Salisbury, Ernest

2004100

Documentary Photography and Visual Activism

Documentary Practice, M4X01631

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Documentary Practice Research: 1507 words

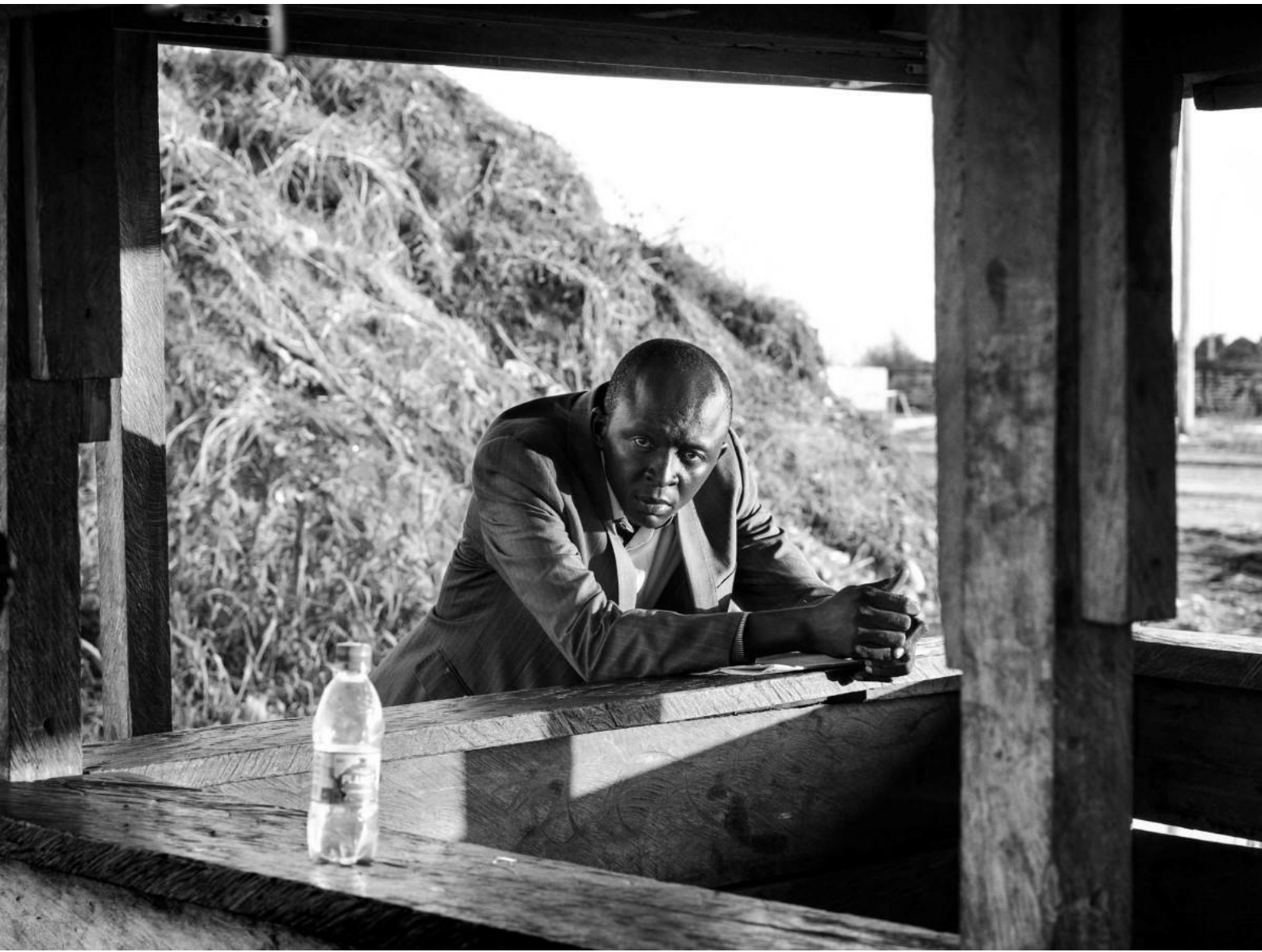

Figure 1: Congo, 2013. “Another Congo” Alex Majoli, ASX, 2015.

