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Documentary Photography in the Art Gallery

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Introduction

Three years ago, on the day that Tate Modern opened, I overheard an American visitor discussing Andreas Gursky's large-scale photograph *Chicago, Board of Trade II*. However, he was not admiring it on any aesthetic or theoretical level. Instead, he was pointing out Bob, and Phil, and Mike. He too worked at the Board of Trade in Chicago and was using the image to indicate his workmates to his partner as if it were a group photograph. Despite the digital manipulation of the image by Gursky (certain parts of the picture are multiplied as if in a kaleidoscope) the visitor's employment of the photograph as a document rather than a work of art was understandable. The image, along with a number of other large-scale photographs by Gursky, was hung on the wall of one of the concourses facing the escalators and not in a gallery space.

In 2003, for Tate Modern's exhibition *Cruel and Tender* (the first major show dedicated wholly to photography at any Tate gallery) the Gursky image was transported to the other side of the wall and into the gallery space itself. One small step for a photograph, but a giant leap for photography at the Tate. Rather than being glimpsed out of the corner of our eye as we descend between floors, the photograph was now surrounded by the discourses of the art gallery. The short piece of text that accompanied Gursky's image in

Cruel and Tender invited us to notice its abstract and 'painterly' qualities, linking it to movements such as Abstract Expressionism. This caption, along with the silence and the presence of a security guard in the gallery room all collaborated to encourage quiet and prolonged contemplation of Gursky's photograph as a work of art.

The repositioning of *Chicago, Board of Trade II* might prompt us to ask a number of questions. First of all, what happens when a 'documentary' photograph is placed in the space of an art gallery? This question is complex and the devil is in the detail. Gursky's image was moved only a few metres, yet its repositioning within a formal exhibition space invited a subtle rereading of the image: less as a document and more as an expressive work. Following on from this we might ask the question: what exactly do we mean when we talk about documentary photography? It could be argued that the Gursky photograph is not a documentary picture at all. But the nature of documentary photography itself seems to be changing. Just as we have learnt to be highly suspicious of any photograph purporting to be an objective document, perhaps we are also allowing more consciously subjective images to take on the old role of documentary photography.

Taking the second question first, I will use the work of Abigail Solomon-Godeau to consider what ideas might make up the discursive formation of documentary photography. In order to consider the other question - what happens when such photographs are placed in the art gallery - it will be useful first to briefly examine how much association there has been between the documentary photograph and the art gallery. Finally, *Hidden*, Paul Seawright's recent exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, will be examined as a recent example of documentary work within a gallery context. This show and its book will be addressed in some detail in order to bring the above ideas together and to reflect upon the changing character of documentary photography in the 21st century.

The Discursive Formation of Documentary Photography

In her 1986 essay 'Who is Speaking Thus?' Solomon-Godeau examines how the words 'documentary' and 'photography' came together. Photographs in a style that we might now identify as 'documentary' were around for many years before the word was used to describe them. Solomon-Godeau argues therefore that the term 'documentary photography' is 'historical, not ontological'.¹ No matter how we might regard it now, for its first few decades, photography was seen as a medium of 'truth', an idea partly reinforced through its formative links with science.² It was only after around thirty years of Pictorialism, where the photograph was explicitly manipulated to demonstrate artistic expression, that the need arose to make distinctions between subjective 'art' and objective 'documentary' photography.

The word 'documentary' famously comes from John Grierson's review of a 1926 film by Robert Flaherty about Polynesian youth, wherein he described the film as having 'documentary' value.³ Within a few years the word was being applied to photography. Although 'documentary' had certain aesthetic associations (it was used early on to describe Eugene Atget's photographs of empty Parisian streets), it also carried with it other connotations. The films of

Flaherty (and indeed Grierson himself) often reflected a humanistic concern for others, usually others leading lives alien to the comfortable viewer.⁴ These connections between 'documentary' and a moral compassion for the plight of others in situations less fortunate than the audience carried over into the term's use in photography.

