A New Documentary Style

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In July 1975, in New Canaan, Connecticut, Nicholas Nixon asked his wife, Bebe, then twenty-five, to pose for a picture in front of his 8 by 10 field camera, along with her three younger sisters, Mimi, Laurie, and Heather. The black-and-white shot taken on that occasion was the first in what turned out to be a photographic ritual that has been repeated every year since, with the four Brown sisters reuniting to pose in the same arrangement and the photographer selecting an image to include in the series, now forty years old (plate 219).[1] In its simplicity (the intimacy of a family shot), its systematic nature (the unvarying composition, the regular intervals), and its vocabulary (black-and-white film, the use of the field camera), the series seems to embody a certain documentary essence of the photographic medium.

The resurgence of work in large and medium formats is one of the hallmarks of the documentary aesthetic that developed first in North America and then in Europe in the mid- to late 1970s and early 1980s. It was practiced in the United States by Nixon as well as by Robert Adams (beginning in the 1960s, plates 15, 224, 240), Adam Bartos (plate 239), Richard Benson (plate 238), John Coplans (plate 218), Sally Mann (plate 220), Richard Misrach (plate 248), Judith Joy Ross (plates 221, 222) and Joel Sternfeld (plates 25, 225).[2] And, of course, by Richard Avedon, who from 1979 to 1983 took his 8 by 10 field camera out of the studio and on the road to produce the images that became the series In the American West (plate 217).

The wider use of the field camera put an end to the mythology of the snapshot—the decisive 35mm picture that had marked documentary photography and American street photography since the 1950s and ’60s, from Robert Frank to Lee Friedlander: quick, mobile shots with a clearly identifiable style. These, too, had represented an aesthetic break, from the traditional journalistic photography in the illustrated press of the postwar years. By contrast, the use of the large-format camera led to a new, slower, and more distanced relationship with the world and the construction of the image: the subject is reversed in the ground glass, requiring curious intellectual gymnastics, and the camera is heavy, cumbersome, impossible to hide. The image requires and implies stability and longer exposure time, and, indeed, this different relationship is not only one of greater physical distance but also of greater attention. The large negatives allow an increase in the size of the prints without a loss of clarity. The explosion in large-format photography of the late 1980s was still a long way off, but the inflation in image size of the late 1970s is notable nonetheless.

The generation of photographers who began to work in this era also deviated from tradition by using color film. A “rush to color” began, as museums began to show and acquire color photographs, culminating in 1981 with the exhibition *The New Color Photography* at the International Center for Photography, New York.[3] As Stephen Shore (plates 22, 23), William Eggleston (plates 19–21), and Joel Meyerowitz (plate 26) had done earlier, Sternfeld, Misrach, Bartos, and the others adopted color. Mitch Epstein (plate 223), who studied with Garry Winogrand (plates 4, 5) at Cooper Union, has recalled that Winogrand, as skilled as he was in black and white, “taught me to think of color as an integral element of a picture. We rarely discussed color on separate terms.”[4] Color became so standard in American art photography that at the end of the 1970s its use was identified with an American photographic school, even in the international art world.[5]

These artists were part of a genealogy of photographers as recorders that began with the great nineteenth-century American topographers, but at the same time some of them were open to broader artistic practices, most notably Ed Ruscha (plate 56), with Conceptual art.[6] But their greatest kinship was with modernist photographers such as Eugène Atget, August Sander, and Walker Evans, whose work was being discovered by younger artists. The documentary style of Evans, in particular, came to light in the United States through major retrospectives and new editions of his books. In Evans these artists—Misrach, Tod Papageorge (plate 44), Thomas Roma (plate 228), Ross, Shore, Sternfeld—found a fertile tension between documentary and aesthetic preoccupations. Evans himself, nearing the end of his life, revisited his

1 An earlier portrait had been shot the previous year, in 1974, but the artist, unhappy with the results, decided not to include it in the series. Sarah Hermanson Meister, “Nicholas Nixon: 40 Years of The Brown Sisters,” in Nixon, *The Brown Sisters: Forty Years* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), n.p.

2 Other US artists who made work in the documentary style were Joel Meyerowitz, Tod Papageorge, and Stephen Shore, whose work appears in the “New Documents and Beyond” chapter of this volume.

3 See Kevin Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America, 1970–1980* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 10. See also Lisa Hostetler and Katherine Bussard, *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (New York: Aperture; Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2013).

4 Mitch Epstein, *WORK* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2008), p. 14.

5 See Nathalie Boulouch, *Le Ciel est bleu: Une Histoire de la photographie couleur* (Paris: Éditions Textuel, 2011), p. 165.

