EYES ARE FOR ASKING: NARRATIVES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

ANNUAL CURATORIAL FELLOWSHIP EXHIBITION

Eve Arnold, *Church Supper in the Graveyard, Brookhaven Township, New York*; 1958

CO-CURATORS:

Gretchen Halverson (M.A. ’16 Art History)

Procheta Mukherjee Olson (M.F.A. ’17 Studio Arts)

THE UNIQUE TEMPORAL REGISTER of the photographic image lies at the intersection of the past and the instant. The instant, then, stretches toward the future as potential new meanings or interpretations of what is depicted continually arise. As Peter Wollen suggests, the moment captured in the image is of "near-zero duration and located in an ever receding 'then'. At the same time, the spectator's 'now', the moment of looking at the image, has no fixed duration. It can be extended as long as fascination lasts and endlessly reiterated as long as curiosity returns."[1] The photo always inspires contemplation of a moment that is past even when it seems immediate.

Helmut Newton, *16th Arrondissement*, 1976

Walter Benjamin also affirms a temporal quality of photography and adds that it is not simply about the past and the present informing each other; rather, the "image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical."[2] It is through this dialectics, which makes it necessary for viewers to read the past in relation to the present, that the photograph creates its narrative.

Eyes Are for Asking explores this narrative potential and the ways in which it is communicated. The images in this exhibition are arranged according to their narrative qualities and their relationship to the proverbial categories of time. It is important here to keep in mind that the distinction between past, present, and future is an illusion, since the present is the reference point from which the past or the future is mapped. Photography interrupts this temporal continuum, marking out the moments that make up time.

MOMENT — THE HERE AND NOW

> "But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it."
>
> — Henri Cartier-Bresson[3]

The narrative capacity of the photograph stems from this frozen equilibrium. The elements arrested in this state become the storytellers of the photograph. The environment captured in the image, the quality of light, the cultural signifiers, the visible objects, and where they exist in this arrangement coalesce to suggest meaning.

Robert Frank, *San Francisco;* 1956

When the photograph involves human figures, their dress and the bodily expression of their attitudes towards the photographer, or to one another, in addition to their surroundings, become key signifiers. Michael Newman defines this bodily expression, or gesture, as a legible action that communicates meaning but needs to be isolated and identified before it can be interpreted.[4] In his writings on Brecht, Benjamin asserts that in order to do so one must stop the temporal flow of the drama.[5] Newman further categorizes this gestural element into coded and uncoded gestures.[6] In Helmut Newton's *16th Arrondissement*, gestural attitudes are definitely coded, swiftly identified as an expression of multiple histories: class relations, erotics of power, intra-gender issues. The scene opens to an encounter between two women at the entryway of an apartment located in the notoriously affluent 16th arrondissement of Paris. At first glance this image may be read according to the tropes of class relations. However, the outcome of this moment is unpredictable. A closer look reveals that the woman in the maid's dress holds the visitor in a steady, confident gaze. Their contrasting stature and dress push at each other with equal and opposite force. The barring gesture of the wealthier woman's right hand across the door frame is mirrored by the territorial position of the maid who has yet to hold the door wide open. The diagonal planes of these gestures are further juxtaposed by the verticality of their confrontational bodies, which align with the frame of the looming doorway.

In Robert Frank's *San Francisco*, the image is born of the photographer's interruption of a private moment and space in the lives of its two subjects. A native of Switzerland, Frank was interested in the lives and trials of modern people. In 1955 he traveled extensively across the United States with the aid of a Guggenheim fellowship. *The Americans*, the series of which *San Francisco* is a part, resulted from this journey. Spanning a wide range of demographics, the series alludes to modern but also existential themes of death, alienation, and loneliness — across race and class, all of which defy characterizations of America as a mythic construct.

Taken from this shifting set of intersecting histories and environments, *San Francisco* frames the identity of its two subjects in light of an archetypal narrative of urban modernity. Unlike many of the lonely figures in this series, the couple in San Francisco does not appear isolated.[7] Amidst the blur of a sprawling cityscape, and a daily life presumably marred by segregation, they have carved out a moment of peace and quiet for themselves – a moment now "ruined" by the intrusion of the photographer, into whose position we are thrust. Frank's intrusion into this temporal space is signaled by the look in their eyes, which conveys strong self-awareness and dignity.[8] The moment, then, reveals itself as a confrontation between subjects, viewing and viewed.

