

Constructing the World. Documentary Photography in Artistic Use

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According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary a document is »something written or printed, to be used as a record or in evidence« (Hornby 1986: 256). Based on the fact that a photograph can count as something printed, its documentary potential is to record and thus illuminate facts or serve as evidence.

But »what is a documentary photograph?« (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 169). This question is asked by Abigail Solomon-Godeau who supplies right away two answers: »With equal justice one might respond by saying ›just about everything‹ or alternatively, ›just about nothing‹« (ibid.). This very contradiction is symptomatic of the discourse. The first idea, that basically any photograph is documentary, is one that can be traced throughout the entire history of photography. Therefore it seems to be useful to begin by further elaborating on this aspect.

Evolution of the Term ›Documentary Photography‹

In the mid 19th century people believed that the world would imprint itself on the photographic plate through the physical-chemical process involved in photography. Human interference was not required except in the process of putting up and loading the camera and afterwards the developing of the plates. The light itself was supposed to find its way on the photographic emulsion and to show the world ›as it is‹. Strangely enough, looking at photographs people seemed to forget that the world is neither black and white nor unmoved as it was impossible to picture moving objects.

The indexical relation between the photograph and the world depicted is responsible for this approach. According to the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce the indexical relationship means, that the »signifier is bound to the referent not by a social convention (=“symbol”), not necessarily by some similarity (=“icon”), but by an actual contiguity or connection in the world: the lightning is the index of the storm« (Metz 1990: 156). So to speak, a photograph is a print of real objects, »left on a special surface by a combination of light and chemical action« (ibid.). This indexical connection is one explanation for the documentary concept of any photograph as well as the also existing iconic relation: most of the time objects on a photographic image are consistent with objects as perceived in the real world. Accordingly, any photograph is somehow documentary.

This broad attribution of documentary value to photography in general can help to explain why the term ›documentary‹ is ascribed to a partition of photography as late as the end of the 19th century. So far all photography had been considered documentary but not art. Around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century pictorialist photographers try to break the accuracy of the photographic depiction by using special printing techniques that blur the image. The interference of the photographer in the darkroom becomes essential to the generation of this kind of images and thus adds an ›artistic‹ element to the otherwise technical process. For the first time the photographer is perceived as an artist because the photographic image turns to be more like a painting. Therefore a differentiation between the pictorial and the documentary practices of photography seems to become necessary. It is important to stress that the artistic surplus in the definition at that time is achieved by *breaking* the accuracy of the photograph and not by using its documentary quality. A difference is made between the photograph as a document and the photograph as a work of art. Only later this differentiation will be overcome. Taking into account all of the aforementioned aspects, all photography that is not manipulated in the darkroom or altered in any other way can be called documentary.

When the film critic John Grierson writes in 1926 about the ›documentary value‹ of a film to differentiate it from the poor artificiality he identifies in feature films made in Hollywood, the term ›documentary‹ becomes more widely used also in connection with photography (cf. Starl 2002: 74). Documentary photography is supposed to depict first hand experience in a faithful and direct manner. Consequently, authenticity is considered to be one of the most significant aspects of documentary photography.

Authenticity versus Representation

But what does authenticity mean? Can one photograph be more authentic than any other? How can we tell? Within the discourse of visual culture it has been argued that despite the indexical relationship between photograph and world ›the camera produces representations – iconic signs translating the actual into the pictorial‹ (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 169). Even photographs produced in the so called ›straight approach‹ – which implies ›no manipulation of the negative or print, no cutting and pasting, no invented tableaux, no supplemental texts‹ (Solomon-Godeau 1991: xxviii) – do not show the world as it could have been perceived by anyone present at the location and the time of exposure. Even though a photograph bears a resemblance to reality it is not an equal substitute for reality itself. It is a representation of reality. According to

Stuart Hall »representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning« (Hall 2002: 61). Meaning is not directly connected to the things depicted in the image or to the photographic print itself. It is subject to the process of the image production as well as to varying parameters of reception. John Tagg states: »At every stage, chance effects, purposeful interventions, choices and variations produce meaning, whatever skill is applied and whatever division of labour the process is subject to. This is not the inflection of a prior (though irretrievable) reality, ... but the production of a new and specific reality« (Tagg 1988: 3). The reality of the image may therefore be very different from the direct perception of reality. The image has so called ›real effects‹ but it »cannot refer ... to a prephotographic reality as to a truth« (ibid.). Unable to depict reality or some kind of prephotographic truth, the documentary photograph as an image that is truthful and authentic seems to be impossible to achieve. Here we catch on with the second answer of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, which states that a documentary photograph is »just about nothing« (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 169).