Such associations, Solomon-Godeau argues, have allowed for work made with the aim of social reform, such as Jacob Riis's 1880s images of New Yorkers living in poverty and Lewis Hine's pictures of immigrant workers made a few decades later, to be retrospectively placed into photographic history as pioneering instances of documentary photography (see for example, the chapter on 'Documentary' in Newhall's *The History of Photography* - a history based largely of course on the photographic collection of MoMA).⁵ Riis and Hine made their work for publication in the mass media: Riis took pictures to supplement his reformist book *How The Other Half Lives*, while Hine worked as a staff photographer for magazines such as *The Survey*, as well as publishing a book of his own. These examples, along with later work such as the photographs made by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and others for newspapers and magazines in order to gain support for struggling dust bowl farmers in the 1930s, have shaped the discursive formation of documentary photography.⁶ Solomon-Godeau notes that certain recurring visual tropes of documentary photography also emerge out of this early work such as the image of the victim and the spectacle of devastation. Although such imagery is instantly readable to a mass audience, the problem with these photographs, Solomon-Godeau suggests, is that they mask the things the camera cannot see: the political and economic circumstances that have created the situation.⁷

We can therefore identify certain central (though highly debatable) ideas in the discursive formation of documentary photography: the objectivity of the camera; a sense of morality and concern for what is shown; the depiction of places, people and events unlikely to be experienced by the viewer outside of representation (due to class difference, geographical location, etc); the need for the images to be distributed to a wide audience, usually via the mass media; and the repetition of a range of visual tropes.

Documentary Photography in the Art Gallery

Writing seventeen years ago, Solomon-Godeau refers in her essay to documentary photography's position 'within the discursive spaces of the mass media (and, more recently, within the discursive spaces of the gallery and museum)'.⁸ As that parenthetical aside suggests, documentary photography was already increasingly finding its way into gallery and museum spaces. Indeed this process had started many years before.

In Britain alone a number of important moments in a gradual repositioning can be identified. In the late 1960s, Bill Brandt was shown at the Hayward Gallery and Henri Cartier-Bresson at the V&A. Soon after, the ICA put on an exhibition which included the documentary work of photographers such as Don McCullin and Tony Ray-Jones. David Mellor and Ian Jeffrey's *The Real Thing: An Anthology of British Photography 1840-1950* (featuring many examples of documentary work) toured to art galleries across the country in

the mid-seventies. In 1989, to celebrate 150 years of the medium, The Royal Academy put on the tellingly titled *The Art of Photography 1839-1989*; a show in which McCullin and Ray-Jones also appeared alongside other documentary photographers such as Evans and Robert Frank. These are just a few instances of documentary work appearing in venues more well-known for showing the traditional media of art such as painting and sculpture.

It is also important to note that photography-based galleries, frequently showing documentary work, including The Half Moon Gallery (later Camerawork) in Bethnal Green and Impressions in York, also began to appear in the early 1970s. The Photographers' Gallery opened in London in 1971. Its first show, *The Concerned Photographer*, centred on the humanist work of documentary photographers such as Hine and David Seymour. The two main exhibitions currently showing at The Photographers' Gallery in 2003 (one based around a cheap and cheerful market in Hackney, the other recording violent deaths in Mexico) could both be placed under the heading of 'documentary'.⁹

Documentary photography has appeared in art galleries for many years. As well as this, photography galleries have consistently shown documentary photography for over three decades. But as I shall soon suggest, the instances of documentary photography appearing in art galleries (as opposed to photography galleries) has noticeably increased in recent times. I will go on to examine a specific example in order to consider if there are certain important differences between seeing work in a gallery dedicated to photography and seeing it in an art gallery. Before this there is one other significant change in the locating of documentary photography to take into account.

