as human rights advocacy.

Preface

I study photography and politics at New York University and my goal for the past few years has been to document issues of human rights and social justice through photography in order to alert the uninformed, but also as a tool for social change. My need to photograph comes partly from a severe feeling of disconnect from those in Darfur, whom I've been advocating on behalf of for almost 4 years. This includes my own need to be on the ground in order to truly understand, and the desire to bring human rights issues closer to those who also feel disconnect. I've also used photography in a more conceptual form to express this disconnect. After reading *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag I was both troubled and intrigued by some of her ideas which challenge and question the efficacy and nature of photography. Through this paper, I aim to dissect some of Sontag's points and build off of them via the opinions and ideas of working photojournalists and human rights photographers, as well as my own reactions and developing views.

Intro

Photographs are a way to bring an audience closer to a reality that they would not otherwise have the occasion to be confronted with in their daily lives. They serve to educate and inform through the documentation of situations otherwise unacknowledged and to stir the conscience of those who are dangerously comfortable within their own realities. They often serve as a call to action, a type of advocacy calling on and compelling individuals to mobilize for change. Photographer Susan Meiselas describes "the photograph as a cultural artifact, of

a...social history or of a personal history.”¹ They can also be used as a way to involve a community in the eradication of their own plight by allowing a different kind of communication, this time allowing the subject to also be the viewer. Photography is a language that is thought to be accessible to all. Photographer Olivia Heussler equates the language of photography to that of an alphabet. She says that “a lot of literate people read photographs through their own heart, feelings and personal experiences.”² They are one piece of the intricate web of human rights advocacy. A discussion of the theoretical context for photographs that depict human suffering and human rights abuse will be followed by more concrete goals and intentions of photojournalism, and specific examples of photographers, projects, and organizations involved in the field.

A Theoretical Framework for Photography: The Powers and Limitations of Pictures

“To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice *not* to transform, not to change or alter whatever is being represented.” (David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*)³

Photography is a complex medium. Its scope is vast and its impact ranges amongst each individual viewer; its power depends on many variables. At its conception, and often still in the news media, photography was regarded as an objective medium. It was seen to be a record of reality taken by a technical instrument which the photographer cannot manipulate, as a painter can interpret and modify what he sees in front of him. Photographs are often meant to be supplementary visual proof to back up text and are presented with the assumption that they will be trusted as fact. But it has become very clear that photographs are not always what they seem. As Maria Gabriella Lay from the ILO stated, “The technical part of photography is at the service

¹ Audio from Susan Meiselas website: www.susanmeiselas.com

² Interview April 15, 2008

³ Strauss, David Levi, *Between the Eyes: Essays* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2003) 9.

of the mind and soul.”⁴ Many decisions go into the creation of a photograph, and the opinions, experiences, and style of the photographer influence the way they select, frame, and otherwise portray their subject matter. As Heussler said, “we are what we see. We show what we want to show.” Not only can photographers make subjective decisions regarding what they show, the content of photographs can in fact be manipulated or left ambiguous to the viewer, so that they may be interpreted in many ways, correct and incorrect. As Sontag states, “the photographic image...is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude...it has always been possible for a photograph to misrepresent.”⁵ While it is difficult to stay neutral, especially while shooting in political situations, photographer Toru Morimoto says that “in history, there are always mistakes, and photos last, so I don’t want to make a decision now by taking a side.”⁶ Photographer Susan Meiselas highlights the multiplicity of views and various vantage points which are prevalent in her work. She tries to combine the different views of those present while incorporating her own.

It is inevitable that a photographer must transform what he sees in front of him. A photograph captures only a moment in time, and while it may assume or imply, it omits information about the context in which the photograph was taken, what happened before, and what will happen after the presented moment. The photograph can tell “us what one small part of the conflict *looks like*, but it has no way of helping us understand the nature of the conflict.”⁷ The fact that photographs are merely representations, not carbon copies of reality, opens the doors to an array of effects that must be questioned. If the photograph is not an exact reality, but only a representation of reality, is there a limit to what can actually be understood from the photograph?

⁴ Interview with Maria Gabriella Lay, April 22, 2008.

⁵ Sontag, Susan, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Picador, 2003) 46.

⁶ Interview with Toru Morimoto, April 7, 2008.

⁷ Andersen, Robin, “Images of War: Photojournalism, Ideology, and Central America” Latin American Perspectives 16.2 (1989) 99.

