

THE FifthCorner

Twenty Years, and Later

by Fred Ritchin

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In 1984-85, Sebastião Salgado spent fifteen months photographing in the drought-stricken Sahel region of Africa in the countries of Chad, Ethiopia (and the disputed Tigre province), Mali and the Sudan. Approximately one million people died from extreme malnutrition and related causes.

I remember almost two decades ago walking around New York City, making appointments, showing the photographs in this book to editorial and curatorial professionals. I was haunted by the images of people starving to death, by their extraordinary grace in the face of adversity, by the responsibility of possessing these photographs. My goal was, I thought, simple - to have the work shown so that it might be shared with others. Together, I thought, we could decide what to do. Alone I could no longer bear to carry the box.

Theodor Adorno stated that "to write poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric." Susan Sontag remembered how she had divided her life into two parts: before having seen the photographs of Auschwitz, and after having seen them. These photographs were, to me, another Holocaust. To respond seemed the only possibility post-1945.

Only a few of these photographs I was carrying had been published in the United States in either newspapers or magazines.

But the quest for a book to be published or an exhibition to be shown was short-lived and ultimately naive. While the young literary agent wept at his desk as he thumbed through the images, he ended up concluding that no one would publish such depressing images. One could not blame the publishers, he stated, since they could not be expected to invest in a book that no one would buy. (How many times have I heard this? Are we, the readers, really like this? Obviously not - look at what you and I are holding.) Then there was the museum director who, having also found them too

depressing, phoned me a few years later, angry that another museum had been given these photographs as part of a major mid-life retrospective of the photographer – a retrospective, apparently, was not too depressing. Then there was the World Hunger Year organization that determined not enough images had been published in the United States for the work even to be entered in their awards competition (most of the images that were published were of the journalistic shorthand for hunger in Africa – big-bellied children).

Meanwhile, in the larger culture, there was Hands Across America, a massive if sentimental attempt to link bodies across this country in solidarity with those suffering in Africa. (I stood next to a group of leather-jacketed Hell Angels holding hands on New York's West Side Highway.) Popular musicians from Michael Jackson to Willie Nelson to Stevie Wonder were singing in concert and selling their hymns to global solidarity in record stores ("We are the world, we are the children, We are the ones who make a brighter day, So let's start giving"). The sentiments were empathetic even if the gloss was show-biz.

After a short BBC clip by an Ethiopian cameraman aired on NBC evening news alerted us to this gigantic disaster, other camera crews descended on Ethiopia for a few days and were gone. The Sahel became a gaunt specter, a backdrop for a self-styled compassionate West. People magazine ran pictures of Senator Ted Kennedy visiting, holding up the requisite starving child.

There was a feel-good sense that we, the world's affluent minority, could unite to help people on the other side of the globe. And to a certain extent we did, even if the aid helicopters often dropped their load of food without landing and their burlap coverings would all too soon be used as shrouds. We were not always conscious of the complexities of aid, of famine, of infrastructure, but moneys were collected and we moved on.

But these photos?

In France these photographs were published in a book, *L'Homme en Détresse* (Man in Distress), designed by Robert Delpire. The direct-mail proceeds went to the humanitarian aid agency that would later win the Nobel Peace Prize, Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders). In Spain, *El Fin del Camino* (The End of the Road), was published with a simpler design, also to help Doctors Without Borders.

But in the United States? Other than a single publication in Newsweek and another in the New York Times, nothing. No one wanted to publish such a book by a photographer who, as of then, was unknown.

A few years later I received a call from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to curate a mid-life artist's retrospective of the work of Sebastião Salgado. The photographs from the Sahel would be in it. The museum had decided that Sebastiao was an artist when he had always called himself a photographer. As a result, in 1990 the people of the United States could finally see some of what had happened a half-decade before in Africa.

It would have been important, both practically and spiritually, if the people in acute distress represented in the photographs had been the main reason for the acknowledgment. But this may refer to an older form of documentary, one in which the messenger remained less important than the message and alerting the viewers - even at the risk of depressing them - could be considered a part of global citizenship.

This exhibition, "An Uncertain Grace," with an accompanying book, traveled throughout the world. When the exhibition came to New York, Doctors Without Borders used the occasion to announce the opening of their first office in the United States. But the New York museum hosting the exhibition refused to allow Doctors Without Border's telephone number to be posted on the wall. People might be moved by the photographs and want to help, but the museum administration insisted that it was not seemly to put a telephone number on their walls.

Soon after the New York exhibition critical attacks began. Salgado was not enough of an artist and his photographs of the Sahel were "packaged caring." The images were too beautiful. Or, more recently, he was criticized for not individually naming the people in his photographs.

One wonders if there was more of an ugliness to the imagery how would that be truer to those depicted? Perhaps ugliness would better represent their material conditions, suffering from drought and famine, but wouldn't it exacerbate their victimization and anonymity by defining them as no more than the sum of their external conditions? People living in disastrous circumstances can be as dignified, as beautiful, as anyone else. Or does their beauty make it that much more painful for us to watch, and that's why some of us want to repudiate it as unbearable?

