

documentary and corporate violence

allan sekula

A small group of contemporary artists are working on an art that deals with the social ordering of people's lives. Most of their work involves still photography and video; most relies heavily on written or spoken language. I'm talking about a representational art, an art that refers to something beyond itself. Form and mannerism are not ends in themselves. These works might be about any number of things, ranging from the material and ideological space of the "self" to the dominant social realities of corporate spectacle and corporate power. The initial questions are these: "How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities and how are our lives invented for us by those in power?" If these questions are asked only within the institutional boundaries of elite culture, only within the "art world," then the answers will be merely academic. Given a certain poverty of means, this art aims toward a wider audience and toward considerations of concrete social transformation.

We might be tempted to think of this work as a variety of documentary. That's all right as long as we expose the myth that accompanies the label, the folklore of photographic truth. The rhetorical strength of documentary is imagined to reside in the unequivocal character of the camera's evidence, in an essential realism. I shouldn't have to point out that photographic meaning is indeterminate; the same picture can convey a variety of messages under differing

presentational circumstances. Consider the evidence offered by bank holdup cameras. Taken automatically, these pictures could be said to be unpolled by sensibility, an extreme form of documentary. If the surveillance engineers who developed these cameras have an aesthetic, it's one of raw, technological instrumentality, "Just the facts, ma'am." But a courtroom is a battleground of fictions. What is it that a photograph points to? A young white woman holds a submachine gun. The gun is handled confidently, aggressively. The gun is almost dropped out of fear. A fugitive heiress. A kidnap victim. An urban guerilla. A willing participant. A case of brainwashing. A case of rebellion. A case of schizophrenia. The outcome, based on the "true" reading of the evidence, is a function less of "objectivity" than of politics maneuvering. Reproduced in the mass media, this picture might attest to the omniscience of the state within a glamorized and mystifying spectacle of revolution and counterrevolution. But any police photography that is publicly displayed is both a specific attempt at identification and a reminder of police power over "criminal elements." The only "objective" truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something—in this case, an automated camera—was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else is up for grabs.

Someone once wrote of the French photographer Eugene Atget that he depicted the streets of Paris as though they were scenes of crime. That remark serves to poeticize a rather deadpan, non-expressionist style, to celebrate the photographer in his role as detective, searching for clues. Documentary photography has amassed mountains of evidence. In this pictorial presentation of "fact," the genre has contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world. A truly critical social documentary will frame the crime, the trial and the system of justice and its official myths. Artists working toward this end may or may not produce images that are theatrical and overtly contrived, they may or may not present tests that read like fiction. Social truth is something other than a matter of convincing style.

A political critique of the documentary genre is sorely needed. Socially conscious artists have much to learn from both the successes and the mistakes, compromises, and collaborations of their Progressive Era and New Deal predecessors. How do we assess the close historical partnership of documentary artists and social democrats? The co-optation of the documentary style by corporate capitalism (notably the oil companies and the television networks) in the late 1940's? How do we disentangle ourselves from the authoritarian and bureaucratic aspects of the genre, from its implicit positivism? (All of this is evidenced by any one second of an Edward R. Murrow or Walter Cronkite telecast.) How do we produce an art that elicits dialogue rather than uncritical, pseudo-political affirmation?

Looking backward, at the art-world hubbub about “photography as a fine art,” we find a near-pathological avoidance of any such questioning. A curious thing happens when documentary is officially recognized as art. Suddenly the audience’s attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist. Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist. A cult of authorship, an auteurism, takes hold of the image, separating it from the social conditions of its making and elevating it above the multitude of lowly and mundane uses to which photography is commonly put. The culture journalists’ myth of Diane Arbus is interesting in this regard. Most readings of her work careen along an axis between opposing poles of realism and expressionism. On the one hand, her portraits are seen as transparent vehicles for the social or psychological truth of her subjects; Arbus elicits meaning from their persons. At the other extreme is projection. The work is thought to express her tragic vision (a vision confirmed by her suicide); each image is nothing so much as a contribution to the artist’s self-portrait. These readings coexist, they enhance one another despite their mutual contradiction. I think that a good deal of the generalized aesthetic appeal of Arbus’ work, along with that of most art photography, has to do with this indeterminacy of reading, this sense of being cast adrift between profound social insight and refined solipsism. At the heart of this fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist’s humanity is a certain disdain for the “ordinary” humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the “other,” exotic creatures, objects of contemplation. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so suspect if it weren’t for the tendency of professional documentary photographers to aim their cameras downward, toward those with little power or prestige. (The obverse is the cult of celebrity, the organized production of envy in a mass audience.) The most intimate, human-scale relationship to suffer mystification in all this is the specific social engagement that results in the image; the negotiation between photographer and subject in the making of a portrait, the seduction, coercion, collaboration, or rip off. But if we widen the angle of our view, we find that the broader institutional politics of elite and “popular” culture are also being obscured in the romance of the photographer as artist.

