

The Paradigm Shift: Reinventing the Photographer

by Fred Ritchin

Twentieth-century photographers, acting as witnesses and interpreters of issues and events, were able at times to provoke widespread discussions resulting in profound societal change. Had they not been able to do so, their coverage of wars, famines, racial injustice and environmental degradation would have verged on the voyeuristic and obscene.

It is now a different moment. The photograph no longer is perceived as automatically credible, the result of a mechanical recording process expressed as “the camera never lies.” Photographs are widely viewed now as constructs, malleable interpretations of the real that are largely subjective and easily modifiable by software. They are produced by the billions, without sufficient context provided to shape their meanings. And they are often used to illustrate preconceptions, to be shared and “liked,” rather than to explore that which may be unknown.

Furthermore, these images are now made in an era brimming with assertions of alternative facts, fake news, and post-truth, making it even more difficult for photographs to emerge that manage to redirect the societal focus. For example, despite the massive problems confronting society, very few iconic photographs exist since 2001 and the September 11 attacks. The 2015 photograph of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned, is one of the rare exceptions.

What then can a photographer do, particularly one working with documentary or journalistic intentions? First, be aware of the media environment that exists today and do not assume that the photograph will be automatically believed any more than the words of a writer. While the photograph still must function as a visual record, that record increasingly needs adequate contextualization to give its reader the tools to decipher its meanings. This may require the inclusion of other photographs, videos and audio files that document what was going on before and after, or around, that which has been depicted in the photograph. It can include the points of view of those depicted, of eyewitnesses, as well as of others from their communities, and links to

other sources of information online that the photographer views as credible and can provide background. It may also include the ethical code of the photographer, as well as the photographer's own responses to what she or he has witnessed and information pertinent to their ability to comprehend what is unfolding before them (does the photographer speak the language, has the photographer been there before, etc.).

The reader, provided with such context, can then choose to engage with the image and its context so as to determine what it represents, rather than being told what has happened by a picture and defining caption that the reader may, particularly in the current media climate, distrust and reject. Whether the reader looks at all the context that is provided or not, its inclusion strengthens the credibility of the process of witnessing by making it more transparent. The photographer is not declaring what is real without allowing access to their own deliberations in both the making and selecting of the image. And, if the photographer is unsure of the result, that can be shared as well—it “seemed” to be like that, rather than it “was.”

And here the photographer should be aware of the difference of his or her own photograph compared to the networked image on social media platforms. The intention of the photographer is not primarily to share in the moment, to attract “likes” and commendations, but to confront the myriad possibilities of what one has experienced and to try both to narrow down these possibilities in the making and selection of an image, but also to open them up. In doing so, one allows that the event's interrogation can be more important than its delineation, especially when there is insufficient knowledge and a reliance on one's own preconceptions.

This stance takes humility, a deep awareness of self, considerable knowledge, and an open-mindedness both to intuition and to experience. It involves the photographer taking on the role of author rather than being limited to a stenographic role, or that of a wholesale supplier of images for someone else to select. It also involves an experimentation with formal strategies in order to elicit underlying truths, including the systems responsible for the symptoms that have emerged, rather than respecting pre-existing hierarchies of importance that result in predictable imagery of leaders and victims, often rendered as spectacle. Each photographer must be able to say about her or his images and their contextualization that, to the best of my understanding, this is the way it was.

To a certain extent, some documentary photographers have embraced this way of working previously, although as a result have often found themselves categorized as

“art” photographers. Given the transformed media environment today, and the inadequacies of previous systems of representation, particularly of the “other,” photographers should consider enlarging their practices in a spirit of collaboration with their subjects, their readers, and their deeper selves. The paradigm has shifted..

For a new practice:

Given the vastly transformed times in which we live, it is necessary to reassess the role of the lens-based image-maker as observer and witness. The following precepts are intended to help galvanize those in the field, including not only photographers but producers, editors and curators as well, to assume more effective and impactful roles in society:

The perception of photography as a form of credible witnessing has been severely diminished so that one can no longer rely upon the lens-based image as having an automatic association as a conveyor of “truth.”

The photograph is both a construct and interpretive, rather than a conveyor of absolute truths.

Image-makers must think of themselves as the authors of their work and take responsibility for how each image they produce is contextualized, sequenced and presented.

Making photographs that purport to explain the lives of others, without sufficient research and preparation, may do little more than illustrate one’s own preconceptions.

A photograph can be just as useful, and at times more so, when interrogating the realities that the image-maker encounters rather than providing certainties.

Concentrating upon the depiction of symptoms, whether they be war, famine, disease, or any other, without exploring the underlying systems responsible for them may be both insufficient and misleading, and lead to the creation of spectacle.

Transparency in the image-maker’s approach is necessary in the attempt to communicate with the reader.

Photographs are often understood differently by individuals and by those from different cultures.

Collaborating with subjects as co-authors of the imagery may provide perspectives that destabilize stereotypes and better delineate the specific situations of those depicted.

Depicting those who have suffered serious harm, including people who previously have been traumatized, must be done in such a way so as not to re-victimize them either in the making of the imagery or in its distribution.

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