

“They Like the Real World”: Documentary Practices after *The Americans*

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In late 1959, after two years of trying, Robert Frank succeeded in convincing an American publisher to print *The Americans*—a book that not only would come to define his career but also would mark a turning point in the history of twentieth-century photography. The critical reaction was immediate, often negative, and profound. The harshest words appeared in *Popular Photography* in May 1960, describing the book as “a sad poem for sick people” and “marred by spite, bitterness, and narrow prejudices, just as so many of the prints are flawed by meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposure, drunken horizons, and general sloppiness.”¹ For a younger generation of photographers, however, the rancor it inspired only underscored its radicality and its promise. In the book’s introduction the writer Jack Kerouac imagined the people depicted saying, “This is the way we are in real life.”

The photographic world had been changing throughout the 1950s: the illustrated press—which most photographers of serious artistic intent had relied on as both livelihood and means of sharing their work with the world—was waning in importance and reach, and American audiences in particular were turning to television to learn about the world around them. Photographers were also beginning to recognize that a magazine’s editorial direction might be at odds with the meaning of their work. Some photographers, such as Garry Winogrand, learned these lessons from the inside, having started their careers at the publications they later came to distrust, but by the mid-1960s even the younger artists were suspicious of magazines that might distort or dilute their work. Instead they looked for opportunities to publish books in which they could control the image selection, sequence, scale, and context. *The Americans* was a pinnacle of artistic integrity and independence, a fact confirmed by how difficult it was for Frank to find a publisher.²

Commercial success was essentially unimaginable—a photograph might sell for twenty-five dollars, if it sold at all—but many of these photographers still managed to produce monographic books that featured their work as they wanted it shown, among them *11:02 Nagasaki* (1966, plate 32), by Shōmei Tōmatsu; *The Animals* (1969) and *Women Are Beautiful* (1975, plate 4), by Winogrand; *Self Portrait* (1970, plate 6), by Lee Friedlander; *East 100th Street* (1970, plate 17), by Bruce Davidson; *Tulsa* (1971, plate 49), by Larry Clark; Aperture’s Diane Arbus monograph (1972, plates 1–3); *Suburbia* (1973, plate 41), by Bill Owens; *The New West* (1974, plate 15), by Robert Adams; *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974), by Lewis Baltz; *Gypsies* (1975, plate 33), by Josef Koudelka; *Humanario* (1976, plate 34), by Sara Facio with Alicia d’Amico; *William Eggleston’s Guide* (1976, plates 20, 21); *Carnival Strippers* (1976, plate 30), by Susan Meiselas; and *Yokosuka Story* (1979, plate 48), by Miyako Ishiuchi.³ Others would follow. It is not hard to sense the sea change: whereas the generation that came of age artistically in the 1950s or earlier saw their work circulate first on the pages of *Life*, *Look*, *Fortune*, *Esquire*, *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and other magazines in Europe and the United States, younger artists largely eschewed magazine publication, both in principle (to protect their artistic integrity) and because other options for making a living were appearing.

A second transformation in the photographic world took place in the 1960s, with the emergence in the United States of the study of photography as an art form. The scope and seriousness of this academic framework brought a larger audience to photography and provided the possibility, for photographers, of employment untainted by commercialism. And a third seismic shift occurred in 1962, with the arrival of John Szarkowski as the director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this event: Szarkowski’s approach to the medium, articulated through many exhibitions and (fewer, but still influential) publications, had a transformative effect on the ways in which both historical and contemporary photography was understood. In 1967 Szarkowski organized the exhibition *New Documents*, in which he introduced Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand:

¹ Robert Frank, *The Americans* (New York: Grove Press, 1959). A French edition had appeared the previous year published by Robert Delpire. Peter Galassi has observed that the most quoted of the book’s negative reviews appeared in the May 1960 issue of *Popular Photography*. Galassi, *Robert Frank in America* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2014), p. 36.

² For my summary of this era I am in debt to John Szarkowski’s convincing analysis of the photographic world on the eve of the 1960s in *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), pp. 11–25.

³ Aperture published Diane Arbus’s book posthumously but editorial control remained with Doon Arbus, the artist’s daughter, and Marvin Israel, an artist, designer, art director, teacher, and friend.

Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago, when the label was new, made their pictures in the service of a social cause. It was their aim to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right.

In the past decade a new generation of photographer has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and the frailties of society. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational.