Fred Lonidier is one of a small number of photographers who set out deliberately to work against the strategies that have succeeded in making photography a high art. Their work begins with the recognition that photography is operative at every level of our culture. That is, they insist on treating photographs not as privileged objects but as common cultural artifacts. The solitary, sparsely captioned photograph on the gallery wall is a sign, above all, of an aspiration toward the aesthetic and market conditions of modernist painting and sculpture. In this white void, meaning is thought to emerge entirely from within the artwork. The importance

of the framing discourse is masked, context is hidden. Lonidier, on the other hand, openly brackets his photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves. These pictures are located within a narrative structure. I'm not talking about "photo essays," a cliché-ridden form that is the noncommercial counterpart to the photographic advertisement. Photo essays are an outcome of a mass-circulation picture-magazine aesthetic, the aesthetic of the merchandisable column-inch and rapid, excited, reading.

Fred Lonidier's *Health and Safety Game* is about the "handling" of industrial injury and disease by corporate capitalism, pointing to the *systemic* character of everyday violence in the workplace. Some statistics: one in four American workers is exposed on a daily basis to death, injury and disease-causing work conditions. According to a Nader report, "job casualties are statistically at least three times more serious than street crime." (So much for TV cop shows.)

An observation: anyone who has ever lived or worked in an industrial working-class community can probably attest to the commonness of disfigurement among people on the job and in the street. Disease is less visible and has only recently become a public issue. I can recall going to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry and visiting the coal mine there. Hoarse-voiced men, retired miners, led the tourists through a programmed demonstration of mining technology. When the time came to deal with safety, one of the guides set off a controlled little methane explosion. No one mentioned black-lung disease in this corporate artwork, although the evidence rasped from the throats of the guides.

Lonidier's "evidence" consist of twenty or so case studies of individual workers, each displayed on large panels laid out in a rather photojournalistic fashion. The reference to photojournalism is deliberate, I think, because the work refuses to deliver any of the empathic goodies that we are accustomed to in photo essays. Conventional "human interest" is absent. Lonidier is aware of the ease with which liberal documentary artists have converted violence and suffering into aesthetic objects. For all his good intentions, for example, Eugene Smith in *Minamata* provided more a representation of his compassion for mercury-poisoned Japanese fisher-folk than one of their struggle for retribution against the corporate polluter. I'll say it again: the subjective aspect of liberal aesthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle. Pity, mediated by an appreciation of great art, supplants political understanding. It has been remarked that Eugene Smith's portrait of a Minamata mother bathing her retarded and deformed daughter is a deliberate reference to the Pieta.

Unlike Smith, Lonidier takes the same photographs that a doctor might. When the evidence is hidden within the body, Lonidier borrows and copies x-ray films. These pictures have a brutal, clinical effect. Each worker's story is reduced to a rather schematic account of injury,

disease, hospitalization, and endless bureaucratic run-around by companies trying to shirk responsibility and liability. All too frequently we find that at the end of the story the worker is left unemployed and under-compensated. At the same time, though, these people are fighting. A machinist with lung cancer tells of stealing samples of dust from the job, placing them on the kitchen griddle in a homemade experiment to detect asbestos, a material that his bosses had denied using. The anonymity of Lonidier's subjects is a precaution against retaliation against them; many are still fighting court cases.

Lonidier's presentation is an analog of sorts for the way in which corporate bureaucrats handle the problems of industrial safety, yet he subverts the model by telling the story from below, from the place occupied by the worker in the hierarchy. The case-study form is a model of authoritarian handling of human lives. The layout of the panels reflects the distribution of power. Quotes from the workers are set in type so small that they are nearly unreadable. The titles are set in large type: "Machinist's Lung," "Egg-Packer's Arm." The body and the life are presented as they have been fragmented by management. Injury is a loss of labor power, a negative commodity, overhead. Injury is not a diminishing of a human life but a statistical impingement on the corporate profit margin.

The danger exists, here as in other works of socially conscious art, of being overcome by the very oppressive forms and conditions one is critiquing, of being devoured by the enormous machinery of material and symbolic objectification. Political irony walks a thin line between resistance and surrender.

Nevertheless, Lonidier's work documents monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life. One realizes that the health and safety issue goes beyond the struggle for compensation, enforcement of safety standards and improved working conditions. Against violence of this scale, violence directed at the human body, at the environment and at working people's ability to control their own lives, we need to counterpose an active resistance to monopoly capitalism's increasing power and arrogance.

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