In our contemporary civilization there are two underlying factors of why humans create art: the need for understanding the physical, the non-physical, and even the meta-physical; then there is the human need to record events that are deemed to signify enough importance they deserve historical documentation. (Mullen, 1988) Documentary photography cannot be defined or narrowed into one sentence, the very mechanical act of photography is open to expression and technique of the photographer. It can be argued that every single human who takes a photo is creating their own style of photography. As described by the Tate Modern “Documentary photography is a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects, and events, and is often used in reportage.” (Tate, 2021)

Figure 2: Karina Sukkar. Patrick Baz, BBC, 2021.

Above is an image taken off the BBC, the woman is Karina Sukkar a Lebanese architect and designer, standing on the balcony of her damaged apartment. As it overlooks the horrible debris of the port of Lebanon's capital, Beirut, an explosion of almost 3,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate set off, killing more than 200 people in its blast. (BBC, 2020) This prime example of documentary imagery shows three factors, people, place, and event. A moment captured in time that will always be linked to its subject's authenticity and meaning. That is the power of documentarian imagery, you are freezing a moment in time, to then display it as historical work. It was that ideology of history that allowed documentary photography to flourish into what it has become today.

During the great first and second world wars many countries experienced depressions, it was during this period that documentary photography grew. Photographers such as Dorthea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Walker Evans documented the great American depression in the thirties and forties. Shaping peoples very opinions and ideas of their histories due to photographs. (Mullen, 1988) This process of everyday civilian people having a say in how history is presented, evolved from early photography in 1888 with the first kodak camera. (Fineman, 2004) This completely diminished the labour of early photography. Allowing for everyday people to incorporate themselves into the arts of documentary photography.

Figure 3: © UNICEF/UN0276430/Almahbashi. 2020.

"The Poetic Image"

"Death by water" The shortest section of T.s Eliot's "The Waste Land", this ten-line stanza narrates a man who has died by drowning and is nipped away by the sea's creatures. (SparkNotes, 2020) For the entirety of the poem Eliot makes a lot of references towards death and the act of death. Following this I proceeded to collect 500 oyster shells from Swansea beach, this was to show the oyster shells for number of covid-19 deaths that day. 376 on 13/11/2020. (Google Covid-19 Data, 2020) This is a recording of statistics within an event, the same ideology can be seen in Alfredo Jaar's "Eyes of Gutete Emerita". Where he prints the eyes of a survivor from the Ntamara Church massacre in Rwanda to match the number of deaths.

(Folkenfolk, 2012)