Documentary Photography and the Printed Page

The remit of *Cruel and Tender*, as indicated in its subtitle, was 'The Real in the Twentieth Century Photograph'. A great deal of the work by the 23 photographers in the show could easily be regarded as documentary photography. Evans and August Sander were positioned by the curators as the two key figures in the exhibition, their photographs hung in two central rooms.¹⁰ But Evans and Sander's images (like most of the earlier work in the show) were not originally intended for gallery viewing. Evans, as has already been established, made much of the work shown in *Cruel and Tender* for newspapers and magazines. Sander created his survey of German people in the 1920s and 30s to be published in a vast series of books, although the war meant that only one smaller volume, titled *The Face of Our Time*, materialised. In fact, *The Face of Our Time* was on display in Tate Modern, but it was placed along with many of the other books in which the images in the exhibition originally appeared inside a row of glass cases on the concourse just outside the gallery rooms (in virtually the same place as the aforementioned Gursky photograph had hung when the gallery first opened). In a talk to go along with the exhibition, John Tagg described the physical placement of these books in Tate Modern during the run of the show as representing, 'a guilty memory' of the original context for which the photographs were made.¹¹

However, much of the later documentary work in *Cruel and Tender* was created with a gallery context in mind. Paul Graham's 1980s series *Beyond Caring* (made in job centres) and Martin Parr's more recent *Common Sense* (on global consumerism) were both made with exhibitions as their primary outcomes. The book format also remains an important resolution of documentary work. *Beyond Caring* came out as a publication in 1986, a year or so after the series was first shown. By the time Parr was making *Common Sense* in the late nineties it had become standard practice for a book to be issued simultaneously with the show. Books of documentary photographs are now intrinsically linked with their equivalent exhibitions. They appear at the same time and often echo each other in their design.

As well as this, publication in periodicals has become far less central to the distribution of a great deal of documentary work. At a conference organised by Photoforum at the V&A earlier this year, Julian Stallabrass argued that much documentary photography is now made primarily for galleries and books. Appearing in a magazine or newspaper has, Stallabrass suggested, become a distant and occasional secondary aim (and is generally used to promote the former two outcomes, rather than as an end in itself).¹² Indeed, if we were to pick up a Sunday newspaper supplement a decade ago, the chances are that we would find a number of traditional documentary features within. Now we would be lucky to find one. If we want to see documentary photography these days our Sunday might be better spent in an art gallery (and of course visiting its book shop).

Hidden at The Imperial War Museum

As has been established, documentary photography appearing in art galleries is hardly a new phenomenon. However, in Britain at least, there does seem to have been a marked increase in the exhibiting of documentary work within the art space in the last few years. Some recent examples of this in London-based galleries might include the Martin Parr retrospective at the Barbican; Nan Goldin's *The Devil's Playground* at the Whitechapel (both in 2002); Philip-Lorca di Corcia's *A Storybook Life* also at the Whitechapel; and *Cruel and Tender* itself in 2003. One of the most interesting recent examples of documentary work being placed in the art gallery is Paul Seawright's series *Hidden*. It is this exhibition (and its accompanying book) that I now intend to focus on in order to bring together the points made so far and to consider what the ramifications might be of the placement of documentary photography within the discursive space of the art gallery. The discursive formation of art, it could be argued, is centred around such ideas as authorship and subjective expression, as well as certain key genres such as landscape.¹³

Seawright was invited by the Imperial War Museum's Art Commissions Committee (ACC) to make photographs in response to the American assault on Afghanistan after the 11 September attacks. The ACC, previously known as the Artistic Records Committee, has been commissioning artists to make work based on conflict situations for over thirty years. In the book of *Hidden*, Marina Vaizey of the ACC also emphasises the links between the Imperial War Museum and 'contemporary British art' since the museum's beginnings in 1917.¹⁴ The Museum's collection of works by 20th and 21st century British

artists is, according to Vaizey, 'second in quantity only to the Tate'.¹⁵ Seawright is consistently referred to as an artist in Vaizey's foreword and throughout the book, his presence within the Museum's collection (alongside Henry Moore, Paul Nash, John Keane, et al) further embedding his work within the canon of art.

