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Research in Practice

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When considering my practice, I intend to inquire into three key concepts, Representation, Activism, Identity. These three concepts are ones in which I personally consider are moral necessities when I create and engage with narratives when creating imagery. I will use modern and contemporary examples for my images to display, despite the progression of an ever-changing art world. Each of these words and concepts are looming when creating a narrative in documentary photography. I will also use concepts explored by Theorists such as John Berger, John Tagg and Geoffrey Batchan who each pose unique insights into each of the concepts I explore for my Dissertation, creating a question which relates to my practice and one in which I can expand upon in my independent inquiry.

Representation

When considering my practice, which is documentary photography, representation is a consideration, lingering in all the projects that I photograph as there are also moral implications due to the sensitive nature of my work, often representation is essential to my projects being successful and effective. Photography as a subject has a history of creating misrepresentations of stories and individuals to better match the aims of their projects at the time to create an agreeable narrative for the social conform at the times as stated by Susan Sontag "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality" (On photography 1977). This reality is often true, Sontag touches on the idea of the power of the individual behind the camera, reality is to what they decide to conform it to.

When considering representing individuals, often is a successful way of navigating this concept is by allowing their voice to echo through the work you create, an artist that successfully navigated this was Jim Goldberg, his photo-Book called Rich and Poor, a series of works based in San Francisco from 1977 to 1985, Goldberg often struggled with the social disparities in the world when referencing this project he stated "I can't let of a society where I believe in a society where things really will get better" often representation of individuals is also controlled by an individual's morals due to nature of how one approaches a project, ones views on a group can often impact and influence the way they approach a subject matter such as the social divide Goldberg tackles in Rich and Poor. Goldberg believed in a society where things could get better and through his Rich and Poor project, he sought to present a society that needed to change.

It's kind of stinky living in this hotel



I don't have nothing only \$10

I keep waiting for someone to come in my door and give me money

But nobody ever will. Joe Petroski



We haven't done anything to promote it, but she seems to think that she is Shirley Temple. She is so sophisticated. I wonder what she may become.

John Steinbeck

Figure 1

Jim Goldberg's Rich and poor project aimed to capture the two sides of life in San Francisco, it was meant to represent those disparities present in one city and act as a metaphor for the rest of the world, his method of representation of including the comments made by the individuals in writing on the photos also gives a stark reality of the difference in individuals, the difference in hand writing it echos the gulf that was between these groups of people through the visuals of their hand writing. Goldberg adds an interesting dimension by allowing his subjects to involve themselves in the narrative itself.

Explored in an accumulation of essays, Goldberg's work is often "identical, with the visual impression an observer would get" so (Photography, vision and Representation, 1975) by adding their voice in the photo it allows the individuals to have a stake in how they are portrayed leading to the stark impression felt by Goldberg being received by the viewer. Therefore, Goldberg's methods overcome any representation issues that may often arise

when tackling a topic like poverty due to the ethical and moral concerns present but by providing a juxtaposition in his book of the Affluent and impoverished in one city, he allowed for the book to represent and echo the call for a need to change.

Representation itself is present in all forms of photography whether it be landscape, Portraiture, or documentary it is a key component, as how something is represented often drives and it is perceived by the masses.

John Tagg explores representation in his book 'The Burden of representation 1977'. He explores the indexical nature of how the photography "Guarantees nothing" as often we can distort meaning to suit our own desires. The photography can be changed based on the material used and therefore the meaning can be changed to suit an individual's narrative. Tagg goes on to state "dispersed transformations in society and in ways of thinking about it, representing it, and seeking to act on it" Tagg references the idea that society itself changes the way we represent and interpret photographs, and therefore references the relationship between social change and photography, demonstrating the changing ideas in how the photograph is represented.

You could also argue that Tagg has been influenced by his viewpoint from the 1980s, a modern view on John Tagg's 'Burden of Representation' would argue a similar method, the one who controls the lens, controls its meaning due to pace as which a modern photograph is taken, so a modern view possesses the foundations that were set by Tagg demonstrating the strength of his argument . Representation has a deep relationship with photography and

is a key concept to be considered when holding the camera. The Lense itself is a powerful tool to which photographers have the power to control narratives through how subjects are represented, leading representation to play a fundamental role in photography.