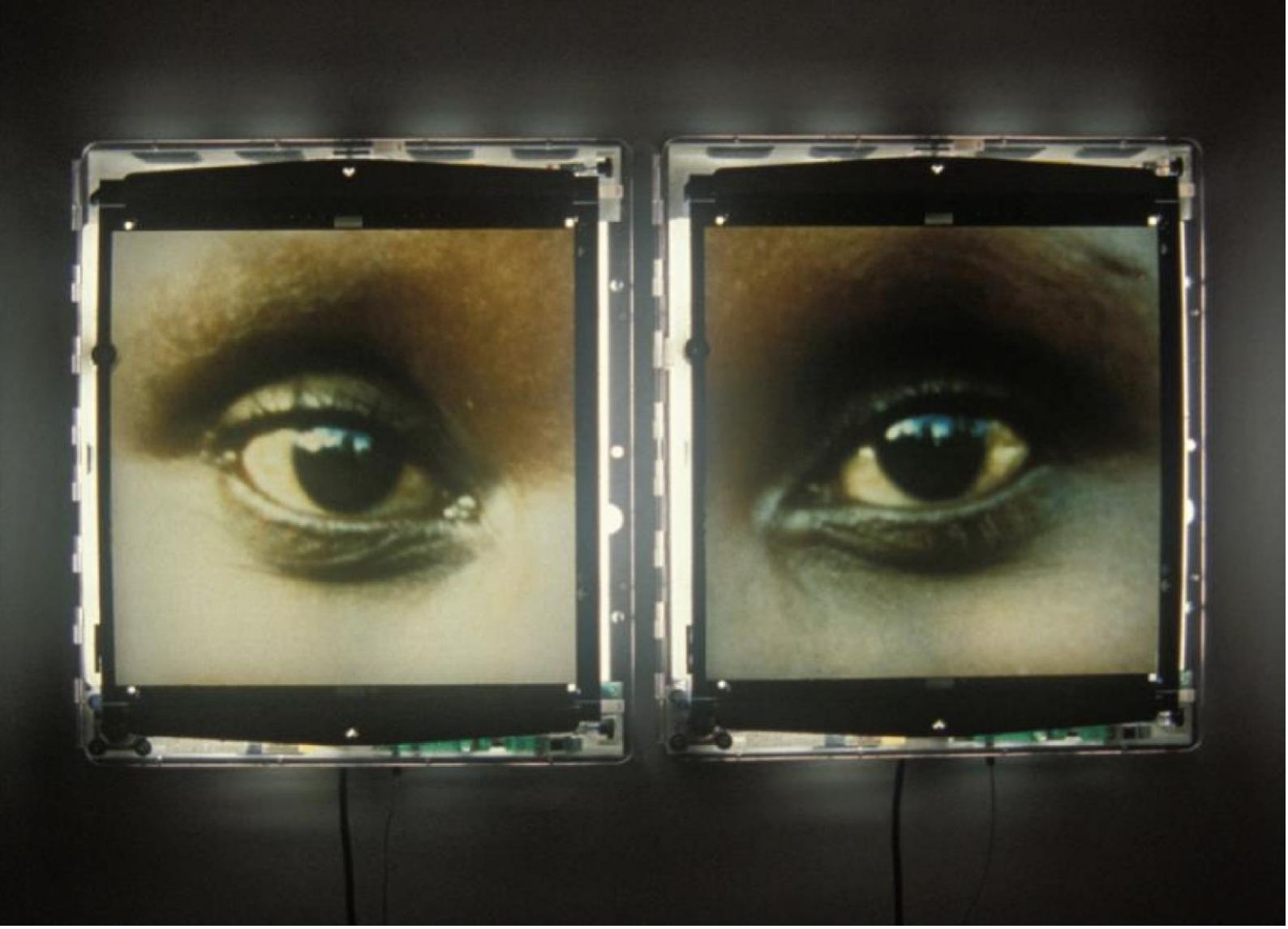

Figure 4: Alfredo Jaar, The Eyes of Gutete Emerita, 1996. Musee, 2020.

"The Cinematic Image"

The main inspiration for my cinematic imagery was Gregory Crewdson's "Twilight", where his dark and mysterious settings present the more psychological depictions. (Hills, 2002) My style is like Crewdson's for images #1 and #2 as they are manipulated imagery. The argument of manipulation in documentary has been very present since the roots of documentary, it consists of the authenticity of an image, the integrity, and the truth.

"the central theoretical issue in documentary photography was that of truth."
(Eisinger, 1995)

The term “Documentary” was coined by the styling imagery’s truth and immediacy, aiming to make sense of our world through very direct ethical representation. (Mullen, 1988) Having to create an image for the use of suggested truth or idea, mixes documentary photography with that of art. However, I believe in the right justification: a created image can still hold the philosophy of documenting a moment in time; it is when you use this creation for false narrative like propaganda that it can no longer be testified as documentation. In 1936 famous photographer Arthur Rothstein went to South

Dakota to document the dust bowls for the Farm Security Administration. (PBS, 2012) It was in the Badlands of South Dakota where he made the mistake of breaching “documentary integrity” (Eisinger, 1995) with his image “Skull”. Rothstein dramatized the situation by using a bleached bull skull, with backgrounds of cracked dry ground. Giving way to the large discussion of truth to be told in documentarian imagery.