6 See Roxana Marcoci, “‘Live in Your Head’: Conceptual Art and the Photograph” on page 64 of this volume.

definition of documentary style in an interview with Leslie Katz in *Art in America*: "Documentary? That's a very sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. You have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style."[7]

The resurgence of documentary-style practice was also evident in Europe, especially in the United Kingdom and Germany. The profound social and economic changes taking place in British society, accelerated by the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979, were documented by artists including Chris Killip, Graham Smith, John Davies, Martin Parr, and Paul Graham, all five of whom would be shown at The Museum of Modern Art in 1991, in *British Photography from the Thatcher Years*. Many of these photographers have recognized the powerful influence of American documentary photography of the 1970s and early '80s, but they were also part of a British lineage of social photography that began in the nineteenth century with Paul Martin and continued with Bill Brandt and Tony Ray-Jones (plate 40). Most of them preferred a medium-format camera, which reconciled the mobility of the portable camera with the precision of the image. Graham considered this choice of equipment to be a European response to the American aesthetic: "Large-format cameras with colour film: that was developed in America. But the Plaubel was definitely European, and its deployment in new colour documentary happened here in Britain. It allowed for more movement, more fluidity; it retained the quality required but it was so compact you could carry it everywhere."[8]

Killip worked near Newcastle, in the northeast of England, from the late 1960s through the 1980s, recording in black and white the changes in living conditions brought about by increased industrialization (plate 226). Graham and Parr, about ten years his junior, also witnessed the country's social upheaval. For Parr, who had spent two years in Ireland and returned to England in 1982 with fresh eyes, color became the only way to "be more critical" about what he saw, as opposed to the "celebration of life" of his earlier work, which was shot in black and white.[9] The series Last Resort, made between 1983 and 1985 in New Brighton, a popular seaside town near Liverpool, highlights the contrast between the heroic political discourse of the country's conservative leaders and the social reality of the north of England (plate 230). Graham's series Beyond Caring (plate 227), made in the same years, as the number of unemployed in the United Kingdom neared three million, constitutes an even stronger social critique, nearly an indictment. Graham took pictures at job-search offices, photographing discreetly, often blindly, with his camera on his knees. Through the unusual framing that results, the photographs convey an almost claustrophobic sense of space and the bodies inhabiting it, of people ill at ease and in distress in a system that is itself in decline. Graham published the series in a book in 1986, and exhibited in several places, including at MoMA in 1987–88. Various organizations, such as The Greater London Council, used the series to sensitize the political class to the plight of the unemployed. Both Parr and Graham would pursue this critical dimension in geographical areas: Parr became interested in international tourism and mass consumption in the 1990s (plate 229), Graham documented the social and political changes in continental Europe and, later, in the United States, where he resides today (plate 257).

In the same period, some of Bernd and Hilla Becher's students from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf were redefining documentary practice. A few of them including Thomas Struth (a student from 1976 to 1980; plates 233–35), Thomas Ruff (from 1978 to 1985; plates 231, 329), and Andreas Gursky (from 1981 to 1987; plates 236, 237, 326), would come to be known by the art scene and the art market as photographers of the Düsseldorf School.[10] The Bechers' classes were inscribed in a tradition of documentary photographic style, especially that of August Sander and the Neue Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, of the interwar period, which was marked by the use of the large-format camera and the principles of clarity, frontality, and seriality, much as the work of the Bechers was. The Bechers were also influenced by contemporary American photography, especially the vernacular poetry of Shore, a friend of Hilla Becher since 1973, whose work was shown widely in Germany, including in Düsseldorf in the 1970s. Gursky has recalled that Shore's *Uncommon Places*, published in 1982, was his favorite book for many years; Struth, in 1987, in indirect

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Walker Evans, interview with Leslie Katz, *Art in America* 59, no. 2 (March–April 1971): 82–89.

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Paul Graham, in David Chandler, Russell Ferguson, and Micheal Almereyda, *Paul Graham: Photographs, 1981–2006* (Göttingen, Germany: steidlMACK, 2009), p. 29.

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Martin Parr, in Parr and Quentin Bajac, *Parr by Parr: Discussions with a Promiscuous Photographer* (Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2010), p. 37.

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Candida Höfer and Axel Hütte were also early students of the Bechers'.

homage, titled his first exhibition of black-and-white street photographs *Unconscious Places*.