German photographer Jurgen Nefzger puts a positive spin on the transforming power of photography in the ICRC's exhibition *In-Security* by saying that "the aesthetic power within photography transforms the subject and that leaves the viewer with a contradictory feeling," which serves to stimulate the viewer's thought process about the subject. This feeling is similar to the result of the contradictory symbolism that Heussler talks about. She referred to a photograph of her own in which a toucan is perched on a weapon. While birds often symbolize peace, the symbol is now complicated by the symbol of violence. She continued to explain that these are the best pictures, and that a photographer can only accomplish such complexity when he or she is well immersed into the culture of the people and situation being photographed. One of the most important powers of photographs is this ability to ask questions. Another example is a photograph taken by Ryan Reed of a grave dug in Sudan (Fig. 1). The grave looks empty, but it is unclear whether it is or not. People stand around it, but the viewer can't see their faces, only the soccer ball that the closest mourner is holding. The dichotomy between the symbols of death and youth are striking.

Sontag questions the effects of heightened aesthetics, cautioning that they may be able to prevent the required moral response, but also make the image inauthentic in a way, by beatifying the horrible. But photographer Sara Terry says that aesthetics do play a part in her photographs. They serve to allow the viewer to come safely into the space of an image that causes him or her to think more deeply, rather than forcing a directly graphic image into the face and mind of the viewer. Exaggerating the reality of a specific moment in time through metaphor, symbolism, or another form of aesthetic may bring one closer to the truth of the overall dynamic of the situation.⁸ Communicating an understanding of a complex situation cannot be done in one photograph. As long as the truth conveyed through aesthetics is true to the situation, and precise

⁸ Interview with Corinne Dufka, April 17, 2008.

captions serve to avoid any misrepresentation, former photojournalist Corinne Dufka welcomes such aesthetics. Often, a photograph takes on a message that stays the same regardless of the context. Andersen cites the example of a photograph taken by John Hoagland (Fig. 2) in which a Salvadoran soldier juggles oranges over a pile of corpses. It is not clear whether he is responsible for the dead bodies or not, but the message is that soldiers and others in war zones get conditioned to death. The message would be the same, and still factual, if he had killed them.

When a photograph shows something unexpected, confusing, or contradictory, making the viewer look twice, it is able to not only keep the viewer intrigued, but also contributes to the shock factor of images. It is the power of this visual moment in time that captures the complexity of a situation or is able to convey a multilayered reality.

Sontag says that “for photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.” She continues to argue that this shock factor fades over time. When people see enough graphic, horrifying images, they become used to the feeling. It is an issue of human nature. We get desensitized to intense emotions. Once we are no longer able to be effected in such a way, the power of the photographic image is reduced. We become familiar with the sight of suffering and of death. We are used to these things which plague the underdeveloped and politically unstable parts of the world to the extent that our urgent desire to help subsides. Corinne Dufka explained her personal experience with being desensitized in a different way. Between the professional pressure of getting the best shot and being confronted with brutal loss of life and human rights abuse, Dufka felt she had lost her sense of priority, and humanity. In 1998 when the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were bombed, Dufka wasn’t present. She and her crew had already gotten on a plane to leave Nairobi. She remembers

sitting in that hotel room and seeing for the first time what had happened to the Kenyan people and I just started crying. For the first time, I had felt absolutely nothing for what happened to these people because I was so distraught over my

professional and personal frustration at having missed the story. It was at that moment I said: I am getting out of this profession, because I felt like I have lost my sense of humanity.⁹

While Dufka still appreciates the value and power of the visual image to affect people, she does not look back on nor regret her decision to end her career in photojournalism. While the event is what removed Dufka from photojournalism, it's what got Toru Morimoto deeper into his own work. He was photographing for a Kenyan newspaper in Nairobi and covered the embassy bombings. He compares photography to writing by saying that when you're photographing "you're more 'in it.' You can write from a hotel."¹⁰

Despite the risks, responsibilities, and limits, many of the photographers that I've spoken with or researched have expressed a strong passion and need to do the work that they do. Photographs are not only awareness raising tools; they are statements of social significance. But as photography is expressive and most often artistic, it is inevitable that each photographer will have a personal connection to the medium. Each has a different style, describes his or her role slightly differently, and has a personal intention in his or her work. The reason and purpose behind each photographers work is what gives it momentum. It is especially evident in photographers that have specialized in a certain area for a long period of time, who have strong relationships with the people and are wholeheartedly immersed in their struggle.

Susan Meiselas describes herself as a listener who likes to share what she discovers. She says that "you are in a kind of collaboration with your subject and they have to want you to be there, and want you to know them, and you have to want to also and that's a very deep thing, people know very quickly if you're listening or don't really want to."¹¹ Many photographers, including Charles Moore, who extensively photographed the Civil Rights movement, even use

⁹ CBC Television: Beyond Words. <www.cbc.ca/beyondwords/dufka.html>

¹⁰ Interview with Toru Morimoto, April 7, 2008.