Identity

Morality and representation play a pivotal role in my practice, identity is often a conciseness that I consistently must consider in relation to my own practice as a photographer, as often that will influence how i identify with another individuals identity. Due to my interaction with people within my work and how I portray them in the photographs I capture, there is often a sense of fiction when you consider porterautre and photojournalism in relation to identity rather we “catch a glimpse” to the identity and truth to the individual we are exploring. As explored in ‘truth is not in the mirror’ 2011 this project intends the reveal the complex nature of Identity and the idea of “fun house mirror” reflection that is created between the individual and the photographs relating to the concept that one's identity cannot be echoed by a photograph rather contemporary photography is a “highly constructed artifact”.



Figure 2

Will Steacy is a documentary photographer from the USA. His photobook called 'from 'down these street ' is a harsh but realistic depiction of the times we live in, it is an identity of the modern age, his works and motives when he considers portraiture relate to my own when I consider identity in my works, he seeks to identify with the individuals first . Steacy has stated himself that he seeks his subjects "to give part of him/herself" to an image when he captures portraiture, this concept I believe is key to a successful representation of one identity through a photograph and is what differs it from the 'Artificial' concept previously referenced. By allowing a subject to give in to a photo and in a sense intertwine one's own identity in the image, it allows the viewer to attach to the identity which is something contemporary photography often loses.

What empowers Stacey in his work is his lack of 'Sentimentality' when visiting communities an example being from 'down these streets' the photography, his ability to endanger himself when exploring these identities allows him to become intertwined in these identities he intends to capture, leading to images like *Figure 2*, this subject has covered his face and identity from the viewer and yet, from the representation and the framing of the image by Stacey he can begin to gauge the individuals inner struggles.

Identify, lies within the artist and the photographer capturing the image, the theory related this identifies with "The photographer's eye 1966" this book explores a series of photographs by different men for different reasons, but each photography maintains a unique relationship with identify throughout. This book demonstrates the relationship with time and identity as often when we create a depiction of an image by how it is captured in that moment. As time has progressed and the Lense became faster, " the eye became incapable of registering" this concept is a compelling viewpoint as modern photography identities often become lost due to the pace in which photography is created in the modern age. The idea anyone can create a photography means that often in the modern day we lose the meaning of a photography and therefore the identities become lost.

Activism

Photojournalism is often a form of activism, the narratives formed through photographs often comment on the social dipartites present, even in the modern-day activism is a consciousness through people, black lives matter, homelessness and LGBTQ+ etc. Each of these groups are a modern example of activism but the photography that captures these groups are a footnote in history and the photographs of them will be viewed for centuries to come, which is why photography is invaluable to activism, it documents and continues that moment, the momentum created by the groups through the image

As acknowledged by an activist 'We animals media' "Photographs are incredibly powerful' and they can "overcome language barrier". As previously stated, this is a testament to the power of photographs, it demonstrates that visual language often displays detail often missed by human eye. The media in the modern age is flooded by thousands of images through all types of medium, which means the human brain cannot filter and differentiate

one image from the next, the concept that the stark imagery is often associated with activism means the works cannot be disregarded by society as 'we animals made' often do their work associated with animals abuse.



Figure 3

The image shown in figure 3 is an image by Bob Fitch an American Photojournalist, it was taken during the American civil rights movement during the 1960s when the movement began to gain momentum. Figure 3 was taken during 1966 at a speaking tour in Alabama, this image shows the control and power Martin Luther King Jr had over his audience. The attention demonstrates the impact he had, this shoot by Fitch focused on Martin Luther King Jr but these photos have been Fitch's legacy. The power that Martin Luther King Jr had over the civil rights revolution as an activist leader throughout history is striking and it is the images combined with the words that often are used to reference him in the modern day, when you reference the 'I have a dream' speech it shows the impact an image can make to a movement Martin Luter king Jr is now a part of the study of the civil rights movement but without the images the power the words hold would be lost to history. Fitch's images were intended to show the power of the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s. He captured their resistance to the conventions that American society were trying to force

against African American people and Fitch's images capturing this power are iconic images in demonstrating the boldness of this movement.