MEMORY — WHAT HAS BEEN

The photographic image often functions as a souvenir. It provides references and clues to the past, but is implicitly fragmentary. It cannot represent the entirety of an experience; rather, it serves to prompt nostalgia and reflection on a moment that has passed. Often, that memory is altered over time; its significance changes as one connects more and more meaning to the image, expanding the semantic connections of the memory it signifies.

As John Berger asserts, memory is not tautological or linear, but rather works radially.[9] The associations made when looking at a photograph serve to create a complex narrative made up of personal, social, and historic references. The photograph offers the viewer an opportunity to retrieve the past, but only a fragment of it, simply an interrupted moment in time. However, the photographic intervention creates a space for imaginative, subjective interpretation. In filling the gaps around this neat slice of time, one takes from it the revelation that is most personally relevant.

Wendy Snyder MacNeil's photograph, *Stephanie and Her Sisters* (1973) captures a private moment, and this intimacy invites us to imbue the image with narrative. The photograph evokes a sense of nostalgia. The primary figure's reclining pose fills the majority of the frame with quiet physicality. Perhaps we can recall this feeling of relaxation and calm of summers past, arms outstretched and eyes closed. The photograph's ability to conjure not simply a visual memory, but even a visceral or bodily one speaks to its strength. The central figure in the photograph consumes the space, and yet she functions as a representation of presence, but also absence in the way that she

Wendy Snyder MacNeil, *Stephanie and Her Sisters*; ca. 1973

floats — at once she is enthralled in a moment of summer's bliss, and in the next she drifts like a corpse in the water. By capturing this intimate dichotomy, MacNeil invites us to par-ticipate in this space. This event has been framed for us so that we might be reminded of our own engagement with the past and its complicated implications.

David Goldblatt's work creates a different connection to the past — one that is provocative in its attempt to, as one critic writes, "expose a situation."[10] That situation in this case most often relates to the widespread effects of Apartheid in South Africa. His documentary approach chronicles the area, using not only the individual subject as symbol and evidence of oppression, but also landscape. In the photograph *Stalled Municipal Housing Scheme, Lady Grey, Eastern Cape, 5 August 2006,* (2006), the deserted landscape stands in for the complex history of this space. The photograph depicts a vacant landscape marked with empty structures in various stages of construction — most mere fragments of a complicated intent. Roofless half-houses stand in the foreground, all mirroring one another — their presence unnerving. Row after row we are reminded of the failure of this municipal housing project. The houses were to accommodate people living in shacks; however, eight years after the municipality had approved the project, it stood abandoned.[11] In displacing human figures with landscape, the composition suggests the reverberating effects of state-sponsored racism. The grim reality of the image sets in once we examine the photo more closely. An open window in the closest house on the left underscores the eeriness of the scene. For a brief moment, you might mistake it for being lived in — but certainly this was never the case and the inhabitable space stands only as a reminder of this fact. Goldblatt has imbued the landscape with narrative by documenting the very silence left in this space. He has created what Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya describe as a "photographic essay" capable of evoking the social and political history as well as the lost potential of this environment, underscoring the human presence that still lurks in the roofless, static structures.[12] The absence of human representation in photography is often more powerful than its presence.

David Goldblatt, *Stalled municipal housing scheme, Lady Grey, Eastern Cape, 5 August 2006*; 2006

Whether the photographic image includes the human figure, landscape, or some combination, its ability to represent the "real" imbues it with authority. Susan Sontag asserts that this authority is "virtually unlimited in a modern society."[13] Such a potent tie

to the past provides the viewer with an opportunity to acquire a memory or a story despite being absent from the event itself. This exchange underscores the command photography has over our engagement with memory.

IMAGINATION — WHAT CAN BE

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes suggests that "the photograph itself is in no way animated… but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure."[14] Adventure need not be restricted to viewing a dramatic action shot. It can be found through the act of exploring the depths of a photograph's narrative. It is this imaginative contemplation that propels us as viewers into active thought and engagement with the picture. The photographs in this section suggest narrative structures and explore possibilities, some potential and some impossible, yet each one unlocked by our imaginative reflection.

In *Boy in Flood Dream* (c.1970) (Figure 5), Arthur Tress plunges us into a scene not entirely decipherable. A blonde boy appears to emerge from a hole in a roof. He gazes directly at us, implicating us in the scene. Can this boy be helped? Is he attempting to escape? The background offers few clues. The house that the boy emerges from seems to be surrounded by sand and yet a ship comes into view disorienting our sense of space and depth. The imaginative framing and singular, questioning figure captures our attention. Tress has charged the image with narrative promise by portraying an almost theatrical moment. He has infused the boy with all the potential of a protagonist on the verge of action. Suspended in time, we are asked to imagine the next moment.

