

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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DOROTHEA LANGE

January 24 - March 27, 1966

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South Room - New California

Time has edited these photographs, made over a span of twenty-five years. They are a product of the files. Some were made at random, by instinct, waiting on streetcorners or during expeditions to the supermarket. Some were made on the fringes of assignments. Some were made between bouts of illness, to test whether the eye remained true and the hand steady.

A photographer's files are in a sense his autobiography. More resides there than he is aware of. Documentation does not necessarily depend upon conscious themes. It can grow almost of itself, depending upon the photographer's instinct and interests. As fragmentary and incomplete as the archeologist's potsherds, it can be not less telling.

Dorothea Lange

Introductory Wall Label

The work of Dorothea Lange was directed not toward esthetic delight, but toward social relevance. Beauty for her was not a goal, but a proof of success--a demonstration that something of importance had been clearly seen and graphically fixed. A beautiful picture, because of its rightness, demanded contemplation, and that was the success she wished.

Yet this success depended on her art--on the alertness and fineness of her sensibility. Lange was by choice a social observer, and by instinct an artist. In the best of her photographs the demands of these two commitments are reconciled and resolved; the image and its comment are inseparable.

In the early 'thirties Lange turned from the categorical and solvable problems of studio portraiture toward the limitless problem of photographing the wide unposable world.

Her sitters had been those who came to her, and who paid for her services. In strife-ridden San Francisco of the early Depression she recognized that the essential life of the time was being lived on the streets, by those who could not and would not buy her pictures. Unassigned and unsponsored, without knowing what function her photographs might serve, but supported by her need to see life and understand it, she took her camera into the center of crisis, and photographed sidewalk orators, soup kitchens, strikers on their pickets, and homeless, aimless, despairing men.

Others did this also. What distinguished Lange's work was a challenging intelligence and an artist's vision. Her intelligence allowed her to bypass the exceptional--the merely newsworthy--and discover the typical. Her art gave to her observation an irreducible simplicity, the eloquence of inevitability.

Lange's work created its own format of function. In 1934 the economist Paul Taylor saw her pictures, and recognized the contribution that such photography could make to social research and education. He hired Lange to assist in his study of California migrant workers. The success of this project was an influential factor in the establishment in 1935 of the photographic unit of the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration). Lange was an original member of this group, which, under the direction of Roy E. Stryker, first suggested the full potentials of documentary photography as a cultural force--capable of educating the minds and the sensibilities of a nation.

During the following years Lange worked for the Farm Security Administration and other government agencies, and also independently, pursuing her own sense of what must be observed and understood. In 1945, after photographing the United Nations Conference for the Department of State, Lange was stricken with the first of a succession of serious illnesses which were to fill much of her last twenty years. In the periods of relative health that were allowed her, she photographed briefly in Ireland, in Asia, in South America, in Egypt; and in the hours that could be borrowed from the normal pattern of her life she again photographed California. She did not attempt to repeat her earlier pictures. The central fact was now not depression but prosperity, so she photographed the mushrooming population and its money: its new houses and highways and automobiles and marketplaces and recreations.

This latter work she considered not a document but the sketch for a document. The record of the 'sixties that she wanted to make was beyond the reach of one photographer. During the last two years of her life she worked to define the conditions under which a new documentary unit might provide for this generation a service parallel to that performed thirty years ago by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration.

John Szarkowski

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Last Ditch

I am trying here to say something
 about the despised, the defeated,
 the alienated.
 About death and disaster.
 About the wounded, the crippled,
 the helpless, the rootless,
 the dislocated.
 About duress and trouble.
 About finality.
 About the last ditch.

Dorothea Lange

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NORTH ROOM

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and what properly belongs to him, on a journey.

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