The Bechers' instruction, however, was also open to the influence of other artistic forms, in order to expand the possibilities for photographic work. Struth has noted that "their influence was less on the formal aspects, but more in their speaking about art and the relation between literature, photography, politics, sculpture, films and books," a pedagogy that also fit the broader context of teaching at the Kunstakademie and participating in the Düsseldorf art scene.[11] Both Gerhard Richter's photographic research for his paintings and Katharina Sieverding's experiments with photographic formats contribute to our understanding of the students' work.

In the 1980s and '90s some of the Bechers' students turned away from the aesthetic of their teachers and toward the production of autonomous, often enormous images, in color and without typological or serial logic. Such large-format prints, which Ruff, Gursky, Struth, and their peers were known for, transpose to the domain of photography questions typically asked of painting, especially regarding the placement and physical engagement of the viewer.[12] These works reveal the phenomenon of the institutionalization of photography: they were produced for the walls of museums and galleries rather than for the pages of a book (reproductions rarely communicate their physical presence). But this explosion in size had another effect: Ruff has said that "the Bechers taught us a belief in the truth of the medium," but many of their students questioned this belief, to the point of making the question into the challenge of their work, Ruff and Gursky in particular. When Ruff decided, in 1986, to take his portraits from 4 by 7 inches to about 83 by 65 inches, he was absolutely negating the realism of photography and accentuating the status of the image as something beyond what it depicts. "Quite often," Ruff said in an interview, "people at the exhibitions say: 'Oh, that's Heinz, that's Peter, that's Petra,' because they are looking through the photography, confusing the medium with reality. By blowing the portraits up to a colossal scale, I forced the viewer to realize that he is not standing in front of Heinz, but in front of a photograph of Heinz."[13] In another interview he noted, "The Becher school and the school of documentary photography in general believe in representation—in the immediate direct image. When a documentary photographer photographs a house they're certain of having photographed a house. I don't believe in representation but in the image, and I can't say that I'm objective."[14]

During the vast political and economic upheavals of the 1990s, documentary concerns went beyond photography, into wider artistic circles, a shift marked by Hal Foster's book *The Return of the Real*, in 1996, by the Whitney Biennial of 1993, and by the Documenta exhibitions of 1997 and 2002, organized by Catherine David and Okwui Enwezor, respectively, which gave center stage to photography and the document. Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1990, plate 244), presented at the 2002 Documenta, evokes the world of sea freight to provide a kind of depiction of globalization and world trade, from Gdansk to South Korea. Staying far from the heroic approaches of traditional maritime painting and challenging the idea of photography as a natural documentary process, Sekula constructed a documentary narrative by associating images and texts and displaying them in various forms: a book (first published in 1995), exhibitions of framed prints, and slide projections. For Sekula, photography, in spite of its imperfections and limitations, nevertheless makes it possible to reconstruct what might be called a critical realism:

> Thirteen years ago, when I first began making photographs with any seriousness, the medium's paramount attraction was, for me, its unavoidable social referentiality, its way of describing—albeit in enigmatic, misleading, reductive and often superficial terms—a world of social institutions, gestures, manners, relationships. . . . At that time photography seemed to me to offer an alternative to the overly specialized, esoteric, and self-referential discourse of late modernism, which had to offer only one crude example, nothing much to say about the Vietnam war.[15]

The era's changes are also evidenced in the work of the South African photographer David Goldblatt and the Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov, both of whom gained an international audience in the late 1990s and early 2000s despite having been working since the early 1960s and '70s, respectively. Mikhailov recorded the disorder that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union—the human reality of new capitalism—in a body

11 Thomas Struth, in Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Une Autre Objectivité/Another Objectivity* (Milan: Idea Books, 1989), p. 191.

12 See Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

13 Thomas Ruff, in Gil Blank, "Interview with Thomas Ruff," *Influence*, no. 2 (2004): 55.

14 Ruff, in an interview with Isabelle Graw, *Artis*, no. 41 (October 1989); republished in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *Thomas Ruff* (Milan: Skira, 2009), pp. 57–59.

15 Allan Sekula, *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks, 1973–1983*, eds. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), p. ix.

of work in three series made in his hometown of Kharkov: On the Ground (U Zemli, 1991), At Dusk (1990–93), and Case History (1997–98). Case History (plate 247), shown at MoMA in 2011, features homeless, outcast, and marginalized people of post-Soviet Ukrainian society in raw, colorful images that are a combination of mise-en-scène and improvisation; Mikhailov composed these large-format photographs using motifs borrowed from religious and historical painting, thus introducing a strong element of staging in a genre of photography that is generally exempt from it. In 1998 MoMA devoted a solo exhibition to Goldblatt, the first museum outside of South Africa to do so, to coincide with the publication of a book containing forty years' worth of his black-and-white images of South Africa under apartheid (plates 241, 242). Goldblatt's choice of black-and-white film was deliberate—"During those years," he has said, "colour seemed too sweet a medium to express the anger, disgust and fear that apartheid inspired"—but for his work on post-apartheid South Africa, with all its contradictions, he turned to color (plate 243).[16] A number of South African photographers who work in a documentary register have followed in his footsteps, including Guy Tillim (plate 246), Mikhael Subotzky (plate 250), and Zwelethu Mthethwa (plate 251).