My relationship to documentative truth in “The Cinematic Image” is image number #2, in semiotic analogy: the burning building with street light glare and dark landscaped background. This image is documentary of Swansea’s Old Boys club burning to the ground from a firework accident. (John, 2020) As an aspiring young photographer with low skill, I am still learning the fundamentals of documentary, that is why I incorporated this image into my manipulated imagery.

Figure 5: Skull, Badlands, South Dakota, May 1936. MoMA, 2021.

"The Collaborative Image"

The modernist protagonist that is largely discussed in documentary photography is the adventurous white person, they are ultimately set out to isolate themself as an artist from society, in doing so to capture and document our environments. The artists

choice of a non-conformist lifestyle portrays them as a solitary figure, passing by time whilst capturing chosen set origins of timely events. From this the idea of the lone photographer is seen to have a greater importance in life and a higher understanding to viewpoints of our world. The same philosophies are discussed by The Royal Collection Trust in "THE CULT OF THE ARTIST" (2020), explaining in the renaissance times how artists had the "romanticized view", to being a "gifted visionary genius".

Collaboration is the act of working with another, or a group to produce a project. (Indeed, 2020) The idea of collaboration goes against the old-fashioned obsolete ideology of the lone photographer, introducing a more diverse documentarian photographer that adapts to post-modernism in the creative discipline.
A famous photographic contemporary arts pair are Gilbert Prousch and George Passmore, working together for more than 50 years. (TATE, 2021)

In my collaborative image I used two of my friends who are in the creative arts to draw me two statements. Their drawings must be what they embody as a physical representation and interpretation of the statements I would say to them. The long exposure styling of imagery is influenced by Hiroshima Sugimoto's theatre images,
I took the photo for as long they needed to draw the statement. (Wright, 2017) The statements themselves are a present question in play of 2020 & 2021 regarding the events of covid-19 virus solutions. Documenting this as: people volunteering in an event of questioning and representational drawing of ideas that are present in the society at the time of the documentation.