¹¹ Susan Meiselas Website Audio, <http://www.susanmeiselas.com>

and think of their cameras as weapons. Moore stated, “I did not like seeing what I did, and I’m a fighter. If I had – and I have – fought before with my fist, but in this, I fight with my camera. That’s my tool. That was my weapon. I believe in something strongly, and I’m going to stand up for it.”¹² Ryan Spencer Reed describes himself as “merely a witness and my job is to convey testimony through a sort of visual translation. My job is to give a voice to these people, to serve as a translator.”¹³ While he acknowledges himself as “merely” a witness who cannot fully comprehend the struggle of the Sudanese people he photographs, he brings up another common theme of giving a voice to the voiceless. Heussler explained that she “visualiz[ing] any kind of problems in human beings is my goal.”¹⁴ Sara Terry, founder of The Aftermath Project, wants to expose a side of war that is under covered – the aftermath. She also likes the way that photography requires that she be completely present and aware in the moment. “If I’m not open to everything around me and ready and informed about it I can miss the photo.”¹⁵

The ICRC held an exhibition called *In-Security*, in which photographs of a variety of photographers were displayed in order to call attention to the threats and damaging effects of nuclear power in the world. It incited the memory of the atomic bomb and Chernobyl as well as the lasting effects of each, and provided information on modern power plants and the risks involved. This use of photography to preserve memory is linked to a preventative measure for the future. German photographer Gerd Ludwig, whose pictures of the effects of Chernobyl in the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2) were also represented in *In-Security*, was quoted as saying that “I...knew that the calculated chances I took were on behalf of unwitting and otherwise voiceless victims, and the hope that environmental irresponsibility and tragedies like

¹² Oral History: Charles Moore Interviewed by Mary Morin, 3.

¹³ Interview with Ryan Spencer Reed, July 2005.

¹⁴ Email correspondence with Olivia Heussler, April 15, 2008.

¹⁵ Interview with Sara Terry, April 21, 2008.

Chernobyl be prevented in the future.” German photographer Jürgen Nefzger (Fig. 4) is represented in the show and in a caption he said that expressing himself through the photographic documentation of social and ecological issues allows him to respond to the world politically.

Sontag argues that “the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs.”¹⁶ In this case, while attempting to elicit a moral response, there is also a risk that photographs “confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place...[and] cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward – that is, poor – parts of the world.”¹⁷ But to deny that the situation depicted photographically exists is to harm in a different way. It perpetuates the silence that surrounds many of these stories. Photographer H  l  ne Caux said that while perpetuating negativity may be a side effect of photographs, negativity is part of the reality of the world, and for a photographer, “it is what is happening in front of your eyes.” She suggests that having a well developed, complete photo essay, since each picture is only part of the truth, with text to explain the photographs, one can try to avoid negative stereotyping.

Responsibilities in Practice

Yoshito Matsushige snapped a photograph only hours after the atomic bomb was dropped over Hiroshima (Fig. 5).

“I thought this must be photographed and held the camera in position. The scene I saw through the finder was too cruel...I tried to pull myself together by telling myself that I’m a news cameraman, and it is my duty and privilege to take a photograph, even if it’s just one, and even if people take me as a devil or a cold-hearted man. I finally managed to press the shutter, but when I looked into the finder for the second time, the object was blurred by tears.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Sontag, 89.

¹⁷ Sontag, 63.

¹⁸ Part of the ICRC exhibit “In-Security,” viewed April 16, 2008.

There is an important responsibility that falls upon the photographer to represent properly. This includes the attempt to avoid objectifying individuals, “reducing them to their plight” as Sontag suggests.¹⁹ It includes maintaining the dignity, privacy, and security of the subject matter. In many situations, using the camera can be intrusive towards individuals that may be included in the frame, in which case a decision must be made where capturing the image is weighed against respecting the environment in which one is shooting. Caux describes the need for “a good balance between creating a good illustration, telling the story, and preserving security.”²⁰

The security of the subject matter is often influenced by the presence of a photographer. People tend to perform for the camera, which often changes the dynamic and meaning of the photograph. People may act differently than they normally would without the presence of a camera, either by getting self conscious or more theatrical. It is the photographer’s responsibility to either avoid capturing too many of these situations, or to present a more realistic variety in the editing process. On a more serious note, the change in behavior could be a matter of life or death. In cases of armed conflict, government troops for example, might prefer to be on their best behavior knowing that their image could appear in front of the international community, and therefore their use of violence may be restrained. On the other hand, militant rebels may act out in increased violence, to show the world that they will respond to their perceived injustice. Sara Terry spoke of a documentary film she is working on in Sierra Leone, covering a community project where both victors and oppressors participate in bon fires and cleansing ceremonies so that offenders can testify and victims can forgive. Some offenders were afraid to testify in front of the camera; they were afraid they would be taken to the local court and tried. Terry says that

¹⁹ Sontag, 75.