Differentiating Documentary Photography from Other Photographic Practices

As the term ›documentary‹ is being used in a photographic context, however, there must be some way of differentiating a documentary photographic practice from other practices. Certain parameters help the viewer to perceive a photograph as documentary. Most importantly the image has a ›documentary appeal‹, which means that it features similarities to the personal perception of the world and is consistent to the basic conception of authenticity in a photograph in the aforementioned ›straight approach‹. But even though the notion of an authentic and truthful depiction of reality in a photograph has been proven wrong by visual culture discourse, it still serves as one major intention in the generation of documentary photographs as used in the news media or for private ends. The intention to take a picture as a piece of evidence in an affirmative way is as prevailing as ever. Otherwise many photographs would not be taken or published at all. The power of photography – especially of documentary photographs – is to visualize certain aspects of life or the world and to prove and circumstantiate the narrative going along with it.

The intention of this kind of photography is to ›show something as it is‹ which means, the author of the photograph tries – as far as possible – to achieve a congruency between her own perception of reality and the reality shown in the image. This often goes along with the notion of catching an atmosphere and

leaving out certain aspects to enhance others. Still the idea is to depict reality in an authentic way. In press photography for example, the professional photographer is well trained to reproduce an event or an atmosphere within the photograph. She will know exactly what to focus on and what to leave out. Even though the press photograph might be constructed, it will be perceived as an authentic document once published in the news media. In private photography the intention to create images usually is to document a special occasion ›as it is‹ to produce a material memory of a perishable moment to remember it. As the amateur is not trained to see in a photographic way, the result might be quite different from what she expected. On the other hand it might show things that were not supposed to be in the photograph and therefore make it even more ›authentic‹. Theoretically we know that the notion of an authentic depiction within a photograph is wrong. However, in the day-to-day production and perception of photographs this is still a popular way of dealing with them. Therefore, I suppose, barely anyone can state that he/she uses the theoretical framework in the perception of *any* photograph at *all* times.

The Importance of Context in Documentary Photography

The context is another aspect that seems to be of importance in the construction of meaning as well as in the perception of a photograph as documentary. A photographic image does not exist all by itself. It is embedded in a set of parameters that widely determine the way it is perceived. Are there any other photographs or images around? Is it presented as photographic print or reproduced in a magazine or newspaper? Is it framed on a museum wall or fixed with a magnet to the door of the refrigerator? Is there any text in form of a caption or a narrative going along with the photograph?



Confronted with a single image not knowing anything about the circumstances of its exposure usually leaves the viewer of a documentary photograph quite in the dark. This distinguishes a documentary photograph from one that is taken

for aesthetical reasons. Is the photograph self-explanatory, meaning that it can be accepted as a visual statement without further explanation, a broader context is not necessarily needed. A documentary photograph, though, usually tries to communicate a more complex set of ideas, which is often not possible to achieve in a single image without context.

Photo historian Beaumont Newhall states:

»However revealing or beautiful a documentary photograph may be, it cannot stand on its image alone. Paradoxically, before a photograph can be accepted as a document, it must itself be documented – placed in time and space. This may be effectively done by context, by including the familiar with the unfamiliar, either in one image or in paired images. A series of photographs, presented in succession on exhibition walls or on the pages of a book, may be greater than the sum of the parts«
(Newhall 1982: 246).

The context of the image is established by the combination with other images, by a text that goes along or by the form of publication. Of course this is essential for any photograph. But the degree of ›truthfulness‹ and ›authenticity‹ of a documentary photograph might be judged by the context of its appearance. Or is a photograph published in a yellow press magazine to be trusted the same way as one in the New York Times?

Artistic Documentary Photography

What has been said about documentary photography so far did not explicitly refer to an artistic practice. One reason for this omission is the fact that it is not easy to distinguish between an applied and an artistic practice in documentary photography. Neither the pictorial language of a single image nor the publication context may be very helpful. Today the transition between the genres is rather smooth, as journalistic photographs are being presented in art galleries and museums and art photography is printed in newsmagazines. The artistic practice to be discussed here is one that is explicitly generated for an art context without any journalistic intentions.

One might ask how the ›truthful‹ depiction of the world can go along with the assumed subjectivity and idiosyncrasy of an artistic vision. But here again the gap between theory and practice becomes obvious. In the applied photographic practice of journalism for example, documentary photographs are used as a form of visual evidence. Even though the photographer might be

aware of the impossibility of accomplishing an ›authentic‹ depiction of the world, she will still try to construct the meaning of the photograph as ›truthful‹ as possible. The artist on the other hand is likely to be very aware of the theoretical implications of the visual culture discourse and can thus exploit the theoretical background to achieve her goals.

One of the first artists to work with documentary photography (starting in the 1930s) is the American photographer Walker Evans. He pleads for the use of the term ›documentary style‹ to describe his work as he associates ›documentation‹ with the »police photography of a scene« (The Estate of Walker Evans 1982: 216). The notion of ›style‹ allows a subjectivity that is absent in the idea of presenting ›facts‹ in an applied documentary practice.

Evans helps to release documentary photography from the instrumental use in education and agitation and thus forms an understanding for its vanguard use. One of Evans' most important accomplishments is the disconnection of image and text. Before, basically any documentary photograph had a caption that stated at least the year of production and the whereabouts of the exposure. Evans wants the viewer to look at the photograph without knowing where and when it has been taken. Thus the viewer has to concentrate on the perception of the image itself. The world depicted – as usually referred to in the caption – becomes secondary to the photograph *as an image*. The context is established by a combination of images who direct the viewer's perception. Thereby Evans relies completely on the visual, which is a completely new way of dealing with documentary photography at that time.