Would we prefer more of the journalistic shorthand which makes these Africans different than us in their victimization - big-bellied, bereft, covered in flies,

surrendering to their circumstances? Why do people see these images on an almost daily basis without finding them dehumanizing?

Salgado, the photographer who has most widely and insistently explored the lives of the world's non-affluent majority, believes in the dignity and expansive humanity of those marginalized. His images rearrange hierarchies, placing those denied material advantages in the center. The conventional and more easily digestible vocabulary of disaster imagery – the poor doubly marginalized as flotsam – is not his.

Rarely published in the US press, the contemporaneous witnessing of these photographs was rejected. As a result, some of the visceral reality of the famine and its aftermath was subverted. Required to assume the label of art for the imagery to be shown in force in the United States, their artistry rather than their urgency could become the focus of the critique. The recorded fact of the people dying (what Susan Sontag called the "footprint" of the photograph) and the concomitant issue of social responsibility – the stuff of the documentary – could be short-circuited and made nearly irrelevant.

These photographs were, in multiple ways, denied.

Perhaps there is another circuit, a living one, in which we are relieved of our distance from these events as "viewer" and become, for a moment, an unhappy protagonist, even a subject of the imagery. The "other" this time is also us.

"Nearly two decades after one of the world's most devastating famines in Africa, scientists are pointing a finger at pollution from industrial nations as one of the possible causes.

"The starvation brought on by the 1970-85 drought that stretched from Senegal to Ethiopia captured the world's attention with searing images: skeletal mothers staring vacantly, children with bloated bellies lying in the sand, vultures lurking nearby. Before rains finally returned, 1.2 million people had died.

"Now, a group of scientists in Australia and Canada say that drought may have been triggered by tiny particles of sulfur dioxide spewed by factories and power plants thousands of miles away in North America, Europe and Asia."

- Associated Press, July 21, 2002

There were other important factors too, including overgrazing, El Nino, poverty, bad planning, and climatic fluctuations. And we can add some of the more aggressive and demeaning aspects of "globalization" that one finds as part of the legacies of colonialism. But it's particularly disturbing in hindsight to find that the spectral bodies that gave us nightmares just might have had something to do with the smoke pouring out of our chimneys. While one society had been making air conditioners and powering refrigerators, the other could not get a cup of warm water.

Distances are diminished. We can begin to recognize our place in a multifaceted cause and effect. It may not have been enough to have been "holding hands across America" Some of the messages of the photographs only recently become apparent.

Nor is the famine over, even if it is occluded from mainstream media by a multitude of other horrors that have been selected for presentation. Famine is certainly not high on the list of our global fears.

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Ethiopia Emergency Bulletin
Save the Children UK

Save the Children - UK
Website: <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk>
Ethiopia October 2003
at a glance

SUMMARY

Food insecurity continues to affect millions of people in Ethiopia as the year continues. The number of people requiring food assistance in 2003 is still estimated to be just over 13 million. According to recent FEWS Net report, a significant number of people, estimated at 6-8 million, will continue to require assistance well into 2004. The worst affected areas are predominantly in the north-eastern and eastern parts of the country and more recently in the Southern Nations and Nationalities Peoples Region (SNNPR). In addition 4.2 million people are estimated to be in need of emergency water supplies, according to the UN . Livestock mortality in some regions remains high. This is compounded by shortfalls in the availability of funding for animal feed. Though donors, humanitarian agencies, the United Nations, and the Government of

Ethiopia have responded to the ongoing crisis with unprecedented levels of support. problems with targeting and distribution of food aid in some areas have caused malnutrition levels to increase.

Perhaps this is the subtext of all of these photographs. The "decisive moment," the instant in which the photograph is made, endures. The photograph finds its resonance from the past as we, Roland Barthes's "active reader," make it incarnate in the present. Its messages are not always obvious at first even to be the most acute. History re-emerges from our wake.

The publication of this book in the United States, twenty years later, is painfully relevant. The photographs ask many of the same questions that they originally did. But who can open themselves up to the pain of the world as it happens, or even as it happened?

Photographs of people suffering, dying, grotesquely emaciated, in a foreign land. How does the viewer react?

The question is, of course, nonsensical. There are many viewers, with many points of view.

But might there be a thread, an idea, a feeling preoccupying many of these viewers?

Is this discussion even interesting?

Perhaps the more pragmatic question is, "How should viewers react?"

By doing something to help if help is at all possible.

Exposed for a fractional second, distributed rapidly, the photograph is a canary in a global coal mine. (This assumes that we are sharing the same world.) As the suffering endures, the image becomes a plea.

But do photographs ever cause certain people to do something about other people (or animals, or places) they do not already know? Or might they have once, but now there are too many of these images of apocalypse tugging at us, confronting us, tearing us up if we take each one seriously? Or is the problem that there are few obvious solutions, and fewer governments with the will or the means to help? Each image of horror becomes another reflection of our own impotence.

Or is that too easy an evasion?

What should we be doing? What should we have been doing?

The questions, all of them, are withdrawn.

It can only be up to each of us.

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