Arthur Tress, *Boy in Flood Dream*; 1970

Arthur Tress began his career as a young boy photographing the dilapidated fun houses and deserted remains of amusement parks in his neighborhood of Coney Island. While his photography would evolve throughout his career, the remnants of this fascination seem to be ever present in this photograph. In this series, entitled *Dream Collector*, Tress interviewed children about their nightmares and attempted to capture these terrors in his photographs using the same children as actors in his surrealist creations. While photography often purports a sort of truth, Tress's images are antithetical to this notion and instead, focus on dream and fantasy in order to question our assumptions about the

photographic image. The ambiguity present in Tress's *Flood Boy* forces us to confront the moment's validity. Subverting photography's connection to realism makes the viewing experience both unnerving and exciting. While we often connect photography to the real and the now, Tress's image suggests the expansive possibilities of the medium.

Sandy Skoglund, a photographer and installation artist from Massachusetts, uses photography as a means to manipulate time and space in order to create a site of fiction or fantasy. In *Ferns* (1980), Skoglund constructs theatricalized environments to create her photographs. These installations are sites for narrative, and in *Ferns* we are asked to enter this artificial space and contemplate its message. Three women wear identical, sack-like dresses and curly gray wigs. The repetition of the figures creates a sense of ambiguity. Are we seeing the same woman in various states or are these figures clones trapped in this pseudo-domestic space? The wallpaper is dotted with ferns, providing the only delineation of color from the neutral, prison-like room. Skoglund's elaborate set transports us into this eerie, confined space and invites us to contemplate the psychological drama that is unfolding.

Sandy Skoglund, *Ferns*; 1980

The photographs in this section focus on fantasy and enigma while undermining traditional assumptions regarding the limits of photography. These imaginative spaces present viewers with a new task: to navigate an ambiguous space and time and determine for themselves their desired engagement with it.

Stéphane Mallarmé, the nineteenth-century poet and critic, noted that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Susan Sontag appropriately pointed out that today, everything exists to end in a photograph.[15] Society's engagement with photography, now dominated by digital formats, continues to evolve in complex and nuanced ways. Often photography's omnipresence compromises our ability to explore photographic images with sustained curiosity. It is our hope that this exhibition subverts this common reflex and encourages extended looking. Paul Valéry asserted that our eyes are organs of asking.[16] Keeping Valery's words in mind, this exhibition provides a place to interrogate the familiar and experience the unfamiliar. By renewing our collective engagement with a medium so often reduced to a personal brand, these works make clear that whether analog or digital, photographs continue to suggest new possibilities for interpretive engagement.

— Curatorial Essay by Gretchen Halverson and Procheta Mukherjee Olson

ENDNOTES

1 Peter Wollen, "Fire and Ice," in *Other than Itself: Writing Photography* ed. John X Berger and Olivier Richon (Manchester: Cornerhouse publications in association with Derbyshire College of Higher Education and Camerawork, 1989), no pagination.

2 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), 477.

3 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (Paris: Simon and Schuster in collaboration with Editions Verve of Paris, 1952)

4 Jeff Wall and Michael Newman. *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2007) 62

5 Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 3-4.

6 Wall and Newman. *Jeff Wall*, 58

7 George Cotkin, "the photographer in the beat-hipster idiom: robert frank's the americans," American Studies, Vol. 26, No. 1 (spring 1985): 26

8 Cotkin, "the photographer in the beat-hipster idiom: robert frank's the americans," 27

9 John Berger, "Ways of Remembering," in *Reading Photography: a sourcebook of critical texts, 1921-2000.* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2011), 214-216.

10 Museum Fridericianum, and Documenta. *Documenta XI: Ausstellung: Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, 8. uni - 15. September 2002 : Kurzführer = Short guide.* (Ludwigshafen: Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, 2002).

11 Exhibition checklist for "Intersections Intersected: The Photography of David Goldblatt," New Museum, New York, 11 October 2009, accessed March 13, 2016, http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/6986.

12 Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Colonial Imagery, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture and Representation in the Work of African Photographers," in *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 35-38.

13 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 153.

14 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

15 Sontag, *On Photography,* 24.

16 Paul Valéry, "Odds and Ends," in *Analects,* trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 78.

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