In the last fifteen years, despite the eroding of photography's authority, a new generation of photographers and artists using photography has reaffirmed the relevance of the documentary-style project. These projects—constructed over time around a specific topic or place—advance the idea of seriality as a quintessential documentary principle. Whether they borrow from the taxonomic and archival logic of the Bechers (as do Zanele Muholi, Sze Tsung Leong) or the more open and fragmentary construction of Sekula (Yto Barrada, An-My Lê [plate 245], LaToya Ruby Frazier) or the mythology of the American documentary (Alec Soth, Katy Grannan [plate 258]), these works use the series to give coherence and meaning to isolated images. Of his series History Images (2005, plate 252), which looks at the rapid transformation of Chinese cities, Leong has said, "The life of an image is much more complex than its specific uses. My photographs certainly do document a period. They certainly record what's going on, but what I have hoped to do is to portray larger themes—for instance, the destruction and creation of history."[17] Barrada, a French-Moroccan artist, sees her images of Tangier and its surroundings as an attempt to chronicle a place through images and thus "exhaust" it;[18] like Evans, Barrada searches in her work for a tension between "allegory and snapshot" (plate 254).[19] Soth calls on Evans's documentary style as well as that of literature to speak of Sleeping by the Mississippi, a series made between 1999 and 2002 (plate 249): "In all cases I am uncomfortable saying I have documented a real place. I know that I am fabricating a place too. I like to think of it as a novel."[20] Rather than documenting the Mississippi frontally, Soth offers an evocation of the river that is indirect, poetic, and almost dreamlike—as though both photographer and viewer were sleeping beside it.

Despite the rupture in the authority conferred by a photograph, photographers continue to demonstrate belief in the political power of documentary language. Muholi, who has called herself a "visual activist," has given visibility to lesbian communities in South Africa through her series Faces and Phases (2011, plates 255, 256), reviving the committed political and social dimension of photography.[21] Frazier, in the United States, works with a reformist vocation. Since the mid-2000s, in her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, she has been retracing the slow, steep decline of this once industrial city from the inside, mixing social and autobiographical perspectives, as in a portrait of three generations: her grandmother, her mother, and herself (plate 259).

In 1994, twenty years after Nixon took his first photograph of the Brown sisters, Rineke Djikstra began her own sequential ritual with a photograph of five-year-old Almerisa Sehric, a Bosnian refugee whose family had immigrated to the Netherlands. In eleven color images made over fifteen years (plate 260) we see the young Bosnian child transformed into a Dutch teenager, then a woman, and then a mother, in a fascinating double chronicle of aging and acculturation and a perfect illustration of how documentary devices may continue to be relevant. Dijkstra has recognized her link to the documentary-style tradition, in particular the work of Sander and Diane Arbus, both of whom had "a real affinity with their subjects even though they were strangers; they made no distinctions and passed no judgments."[22]

16 David Goldblatt, in Mark Haworth-Booth, "Interview with David Goldblatt," in Goldblatt, *South African Intersections* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), p. 94.

17 Sze Tsung Leong, "Unintelligent Design: Josh Jones Interviews Sze Tsung Leong," *Guernica* website, January 18, 2007, www.guernicamag.com/interviews/unintelligent_design.

18 Yto Barrada, interview with Guillaume Le Gall and Nadia Tazi, in Le Gall, ed., *Fabrique de l'image* (Arles, France: Actes Sud, 2004), p. 96.

19 Barrada, *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (London: Autograph, 2005).

20 Alec Soth, in Jane Gudmonson and Antony Anderson, "A Photographic Tour in the World of Alec Soth," *Les Photographes* website, www.lesphotographes.com/old-site/2010/05/12/a-photographic-tour-in-the-world-of-alec-soth/.

21 Zanele Muholi, interview with Pamella Dlungwana, n.d., *C&* magazine website, http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/im-an-activist-first-being-a-photographer-allows-me-a-greater-and-more-influential-audience/.

22 Rineke Dijkstra, in Jan van Adrichem, "Realism in the Smallest Details," in Sandra S. Phillips and Jennifer Blessing, *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2012), p. 60.