²⁰ Interview with H el ene Caux, April 15, 2008.

being aware of the way you effect a situation as a photographer is a very important responsibility. She said that “it’s totally insane to think you couldn’t alter an equation somehow...The observer alters what’s being observed.”²¹

Terry also explained that she doesn’t speak in depth with the people she’s photographing or seek relationships with them while she shoots because it prevents her from seeing the imagery. This is a matter of personal preference and style of the photographer and the relationship he or she has in the given situation. Sometimes it is best to immerse yourself in your subject matter to the extent that they are so familiar and comfortable with you as a photographer that the camera is almost unnoticeable and their behavior is both uninhibited yet natural. Photographer Edoardo Gianotti described his time photographing in Peru in 1999, explaining that even though people feared him out of the “Aymara belief that a photograph could snatch the *Ajayu*, the vital fluid of the soul” and did not want their pictures taken, he “preferred to be associated with [his] cameras (even if [he] did not use them) rather than get them out from time to time. [He] did not want people to think that [he] had a hidden weapon...”²² While getting the desired picture is important, one needs to be respectful of the environment and needs of the people.

Photography is also a form of documentation which can be used to detect early signs of armed conflict or genocide. This form has a lot of potential, but has not been used as thoroughly as needed. There are many stagnant status quo crises such as poverty that are breeding grounds for armed conflict and other forms of human rights abuse, including the early, not yet widespread instances of human rights abuse that precede genocide. These must be documented. Corinne Dufka described this approach as an early warning system. But Terry believes that photographs that document root causes will only be effective if the media and policy landscape start to

²¹ Interview with Sara Terry, April 21, 2008.

²² Gianotti, Edoardo, “Through the Lens of the Camera in Remote Mining Sites in the Peruvian Highlands” Visual Studies 19.2 (2004) 129.

change. Photographs must work in conjunction with political will to address such emerging crises. We see from Darfur (as one of many possible examples) that this crucial piece is often missing.

Former marine captain Brian Steidle was surprised to find out the extent to which political will was lacking on Darfur. He traveled with the African Union in 2004 to help monitor Sudan's North-South ceasefire, and later that year he went to Darfur as an observer, armed only with his camera. In his film *The Devil Came on Horseback*, we see that Steidle is frustrated in having a camera instead of a weapon. But even so, he believed that the evidence he was capturing would have a huge impact on both the public and politicians back in the United States. Steidle has spoken with and shown his photographs (Figs. 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3) to top diplomats, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. But the reaction he got was far less than he had predicted or desired. While he expected outrage, his binder of photographs which included aerial views of burning villages, hundreds of orphaned children, and freshly murdered corpses, was calmly returned to him with no further action guaranteed.

A common criticism of war photography is that it is practiced by photographers who understand little about the situation where they are "helicoptered in," stay short periods of time, and don't produce a story that thoroughly captures the situation in depth. But Dufka explained that photographers don't always have the luxury of time to spend in certain situations, especially when they are under contract by news agencies with budgets and deadlines. She says this doesn't diminish the way a photographer feels about the situation or their photographic skill. These mid conflict photographs have a weight of their own and can express the realities of a situation in their own way. The highest demand however, is for dramatic photographs, which are more likely to make media headlines. Heussler's style is more documentary in nature and she finds it more

important to show pictures that illustrate a process rather than one limited moment. Her next book will be on the revolution in Nicaragua, which will take the viewer through many years of pictures so that one can understand how the revolution unfolded and the steps taken toward democracy.

Aftermath Photography

While the most popular forms of photojournalism come from the battlefield, the so-called “war photography,” there is an alternative way to portray such issues – documenting post conflict themes. These themes vary from wounded soldiers back from Iraq, post hurricane rebuilding after Katrina, and the effects of the nuclear reactor explosions in Chernobyl as seen in *In-Security*. The demand for this kind of photography is much lower, but it conveys an affective message of its own. Photographers generally spend a longer period of time in the location and build photo essays from a larger number of photographs. The reason for this is most likely because the timeframe for such aftermath is longer. Unfortunately, it usually takes years for people to rebuild their lives and communities, and longer, if at all, to recover from their loss. And when people are in danger of physical harm, these scars can last forever. One example is the soldiers that have come back from Iraq, permanently wounded both physically and psychologically. Instead of being helicoptered into Iraq, Nina Berman has chosen to photograph American soldiers that have come home wounded from Iraq (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2), to give more attention to issues off the battlefield. Another example is Cambodia’s landmine problem. Bobby Neel Adams documented Cambodian amputees that suffer from landmine explosions in a project called *Broken Wings* started in 1992 (Fig. 8). Toru Morimoto expressed frustration over the lack of demand for these kinds of photographs. In Barcelona where he is based, he tried to publish his

project on a small village massacre in Kosovo (Figs. 9.1, 9.2 and 9.3), but people didn't want to see it. Finding places to publish his images is the biggest struggle, he said.