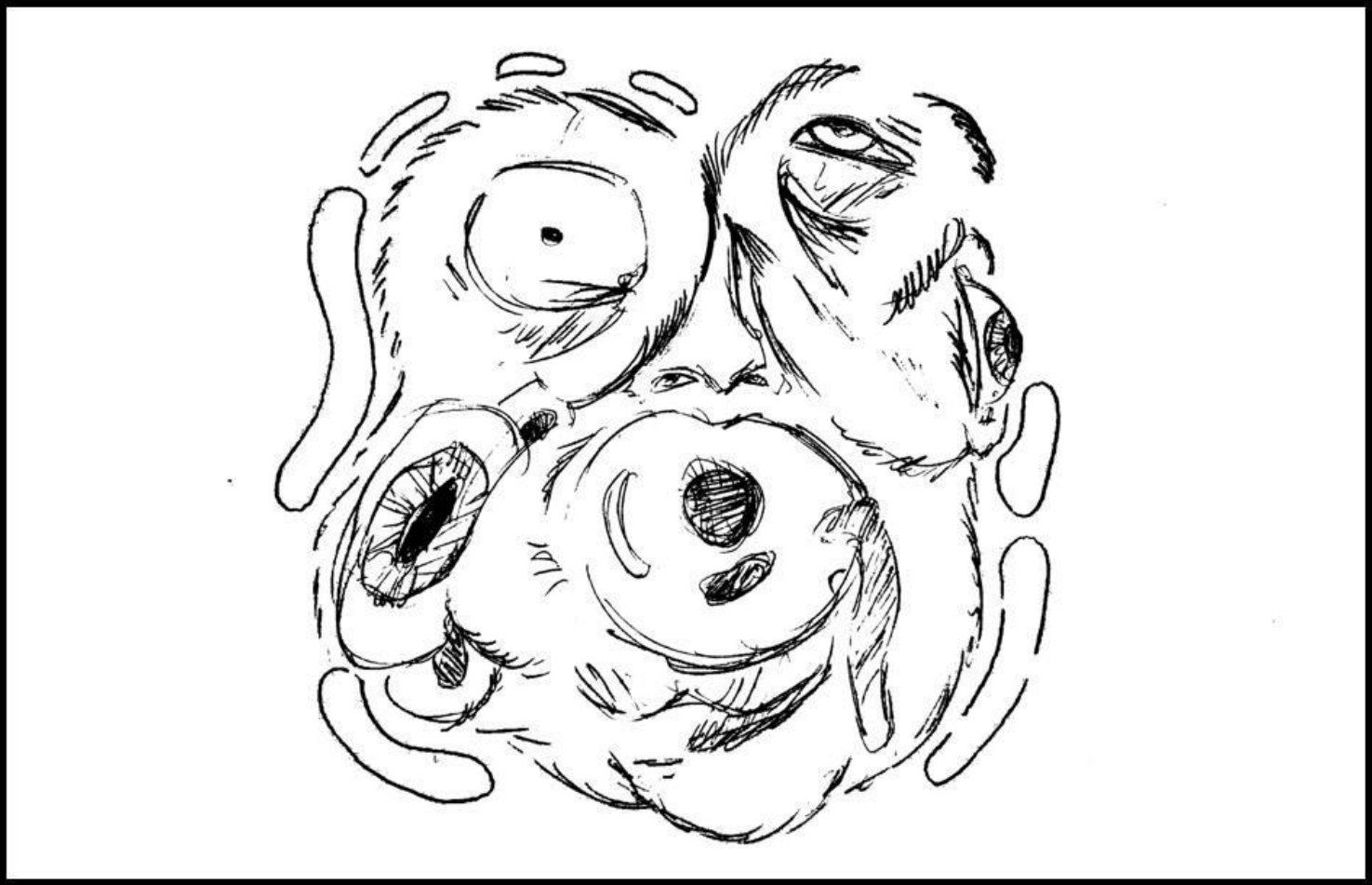

Figure 6: Take this needle now!, Tyler Jnekins-07/12/20. Salisbury, Ernest. 2020.

"The Networked Image"

To me it portrays the post-modernist change in arts, and photographic arts being more adaptive to the ever changing ever evolving present ideas of the world and imagery. In our contemporary society in relation to the networking of images, social media platforms play an extremely large roll in not only the presentation of imagery but the distribution of imagery. We have evolved into the short attention spanned viewer that needs the constant cognitive arousal and justification of imagery. Discussed by John Berger in Ways of Seeing, "In the cities which we live in, all of us see hundreds of publicity images every day of our lives." (p.p. 129,1972)

It is this idea of constant imagery that I interpretated the "Networked Image" to be.

And so, that need for constant imagery is the need to display imagery, smartphones. Although a manipulated set of images I photographed the subject going on their phone in whatever manor as portraying a mystifying light, an almost oxymoron to going on your phone. Inspired by Eric Pickersgill's "Removed" (Pickersgill, 2020).

Figure 7: Removed Self Portrait, TEDxBend 2016. Eric Pickersgill Studio. 2020.

I am still learning what it means to be a documentary photographer. Through this text I hoped to explain a basic overview of the ideologies presented in the field of documentary photography, its histories as an art and its modern evolution as a vessel of communication. I believe documentary photography should not be recognised as its stereotypes or old-fashioned stigmas based around it. As discussed in A Future for Presentism, engage "in the only time that exists", the present. (Bourne, 2006) Documentary photography should be an open form of expression that is presented by all worlds of life from all different backgrounds and opinions. To document you should not be persuaded or directed, you are free to capture the moment in time that takes place there and then. Engage in the present and never stop seeking to innovate how you capture, inform, and educate as a photographer.

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Figure 2: *Karina Sukkar. Patrick Baz, BBC, 2021*. [Website] Available at:

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Figure 5: *Skull, Badlands, South Dakota, May 1936. MoMA, 2021*. [Website] Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45296 (Accessed on: 30/12/20)

Figure 6: *Take this needle now!, Tyler Jnekins-07/12/20. Salisbury, Ernest. 2020.*

Figure 7: *Removed Self Portrait, TEDxBend 2016. Eric Pickersgill Studio. 2020*.

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