This is also a major difference between an applied and an artistic practice of documentary photography. In the applied approach the things depicted are of major importance. Of course, the way the image is arranged is also important, but the perception is usually formed around *what* there is to see and if this is interesting or not. In the artistic approach sometimes there is nothing really to see or what there is to see seems not to be important. What is behind the photograph, the meta-text so to speak, gains of importance and guides the understanding of the image. This meta-text is based on a construction of meaning. Even though the artist just works like the journalist, framing the perceived world in the photographic image without manipulation, she has a much more complex set of instruments to accomplish her goals.

Code Orange

For a better understanding of the idea of construction within an artistic documentary photography I want to discuss the artwork »Code Orange« that has been photographed by the author in the spring of 2003. The work consists of 88 black and white photographs which were taken in Washington DC and New York City in March and April 2003 during the first weeks of the war in Iraq. Even though the military action was taking place in a remote theater of war, it retroacted upon the atmosphere in the US, especially in the capital and the terror-experienced city of New York. The title points to the US American »Homeland Security Advisory System«. *Orange* is the second highest threat level within this system, activating a certain set of security measures on an estimated terrorist threat. Knowing about this system and verifying that North American cities are depicted, the title is the first hint for a direction in which to read the work.

The black and white photographs show urban situations: street crossings, cars, buildings, parks, passers-by. Initially nothing seems to be specifically conspicuous. On a closer look one notices certain events. The police are closing off roads, in other places city streets are uncomfortably empty even though no security personnel can be traced. Concrete barriers are blocking sidewalks. Surveillance cameras are heavily monitoring garage exits. A man is fumbling underneath the engine hood of his van beside a concrete road block. Even though no palpable event can be traced within the images, something seems to be happening. Therefore suspicion is increasingly spreading. What are the two men talking about standing in the shadow between the parking cars? Who are the two young men eavesdropping with headphones on the park bench? Who is steering the car leaving the parking garage and what might this person be up to? And what about those white vans appearing at different places in the city?

The language of the images refers to one of observation as for example applied in the movie *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott 1998). The decisions to photograph with black and white film, to use a telephoto lens and to create some filmic series as to document consecutive action are part of the pictorial language employed. Just as the photographer herself, the viewer of the images becomes an observer, partly monitoring those who keep public space under surveillance. This is a way of disorganizing the distribution of power. Who is observing whom and why? The setting stays ambivalent. The white van, for example, in media use appears repeatedly in situations of observation. Not only in Hollywood movies it is as well home for the observer as it is shelter and

getaway car for the observed. In his spectacularly from a news helicopter filmed flight O.J. Simpson used a white van as getaway car. And for a long time the ›Washington Sniper‹ in 2002 was suspected to use a white van, which later turned out to be wrong. The white van is likewise a stage prop for the ›good‹ and the ›bad‹.

Singling out any one photograph of the »Code Orange«-series it will not give an explanation of what it is about or even why it was taken. The single photograph seems to offend the very basic idea of photographic practice: A photograph is taken either for aesthetic reasons or to differentiate between the particular – which is worthy to be framed in an image – and the unspecific – which is too common to be photographed. Most of the images of »Code Orange« show neither a spectacular aesthetical composition nor do they depict any event which seems to be noteworthy. In the normality they picture it is questionable why they were taken at all. In the context of the other images, however, the viewer starts to comprehend a certain idea that brings the photographs together. It is no longer important that a single image may show a random North American street crossing or some arbitrary architecture with passers-by. Only in the combination of the body of photographs together with the title the work as a whole can be conceived.

In the photographic process this kind of documentary photography needs a conceptual approach. As any other documentary photography the photographer visits certain places and draws on her perception of the world to generate the photographs. No manipulation either by staging a situation or by digital alteration afterwards is implied. Nevertheless, the city depicted in the images has probably not much to do with the impression any inhabitant or visitor might have had during the same time the piece was photographed. The reason for this difference can be sought in the process of construction. Being aware of certain habits of seeing and of photographic methods in creating an atmosphere of suspicion and surveillance the photographer uses these tools in conceiving her work. By narrowing down her own perception of the world to certain things she is particularly looking for, she suddenly sees suspicious activity everywhere. This atmosphere is further elaborated in the process of selecting adequate images. In using the technique of documentary photography the photographer manages to construct an overall image that cannot be perceived by others present at the location and time of exposure. One might accuse her of failing to supply an *authentic* image. On the other hand the photographs are truthful and comply with the photographer's own perception of the situations depicted. Thus this work is an accurate example

for the ambiguity of documentary photography in the first place and secondly for the manifold potential of the artistic use of documentary photography.

Images:

All images are from the series »Code Orange« © Bettina Lockemann 2003.

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