The Aftermath Project is a young non-profit organization focusing on post conflict situations, the side of war that is given less attention. Created by photographer Sara Terry, the Aftermath Project gives out grants to photographers to document post conflict life, "the story of what it takes for individuals to learn to live again, to rebuild destroyed lives and homes, to restore civil societies, to address the lingering wounds of war while struggling to create new avenues for peace."²³ Terry says that these are photographs that don't get much funding or competitive attention, but that the story of aftermath is necessary as the prologue for the future. The Project aims to change the way the media handles imagery and also to affect public policy regarding the post conflict situations.

Terry provided some examples of the stories documented by previous grant winners. Magnum photographer Jim Goldberg won the \$20,000 grant for a project called "The New Europeans," which examines the lives of people who traveled to Europe from different post conflict countries around the world and the basic challenges to their human rights that they face. Wolf Böwig won the \$15,000 grant for his project, "The Forgotten Island: Narratives of War in Sierra Leone," which focused on a five year old boy, the only survivor of a massacre on Bonthe Island.

Practical use: ICRC Photo Tracing

Photography is a tool of communication that can be used to serve many purposes in many ways. There are forms of photography that serve purposes of social justice that are more practically, rather than aesthetically or emotionally, executed. One example is photo tracing, used by the International Committee of the Red Cross. During the Rwandan genocide, many

²³ The Aftermath Project, www.theaftermathproject.org > The Mission

children were orphaned and separated from the rest of their families. Polaroids were taken so that families could recognize, and then be reunited with, the children. Because the children are very young, using visual representations is much more suitable, rather than trying to obtain information about their history, current situation, and families from them. These Polaroids can be seen on display in the ICRC museum's permanent exhibition.

History Repeats Itself...And So Do Photographs

Sontag states, "photographs echo photographs: it was inevitable that the photographs of emaciated Bosnian prisoners at Omarska, the Serb death camp created in northern Bosnia in 1992, would recall the photographs taken in the Nazi death camps in 1945." What is important to note here is not only that photographs echo earlier photographs, but that human rights abuse is a recurring reality and in repeated forms. We've seen photographs of skulls piled up from the Armenian genocide (Fig. 10), later to see similar photographs of the skulls of victims of the Rwandan genocide (Fig. 11). We saw photographs of massacred corpses sprawled across roads in Rwanda in 1994 (Fig. 12) only later to see the same images, but taken by African Union monitors of those in Darfur (Fig. 13). Why? It's not just a matter of photographic form, but of a similar lack of political will to fulfill the promise of "never again" when faced with genocide. The echoed photographs will always reflect this. Another example is photographs of child labor. Few will forget the photographs of Lewis Hine. From 1906 through the early 1900s, Hine photographed industrial labor issues in the United States focusing first on working conditions faced by immigrants and then, more famously, by children. In 1906 he started photographing for the National Child Labor Committee and traveled across the United States for 10 years to document child labor (Figs. 14.1 and 14.2).²⁴ His work was used hand in hand with campaigns and other advocacy measures regarding the issue of child labor. There are still photographs like

²⁴ Seixas, Peter, "Lewis Hine: From 'Social' to 'Interpretative' Photographer" American Quarterly 39.3 (1987) 389.

these today, but only because the problem persists. The repetition is important in understanding the development of photography, but more importantly, it is about understanding our world and its inability to sufficiently fight grave injustice.

Photography and the International Labour Organization (ILO)

Many see child labor in the United States as depicted by Hine as something of the past, but the use of child labor is still a ubiquitous practice around the world. The ILO, the United Nations' branch focused on equal labour opportunities and fair labour standards, puts a high priority on the use of photography to further its message, especially within the theme of child labour.