When considering activism and Identity, each of these concepts work in tandem in photography. As often the identity of the photographer plays a role in the origin of their morals within their works, in the case of Marther Rosler and many documentary photographers alike. A Theorist who follows this concept closely is Geoffrey Batchan.

Geoffrey Published his infamous book "Burning with Desire" in 1997 the ideas that he develops in this novel explore identity within photography as he stated "is photography to be identified with (its own) nature or with the culture that surrounds it" this relates heavily to the concepts that I have explored above in relation to identity and activism. It can be seen throughout documentary photography in the past and present, photographs are often associated with the contexts that surround it, it is not identified as a singular identity rather it is associated with "historical and ontological identity".

Photography cannot be separated from what it captures rather, despite the photographs with the right ethical concepts behind it, it cannot be disassociated from what society chooses to see based on its concepts rather photography's identity lies within photography's "history" as Batchan states.



Figure 4

Martha Rosler, she is an American documentary photographer based in New York City, her project and action series in the 1980s called 'if you lived here' was a comment on the state of homelessness in New York city. In this project she viewed the homeless as the "tip of the iceberg" in relation to the imbalance in New York city. Rosler is the epitome of all the subjects I have explored in this essay as she combines the concepts of Identity, representation and activism within her project, all concepts play a role in different aspects in this project.

Within this project she sought to re-identify homeless people, as society often restricts homelessness to the people that are visible on the streets rather opening the viewpoints that the term homeless goes beyond this and can also be the people who stay with friends and relatives, rather they are required a more 'rigours' identity. Her work in the exhibitions were a combination from artist, architects and homeless people alike, all to make a statement of the state of New York, in a sense this work represented the voices of the often

'invisible' people within New York City. Rosler goes onto explore that she believes that 'action' possesses more power than representation in photography, it gave the homeless a "power to act" rather than creating a representation of their action that most modern photographers tend to lean towards. Rosler through her work makes an impact on New York City as she gives the voice to the invisible through her work, she does not seek to form her own representations, rather she allows them to voice their own issues through creating artwork related to it.

To conclude, when considering representation, activism and identity, all are subjects that play a pivotal role in the ethics and morals related to any documentary project being undertaken. Each idea and concept related to each of these words were explored by theorists like Batchan and Sontag photography's identity and representational strategies rely heavily on how society seeks to reference the concepts rather the photographer has no control over his photograph. The context and social issues of that present moment will overshadow any original ideas related to the image that the photographer may seek to discuss. In my dissertation I would seek to explore this idea of how Photography's identity is interpreted by how society interprets it and how true this statement is in a modern-day setting. So, one question I may explore in my dissertation is 'How does the representation strategy a photographer chooses to cause a photograph to be interpreted in both past and present documentary photographs'? Or 'How has the modern identity of the photograph become lost in the culture that surrounds it or can photography through representational strategies from its own narrative?' Each of these questions pose important ethical questions

in relation to my own practice and something that I believe requires more research for the benefit of the longevity of my images and how they are interpreted.

Figures

Figure 1

Image 1

"It's kind of stinky living in this hotel. I don't have nothing only \$10. I keep waiting for someone to come in my door and give me money but nobody ever will." Rich and Poor Series San Francisco. USA. 1984. © *Jim Goldberg*

Image 2

"We haven't done anything to promote it, but she seems to think she is Shirley Temple. She is so sophisticated. I wonder what she may become." Rich and Poor Series San Francisco. USA. 1983. © *Jim Goldberg*

Figure 2

Will Steacy American, b. 1980 Tony, San Francisco, 2010 from Down These Mean Streets
Pigmented ink print 30 x 24" 2010.14.4 Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art Museum
purchase from Mrs. Victoria S. Higgins in memory

Figure 3

Martin Luther King Jr., Eutaw, AL 1966 people to people speaking tour; note attentive boy at right
elbow Bob Fitch

Figure 4

If You Lived Here 1989 Martha Rosler

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