As I have indicated, there were two outcomes from Seawright's time in Afghanistan during June 2002: an exhibition and a book both titled *Hidden*. A selection from the series was exhibited in a new and unnamed gallery space at The Imperial War Museum in February and March the following year. The presentation of the work at the Museum, printed large and spaced apart in a 'white cube' gallery (complete with a seat in the middle), helped to associate it further with art. Outside the gallery space visitors to the Museum noisily discussed missiles and photographed each other in front of the machines of war. Inside, an atmosphere of peaceful and sustained consideration was evoked. The majority of Seawright's photographs in the book version of *Hidden* are placed on its right-hand pages, with the opposite page remaining blank. This concentrates our attention on one image at a time, paralleling our experience in the gallery. Both incarnations of *Hidden* are presented as Seawright's impression of the environment he visited; he is identified as the expressive author of the work.

The meditative feeling suggested by the context of *Hidden* in both its gallery and book form is mirrored in the photographs themselves. *Hidden* shows us no victims of war, nor does it present the viewer with what Mark Durden in the book refers to as the 'spectacle of ruins'.¹⁵ Instead, what we see is the desert, scattered debris, innocuous roads and abandoned Taliban barracks. The images are often quite empty, yet we are aware of what has happened and what remains unseen (one of the pictures, foregrounded by a large expanse of sand is titled simply *Minefield*). Rather than depict the victims and ruins that, as Solomon-Godeau argues, often stand in place of the concealed political and economic situation, Seawright is trying to suggest what is 'hidden' through metaphor (a reading of the work that is encouraged by the texts that appear in the book).

In a piece on *Hidden for Portfolio*, David Chandler refers to David Company's essay 'Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on problems of 'late photography''.¹⁶ In this essay Company argues that 'late photographs', images that are not of an event itself but rather of the traces of an event, are becoming increasingly common.¹⁷ As video and new technologies take over the reportage role previously occupied by the still photograph, photography has been left with the task of 'picking up the pieces' after the action has taken place. The 'decisive moment' is no longer captured by photography; documentary photography has moved on.¹⁸ Often such photographs are now no longer a trace of what happened, but a 'trace of a trace'. We only see the aftermath.

Referring to such imagery (including that of Seawright himself), Company goes on to say that the 'late photograph' has become central to art's 'current dialogue with contemporary photography'.¹⁹ Further to this, Company continues, 'There is a reticent muteness in these images that leaves them

open to interpretation'.²⁰ All is not revealed to the viewer, who must instead imagine what has occurred. The pictures require metaphorical reading. This subtler, contemplative use of the documentary photograph may also tie in with the perception that photography can only go so far in revealing any kind of objective truth through the depiction of spectacle. This same realisation and the resulting stylistic changes open the way for some documentary photography to be more easily regarded as the subjective, expressive work of an artist.

Seawright's images are far from the dynamic front line photographs of McCullin or Robert Capa. Rather they recall much earlier war photographs such as those of the American Civil War by Matthew Brady and the Crimean War by Roger Fenton. This link is further enhanced by the tone of the pictures; sometimes the images in *Hidden* seem almost monochromatic, bleached of colour. In the book, Durden compares Valley, one of Seawright's photographs of 'spent ordinance', with Fenton's famous 1855 picture *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, where strewn cannonballs can be read as skulls. Fenton's image, Durden argues, 'collapses the landscape genre into war reportage'.²¹ There is a similar 'collapsing' of genres in Seawright's photographs (his work is referred to as both 'documentary' and 'landscape' on different occasions in Durden's text).²² Only this time the full consequences of such a fusion are borne out via the position of Seawright's work in a gallery setting. Whereas Fenton's work was made for newspaper reproduction, Seawright's appropriation of landscape, perhaps the most publicly accepted genre of art, is shown within a gallery environment, strengthening further the movement of his documentary images into the discursive formation of art.

We can see from the example of Seawright's *Hidden* that the discourses of documentary photography and art are blending and clashing. The work maintains a sense of moral concern (it was made with the assistance of Landmine Action and the Halo Trust) and it depicts a place likely to be unknown to the majority of its viewers.²³ Yet the objectivity of the camera is replaced by an emphasis on Seawright's own subjective experience of Afghanistan. Faith in the photograph to reveal all has been superseded by the very opposite idea: a resignation made clear in the series' title that things have remained unseen.