Maria Gabriella Lay put together a book of Fernando Molerés's photographs (Fig. 15) documenting child labour in many different countries. Captions were not only left until the end, but they omitted the nationality of the child in each photograph in order to convey the universality of human rights abuse resulting from child labour. Molerés's style very much echoes the beauty found in Salgado's photographs. Lay refuted the critique that aesthetics limit the messages of photographs by saying that "aesthetics are the highest expression of the human spirit."²⁵ Sometimes, there is beauty in the horrible. The point here is that aesthetics allow the photograph to strike an emotional chord in the viewer, so that questions may come up. The viewer is then moved to make a connection between what one sees in the photo and what one feels. Why is the picture making me feel this way? Only emotions, a sincere care for what is depicted, will cause someone to act.

The creation of a complex photo which strong political messages does not happen by chance, says Lay. This comes with a deep understanding of the political situation being depicted. A photographer takes his or her knowledge, forms the message, and frames accordingly. This

²⁵ Interview with Maria Gabriella Lay, April 22, 2008.

knowledge of a situation includes the understanding that our world is so interconnected. Looking at one of Molerés's photographs of a child picking up trash (Fig. 16), We can see Coca-Cola cups in the bag the child carries on her back, referencing the extent to which our world has been globalized, and creating a dichotomy between the wealthy, famous corporation and the poverty stricken, forgotten girl who must spend her life in filthy heaps carrying trash on her small back. There is a vulture on the right side of the frame, providing a foreboding feeling, and a detail that implies the environment is unfit for the child. In the background, another figure who Lay pointed out as the grandmother mirrors the deed of the child in the foreground. The older woman figure references the idea that the poverty is the burden of many generations. There are no captions readily available to confirm that the figure is the grandmother, but like the photograph of a Salvadoran soldier juggling oranges, the aesthetics make it so that it doesn't matter. Even if this detail is untrue, if the figure is just another child, the generational reality is an accuracy that applies to many families in similar situations, and is important to convey. This references Dufka's point that sometimes, exaggerating reality or creating metaphoric symbolism is helpful, as long as the message is true and the captions are accurate.

The ILO created a youth program called SCREAM (Supporting Children's Rights through Education, the Arts, and the Media). After one discussion on child labour, children were asked to respond to what they had learned through drawings or poems. These poems are included in a book of photographs taken by Edoardo Gianotti called *The Sky Above the Children/Il Cielo Sopra I Bamini*, which documents children under forced labour conditions across multiple continents (Fig. 17). In an article Gianotti describes his ILO supported work in Peru in 1999 of children and families working in the gold mines. He talks about the influence he had as a photographer on the workers he photographed. His presence caused the miners to wish to be seen

not as they were, but how they wanted to be. Those “who often did not own a pick and rubber boots wished to be documented with these items. This desire was their way of underlining to the outside world their wish for these items.”²⁶

Framing Darfur

The so-called genocide that has been raging in Darfur, Sudan for about 5 years now has gotten a relatively large amount of photographic coverage. Arguments about the efficacy of the Darfur movement in the United States are ongoing and unlimited, but the photographic records have been abundant, with varying results of impact. Sudan’s history of human rights abuse is long, but finally when the bombing, pillaging, and killings did catch the eye of the news media between 2003 and 2005, the records were not abundant. Jan Pronk, former special representative of the UN Secretary General for Sudan addressed an audience at the 50 year anniversary of the World Press Photo in October of 2005 asking photographers to document Darfur more. An important aspect limiting the coverage of Darfur is that it is a very remote, spread out area. Atrocities occur in places journalists are not present. That is both an unfortunate fact about the landscape of Darfur and a challenge for journalists. Because of this, most of the photographs coming out of Darfur are of the after effects of the atrocities rather than the atrocities as they are perpetrated. Most pictures are of burning or already burnt villages, rebel factions riding on the backs of pick up trucks, and corpses, already mutilated or killed. Documentation of attacks as they occur are lacking. Of the few photographs that do capture such moments, Brian Steidle’s photographs of a government soldier burning a food storage and a village beginning to burn stand out. (Figs. 6.1 and 6.3). But the photographs that do exist are relatively plentiful, at least to those who look for them, and have served as an effective tool in mobilizing the Darfur advocacy movement in the United States in particular.

²⁶ Gianotti, 134.

