

ON DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

A Photographer's View

In July last year, documentary photographers from all around the country met in Cape Town at a conference organised by the Centre of Documentary Photography. The conference, which was the first of its kind, coincided with twelve photographic exhibitions at different venues on the University of Cape Town campus.

Papers given at the conference raised many issues that are important to documentary photographers working in South Africa today. These included:

- *the role of photographers in the democratic movement
- *the position of women cultural workers and the image of women reflected in our own cultural products
- *the creation of and response to images of violence
- *the aims and operation of photographers collectives such as Afrapix, Vakalesa, Dynamic Images
- *the need for communities to take control over the production of images of themselves.

Also discussed were the problems for photographers working under the State of Emergency. This was dramatically underscored by the

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detention of convenor Omar Badsha on the eve of the conference.

A serious flaw in the conference was the lack of photographers on the platform. For example, Jurgen Schadeberg's entertaining account of his work at *Drum* magazine was the only input on South Africa's photo history. The panel discussion on collectives and the talk on the Funda educational programme in Soweto were the only other talks given by photographers.

One of the consequences of this was that the real issues for photographers were raised in a fairly abstract and theoretical manner, which was difficult for us photographers to

grapple with. This was a disservice to photographers attending the conference. Judging from the exhibitions, documentarists in the field today are dealing with the challenges of their times in fresh and in interesting ways. The exhibitions illustrated a range of photographic practices and articulated many of the issues which were so inadequately raised in the discussions. And it is to these exhibitions that I now wish to turn.

For the purpose of this article, I will group the exhibitions into three categories - community photographs, radical photojournalism and traditional documentary photography. At the outset I must state that these categories are not distinct, nor mutually exclusive, but rather represent different tendencies or approaches.

Community Photography

Community photography can be defined as the practice of documentary photography



One of the photographs from an essay on Namaqualand by Paul Grendon



A photograph by Joe Alferts from his essay on Kosi Bay - The Fishing People.

where members of a community are engaged in documenting some aspect of their own lives. Usually this is a collective venture where knowledge and skills are shared, and where the end product is used to support some sort of struggle in the community - for example an improvement in housing conditions.

A crucial aspect of community photography is that it deals with the issue of self representation. Su Braden in 'Committing Photography' wrote about the thinking behind community photography:

'As the complexity of the interrelationships between photographer, subject, photograph and audience has become more apparent, so the question of access to and self-representation through, the photographic image has come to be seen as equally important socially and economically as access to the written word.

'A principal question has emerged - Whom does the photograph represent? Do the photographer's own ideas about the subject dominate the way the picture is taken and shown and, if so, is this bias (negative, positive, class-bound, or simply personal) apparent to those who see the image?

'... As a purveyor of dominant cultural bias, photography is capable of forming the vanguard of any invasion: an invasion where the incursionists take with them the ideologies, conventions and often the

context from their own world as they launch themselves upon the world of others.'

Braden asks:

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rapher and photographed which will ensure that the person behind the camera is not appropriating the identity of the person in front of the lens?"

In the mid-1980s in Britain a wide range of community photographic projects developed out of an attempt to answer this question.

In South Africa the issues around self-representation take on an even greater importance because the majority of photographers come from the group that has had privileged access to money and skills - white, middle-class men.

Of the Cape Town exhibitions, those which came nearest to representing a community photography position were those by the Funda students and Gideon Mendel's exhibition "Living in Yeoville" which is a study of his home suburb.

Both of these exhibitions were made by photographers in, of and for their own com-

munities. However, both fall short in other areas of the definition of community photography. The content of the Soweto students' exhibition was superficial - largely photographs of poverty on Soweto's streets - and failed to add up to a coherent statement on any aspect of the township. Mendel's exhibition was, in the main, a somewhat jaded view of aspects of white suburban culture to which he does not subscribe. Neither exhibition had the potential for supporting any particular campaign or community struggle.

Radical Photojournalism

Most of the Cape Town exhibitions fell more clearly into the radical photojournalist tradition. Here the focus is less on self-representation than on documenting adverse conditions or revealing relationships of power and domination. An important element of this kind of work is its value and accessibility to groups on the left engaged in the process of social change.

Four of the Cape Town exhibitions were mounted on light-weight laminated board, which has helped to make them accessible to communities around the country. The four were - "A study on Atlantis Township" by Chris Ledohowski, "Rural Communities in Namaqualand" by Paul Grendon, "Domestic Workers" by Afrapix and "Working Women" by Lesley Lawson/Sached.

Some of these exhibitions have been displayed in community halls, libraries, church halls and at workshops, trade union meetings etc.

The Namaqualand exhibition was undertaken with the Surplus People's Project. It was used as part of a campaign to mobilise public support for the communities which are attempting to win back their land which was appropriated by the House of Representatives.

Other exhibitions which fell into this category of radical photojournalism were an Afrapix study of the black community of Paarl and a group exhibition 'Beyond the Barricades'. The Paarl study formed part of an alternative programme to the official tri-

centenary celebrations of the founding of the town. The 'Barricades' exhibition represents the best work of twenty photographers and forms a valuable and powerful historical summary of ten years of political struggle in South Africa.

Traditional Documentary Photography

The more traditional form of documentary photography is less concerned with issues of self-representation, collective work, accessibility and political usefulness. The focus is more on the power of the individual image and the ability of

a group of images to make a coherent visual, emotional and cognitive statement. It is primarily concerned with photographic excellence and strength of personal vision.

Two of the Cape Town exhibitions which fell into the more traditional documentary category were David Goldblatt's "Structures" and Omar Badsha's "Prayers, Performers and Megaphones".

Goldblatt's photographs are of structures - mainly, but not all architectural photographs - that he has photographed around the country since 1961. They show interiors and exteriors of churches, homes and public buildings. Even non-buildings, such as demolished structures after group areas removals have



One photo from Chris Ledochowski's essay on Guguletu.

been documented. Goldblatt intends this work to function on the level of allegory. As an introduction to the work he writes:

'In the geology of South Africa's structures are to be read the accretions of our history and the choices we have made. These are photographs from a geological probe.'

Badsha's exhibition comprises three groups of photographs - groups at prayer, mainly in Durban's Grey Street, cultural performances by worker groups and photographs of speakers using megaphones to address crowds at political and cultural meetings. Badsha says he is using these categories as 'metaphors and statements about power and the centrality of ritual in our society'.

What both exhibitions have in common is a depth, complexity and opaqueness which require the viewer's full attention. They are not accessible to the casual viewer. This complexity functions on the level of the individual photograph and on the level of the overall statement of the essay. Although both exhibitions make powerful political statements, they do not lend themselves easily to practical political uses.

In categorising the exhibitions I do not wish to make moral, political or photographic judgements. There is a tendency amongst us to do this. Comments run along the lines of 'radical is best, personal vision is reactionary' or 'you lefties use the photograph like a pick-axe and care nothing for the craft.' Furthermore, I

do not wish to imply that concern about categories or different photographic practices absolves any photographer from detailed attention to the quality and meaning of the individual images which we are engaged in making. A photograph that does not 'work' does not communicate. A set of photographs that do not 'work' can never add up to a valid statement.

What I have tried to suggest is that different documentary practices have different strengths and uses. I believe that photographic practice itself thrives on diversity and that different approaches can enrich one another. It is only by learning from each other that we can honour both the rich potential of our chosen craft and the imperatives of our time and place.



The conference mob! (photo by Steve Hilton-Barber)