Finally, although the exhibition is touring and a book has been published, the audience for *Hidden* is not as wide as that of much previous documentary photography.²⁴ Nor, perhaps, should it be. This is not work that can be best placed in a Sunday supplement. Some of those dwindling documentary discourses have been replaced by ones more directly associated with art: Seawright's subjective point-of-view; the idea that he is the expressive author of the work; the employment of the landscape genre; the openness of the images to interpretation. All of these aspects of *Hidden* tilt the balance closer to the discursive formation of art than that of documentary. The photographs are therefore appropriately positioned within the space of the art gallery.

Conclusion

Viewing documentary photographs in the art gallery changes how the pictures are perceived. But it is not just the context for such photographs that has changed. Paul Seawright's *Hidden* is symptomatic of how the genre of documentary photography has changed in recent years. As the discourses of documentary photography have entered the art gallery, so too have elements of the discourses of art seeped into and reconfigured documentary photography itself.

Notes

¹ Solomon-Godeau, A. ([1986] 1991) 'Who is Speaking Thus?' in *Photography at the Dock*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p.169

² The title of Fox-Talbot's 1844 book of photographs *The Pencil of Nature* epitomises this early idea that photographs were objective and 'natural' traces of reality.

³ Solomon-Godeau (1991) op.cit., pp.299-300

⁴ A good example of this is Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1935) which depicted the difficult lives of Aran Islanders struggling to survive against the elements.

⁵ As one example among many, see the chapter on 'Documentary' in Newhall, B. (1964) *The History of Photography*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, pp.134-151.

⁶ The images were made for the Farm Security Administration under the auspices of Roy Stryker, who often dictated what the subjects of the images should be. See Solomon-Godeau (1991) op.cit., pp.176-9.

⁷ Ibid. pp.178-9

⁸ Ibid. p.170

⁹ The shows were: Stephen Gill *The Wick and the eponymous Enrique Metinides*. The Photographers' Gallery, London, 24 July-14 September 2003.

¹⁰ See Dexter, E. and Weski, T. (2003), 'Curators' Introduction' in Dexter and Weski ed. *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth Century Photograph*. London: Tate Publishing, p.10.

¹¹ Tagg, J. and Edwards, S. 'The Camera at Work' unpublished talk at Tate Modern, London, 24 June 2003

¹² Stallabrass, J. unpublished talk at 'Siting the Photograph' conference (organised by Photoforum), V&A, London, 10 May 2003

¹³ See Burgin, V. (1986), 'The End of Art Theory' in *The End of Art Theory*. London: Macmillan, pp. 140-204 for a discussion around these, and many other issues.

¹⁴ Vaizey, M. 'Foreword' in Seawright, P. (2003), *Hidden*. London: Imperial War Museum, unpaginated

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Durden, M. (2003), "'The Poetics of Absence": Photography in the "Aftermath" of War' Ibid.

¹⁷ Chandler, D. (2003), 'Paul Seawright Hidden' in *Portfolio*, no.37, 2003, p.67

¹⁸ Company, D. (2003), 'Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on problems of "late photography"' in Green, D. ed. *Where is the Photograph?* Brighton and Maidstone: Photoforum and Photoworks, pp.123-132

¹⁹ Ibid. p.130

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Durden, M. (2003), Op.Cit.

²² Ibid.

²³ In his 'Acknowledgements' Seawright tells us: 'Landmine Action works tirelessly to address land mine issues in countries worldwide... Halo Trust have been clearing mines and unexploded ordinance in Afghanistan for 13 years...' Ibid.

²⁴ *Hidden* went on to be exhibited at the Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Landudno, 24 May -5 July 2003

Stephen Bull is a Brighton-based artist, writer, curator and lecturer. His work has been shown at The Photographers' Gallery, London, and as part of The Shoreditch Photo Biennale in 1998. He has written for *Creative Camera*, *Art Review* and *Portfolio*, and is a regular contributor to *Source* magazine. He is currently curating the OpenSubmission show for the Brighton Photo Biennial 2003. He lectures on the Media Arts, Fine Art, and Communication Design degrees at Northbrook College and on BA(Hons) Photography at The University of Portsmouth.

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