A traveling exhibition called “Darfur/Darfur” is a compilation of the work of 6 photographers that have spent time documenting the crisis in Darfur including Brian Steidle and H  l  ne Caux (Fig. 18). The project has been made into a book, but its general presentation is composed of large scale digital projections on the walls of buildings and other surfaces around the world such as the New York Historical Society, The Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C., the Jewish Museum in Berlin (Fig. 19), or on a screen in the Jardin du Trocad  ro in Paris. The benefits of this type of presentation are the scale and location. Random selections of the public (with varying levels of knowledge about Darfur) encounter these large exhibitions without expectation. The images confront them whether they have sought out the images or not, and have instantly decreased the physical distance between viewer and subject, and hopefully the conceptual and emotional distance as well. But as Caux stressed, “as soon as you touch people’s minds there is no way to gauge the response.”²⁷ She explained further that photographs alone cannot do enough, especially when there is a lack of political will. They alone cannot resolve the fact that the Sudanese government has continued to deny the atrocities. Photographs are only one piece of the puzzle. Political will, along with the concrete work of aid agencies are also necessities. While Caux can’t guarantee that photographs have made any concrete change on the ground, she does think they have done some good. They have given Darfur some coverage, and without them, the government would find it easier to continue the atrocities.

Media

“A photograph is a meeting place where the interests of the photographer, the photographed, the viewer and those who are using the photographs are often contradictory.” (David Levi Strauss quoting John Berger)²⁸

²⁷ Interview with H  l  ne Caux, April 15, 2008.

²⁸ Strauss, 32.

The news media is a forum for communication to make the public aware of significant events that occur around the world and the political climate at a given time. Often, the methods employed, including captions and layout, leave depictions of conflict ambiguous and overgeneralized. Robin Andersen describes this occurrence in the case of reportage of the civil war in El Salvador which started in 1980. She describes how the violence resulting from political disparities in El Salvador have been “reinserted into the U.S. media frame...[so] that struggle = death; revolution = chaos; and change = pathology.”²⁹ There has been no consistent well rounded view of the conflict, with the multiplicity of views that Meiselas speaks of, and no inclusion of the United States’ role in backing the government.

When there is a lack of detailed information about the conflict, any emotional response or desire to act is diminished. This works in many ways. Oversimplification of conflict makes it unsolvable because no concrete policy asks can be formed or advocated from ambiguity. And while generalization causes some action, limited knowledge makes it slow and ineffective. We see this from the Darfur movement, and not just from the photographs. Oversimplification has been an effective tactic used by certain advocacy organizations in making the public feel like they understand the situation. This causes an increase in the group’s number of members, and usually dollars. But boiling down one’s understanding of a conflict to moral pity for victims doesn’t give us any direction in which to make change. One example of an area where much oversimplification occurs is when trying to understand Darfur’s rebel factions. Captions under photographs of rebel groups should be more detailed. It is easy to lump all rebels into one category, but with a history of factioning, there are distinct differences. It is in these details where vital information lies about the nature of failed peace talks between the Sudanese government and “the rebel,” the demands of each rebel group, and their current and historical

²⁹ Andersen, 101.

relationships with their ethnic groups. Only with these details, can one properly advocate for a people who they know only through images and text.

As stated earlier, there seems to be an increasing competition in the mainstream news media and award competitions for the most dramatic or graphic photograph. While these are often very emotional and shocking, they don't always convey the most information, leaving little room for other, equally pressing stories. Caux admitted that she feels intoxicated with such imagery, and that more positive and resilient pictures, or at least stories on under covered issues such as refugees and IDPs, which are her specialty as an officer at the UNHCR, are needed to create balance.

Corinne Dufka expresses the contradiction in the extent to which graphic images are received by the public. There is a seemingly endless appetite for this imagery on television, in movies, and in other fictional media, but when it comes to hardcore photojournalism people always try to censor the amount of violence shown in the media. Dufka thinks there is a need for more dramatic images of Iraq especially, but the lack of these pictures is due to the danger posed to photojournalists in trying to get them.

Photographer and Darfur advocate Ryan Reed explains his frustration with the media in handling his own photographs, and with the media climate in general. He explained an instance when he shot a story for Newsweek. They showed him a copy of the layout, which he approved, without knowing that he was looking at the international version. When the magazine came out in the United States, he saw something different. Along with a reduced image size, two full page ads interrupted the story. Sontag explains that when photographs are forced to compete with advertisements, "each use of the camera impl[ies] the invisibility of the other..."³⁰ The images are read differently, and the messages of the photographs influence each other, creating new

³⁰ Sontag, 32-33.

connotations in each. Reed has experienced the frustration coming back to the United States to see celebrities and pop culture dominating the news headlines. He blames this on our societal culture. The news media gives us what we demand, and we do not want to see pictures of human suffering in places conceptually and physically distant from us. He says that while we “have every capacity in the world to not just band-aid the situation but actually prevent it from continuing...we get involved only enough to alleviate our guilt.”³¹

When alternative forums for photographs, such as the exhibition space, combine text, varying styles of photography, and “are the result of personal commitment and artistic interpretations it’s meaning [is better able to cut] across the surplus of information provided daily by the media.”³²

