

Suggestions for the Contemporary Photographer

by Fred Ritchin

All photographs are interpretive and do not show objective reality. They are constructs. A social documentarian must be aware of this and attempt to be as transparent as possible in letting the reader know what strategies were used to make the images.

Provide context for your photographs as their author. Do not let them circulate without attempting to situate them in ways that make their meanings more evident. One must also be aware that they will always be interpreted in various ways by readers, and will be read differently in other cultures.

Rather than waiting for various problems and catastrophes to emerge before witnessing them, one can also think of how to work proactively as a photographer to reduce or even eliminate some of these problems and catastrophes before they happen. As a “peace photographer,” one can also work with those who have suffered to alleviate the pain using one’s imagery.

In order to avoid spectacle, make photographs for one’s subjects rather than only for the outside world. These images can become part of the collective memory of those depicted, a family album. Outsiders can then look at the images knowing that they were made for the insiders.

Consider collaborating with one’s subjects to make imagery that they themselves feel is representative. This does not mean that must lose one’s own ability to analyze and depict what one understands to be happening but is aware that other points of view may be helpful. For example, one can make an “interactive portrait” in which the photographer shows the image to the subject and asks whether, and to what extent, it represents who the person is. Recording the answer, one can then make it available to be shared with the reader. Similarly, one can ask insiders to curate their own social media to show what’s going on from their points of view and include it, or link to it,

with your own work.

The reader should be able to easily find the photographer's code of ethics, perhaps by clicking on the photographer's name and receiving a short description that can be easily understood.

If appropriate, rather than call oneself a documentary photographer, a highly elastic term that encompasses a variety of practices, it might be preferable to refer to oneself as a "non-fiction photographer." This indicate to the reader one's practice in a more specific way (writers, for example, can write non-fiction or fiction, but documentary is not a term that is helpful in describing their practice).

The photograph has been thought of as a quotation from appearances, a description that has little to do with the truth of the imagery but rather its stenographic value. If it is no longer a quotation from appearances, there should be an indication of that available to the reader just as a non-fiction writer who paraphrases what someone said cannot put the statement in quotation marks.

Avoid illustrating your own, or someone else's, preconceived notions of people or a particular situation. Avoid stereotyping, and as much as possible interrogate yourself as to ways in which you have been conditioned to perceive the "other." Remember that the act of photography can be an aggression, objectifying and re-victimizing those whom one depicts.

One way of reflecting on one's practice is by employing the Golden Rule. if you, your family or friends were shown in the same ways in which you are depicting your subjects, would it be the right thing to do?

Rather than depicting only the symptoms, it can be preferable to explore and explain the systems that underly the systems. Similarly, rather than attempting to always provide answers as to what is happening, one's photographs can be used to ask important questions.

Witnessing may not be enough given the diminished power of news media in many countries. One must consider how to maximize the impact of one's work. The digital revolution provides many new ways of making images, as well as contextualizing and presenting them. It is important that the photographer is aware of both these newer and older possibilities.

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