Back to the Community

Many projects have been created to further involve communities in reflecting on their particular situations and taking a role in improving them. Maria Gabriella Lay explains that often, the exploited are unable to see themselves as exploited, because they are unaware of their rights and social injustice. This is especially common in children. To involve members of a community in becoming more actively engaged in improving their lives, bringing them out of social injustice, they must psychologically reframe their lives, and they can begin by doing it physically through the camera lens. Although not photography, a traveling exhibition called *Darfur Drawn* (Fig. 20) sponsored by Human Rights Watch takes a similar approach. Included are drawings done by children in refugee camps along the border of Chad and Darfur. They were not given any direction about what to draw, but all the drawings are scenes of soldiers on horseback, bombings, and killings, all things the children are forced to experience in their daily

³¹ Interview with Ryan Reed, July 2005.

³² *In-Security* exhibition plaque.

lives. To viewers in the developed, democratic world, these are not pictures that should be drawn in crayon by children. The sharp contrast between form and content strike these viewers, while they can be used in the children's own community to reflect on their situation.

Another project called *Kids with Cameras* directly involves children into the photographic process. The project was started by photographer Zana Briski, who photographed children born and raised in Calcutta's red-light district. As shown in the movie "Born into Brothels" Briski starts to teach the children photography as a way to provide them with an expressive, enriching activity, thorough which they are able to reflect on their lives and the lives of their siblings and friends. The process is also a way to sustain themselves financially through sales of their pictures. The project has now spread to communities in Haiti, Jerusalem, and Cairo as well.

Link to Policy Change

Terry explains that an informed public is the basis for policy changes. Informing the public can be achieved through images, and when images succeed in asking questions and engaging the viewer in this kind of visual thinking, he or she is more likely to act in response to the image. Gianotti explains that the photographs he took of gold miners in Peru, and others taken by volunteers, have helped encourage the political will for humanitarian intervention, including the attention given by the ILO to address the labour problems there.³³ The photographs have been used as campaign materials to apply further pressure on international organizations and to raise awareness by putting a face to the issue for all audiences. Lay says that depending on the audience, the tactics to engage it are different. If one is trying to alert policy makers to an abuse of human rights, Lay says the smartest thing to do is to "point the camera where it is their

³³ Gianotti, 133.

responsibility.”³⁴ If the goal is to inform the general public, the photograph should invite the viewer to action.

Conclusion:

Something happens also with the element of distance in photography. They are meant to decrease the distance between subject and viewer, so that one can be informed of a social issue that does not directly affect him on a daily basis. But as I was speaking with Maria Gabriella Lay in the office of the ILO, I went from a feeling of excitement about the efficacy of photography and the beautiful photographs taken by Fernando Molerés, back to a feeling of complete disconnect from the people in the photographs, all within minutes. We sat in an office and commented on the lighting or other aesthetic qualities of the physical page between our fingers. Not of the living, breathing human being depicted there. But photography is an artistic medium, a form of representation of an every changing world, and so it is malleable and absorbent. A photograph is able to interact with our thoughts and feelings in different ways depending on our variable emotional states and extents of knowledge, so that at any given time, it can affect us in a different way than it did a year before or a minute before.

Photographic methods continue to develop daily. Especially with the rapid advances in communication and technology, new forms of expression in freshly combined mediums come to the fore. The ability of photography to confront us with different realities and to create new ways of thinking while directing our gaze toward urgent social issues strengthens our society’s desire and ability to engage in social change.

In his forward to the book “This Critical Mirror,” Salgado said that “we should not hesitate to continue to show photographs of the genocide in Rwanda...so that such atrocities are never repeated... It is vital that everyone sees them and recognises themselves, otherwise the

³⁴ Interview with Maria Gabriella Lay, April 22, 2008.

human species, which is both responsible for and the victim of these horrors, may one day disappear completely.”³⁵ It is this power of recognition that is most awe inspiring. Whether the viewer’s life has nothing or everything in common with the subject matter on first glance, what connects the two is often self recognition, in which one can see that commonalities almost always do in fact, exist, whether it is the shared humanity, or the link provided by an ever growing globalized world. The viewer, subject, and photographer are linked in the photographic process. Whether these links negatively or positively affect our world, the recognition of either can inspire the desire to improve our global society. Photographers have different artistic styles and opinions regarding the efficacy, proper use and execution of photography as social change, but there remains a powerful medium of visual communication of which many questions must be asked, and where much room is left for further exploration.

³⁵ Pronk, Jan, “We Need More Stories and More Pictures” 2005 <<http://www.janpronk.nl/speeches/english/we-need-more-stories-and-more-pictures.html>> 19 April, 2008.