This exhibition shows a handful of pictures by three photographers of that generation. What unites them is not style or sensibility: each has a distinct and personal sense of the uses of photography and the meanings of the world. What they hold in common is a belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.⁴

In the nearly fifty years since *New Documents*, there has been a tendency to group the achievements of these three photographers, minimizing the individuality of each, although surely that was not Szarkowski’s intent. The works of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand, as well as of many other artists who sought to engage with the real world through a camera’s lens, are as diverse as what they chose to photograph; to borrow Szarkowski’s phrase to discuss them is both to acknowledge the exhibition’s influence and to newly apply its notion to the wide range of practices represented here, as well as in other chapters of this volume. This air of (or interest in) authenticity became a central preoccupation of photographers who otherwise had little in common in the following decades. Even within the rather strict parameters of straight photography—artists examining the world with a camera—the period between 1960 and 1980 was one of unprecedented vitality and heterogeneity. Artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher (plate 72), Nan Goldin (plate 92), Duane Michals (plate 145), and Nicholas Nixon (plate 219) were very much interested in the real world, whatever form that interest might take.

Most of the artists who appear in this chapter were featured in solo exhibitions during Szarkowski’s tenure at MoMA.⁵ That these figures form the core of an

artistic canon of the era suggests Szarkowski’s singular influence: in 1982 the art historian and curator Christopher Phillips described Szarkowski’s position as “the judgment seat of photography.”⁶ From that same seat Edward Steichen, Szarkowski’s predecessor, had often subsumed individual achievements into musings on the medium’s universality, epitomized in 1955 by the exhibition *The Family of Man*. Szarkowski was determined to put forward the specificity of each photographer’s vision, to the extent of titling his first exhibition at MoMA *Five Unrelated Photographers*. There is certainly a danger of overstating the power of an individual or institution to transform culture, but to pretend that MoMA and Szarkowski were not critical to understanding the 1960s and ’70s is to risk a greater historical inaccuracy, especially from an American perspective.

MoMA was not alone in its attentiveness to work of this sort, nor in its efforts to bring it to a broader audience. As the shifts of the 1950s were taking place, the George Eastman House, in Rochester, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, were all collecting and exhibiting photographs to varying degrees; the International Center of Photography, in New York, and the Center for Creative Photography, in Tucson, were founded in 1974 and 1975, respectively. In December 1966 the curator Nathan Lyons brought together the work of Davidson, Friedlander, Winogrand, Danny Lyon (plate 43), and Michals in *Toward a Social Landscape*, an exhibition organized for the George Eastman House with a modest catalogue typical of the era. In his essay for the catalogue Lyons astutely concluded,

I do not find it hard to believe that photographers who have been concerned with the question of the authentic relevance of events and objects should consciously or unconsciously adopt one of the most authentic picture forms photography has produced. The directness of their commentary of “people and people things” is not an attempt to define but to clarify the meaning of the human condition. The reference point of each photographer is presented as a separate portfolio. The combined statement is one of comment, observation, aluminum, chrome, the automobile, people, objects, people in relation to things, questioning, ambiguity, humor, bitterness and affection.⁷

⁴ Szarkowski, wall text for *New Documents*, 1967. MoMA Archives, New York.

⁵ The solo exhibitions presented at MoMA between 1962 and 1991 (or group shows featuring individual achievements) included those devoted to Robert Adams, in 1971, 1979, and 1984; Arbus, in 1967 and 1972; Mark Cohen, in 1973; Bruce Davidson, in 1966 and 1970; William Eggleston, in 1976; Larry Fink, in 1979; Lee Friedlander, in 1967, 1972, 1974, and 1991; William Gedney, in 1968;

Frank Gohlke, in 1978 and 1983; Emmet Gowin, in 1971; Chauncey Hare, in 1977; Kikuji Kawada, in 1974; Josef Koudelka, in 1975; Helen Levitt, in 1974; Joel Meyerowitz, in 1968; Daido Moriyama, in 1974; Stephen Shore, in 1976; Rosalind Fox Solomon, in 1986; Joel Sternfeld, in 1984; Shōmei Tōmatsu, in 1974; Henry Wessel, Jr., in 1972; and Garry Winogrand, in 1963, 1967, 1969, 1977, and 1988.

⁶ Christopher Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” *October* 22 (Autumn 1982): 27–63.

⁷ Nathan Lyons, introduction to *Toward a Social Landscape* (New York: Horizon Press; Rochester, N.Y.: George Eastman House, 1966), p. 7.

The following month *Twelve Photographers of the American Social Landscape*, organized by Thomas Garver, opened at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, in Massachusetts. Garver brought together the work of four of the same photographers (Davidson, Friedlander, Lyon, Michals) with that of eight others (Frank, Ralph Gibson, Warren Hill, Rudolph Janu, Simpson Kalisher, James Marchael, Philip Perkis, and Tom Zimmermann). The connection between his and Lyons’s titles is not entirely coincidental; in his acknowledgements Garver cited a 1963 interview in which Friedlander described his preoccupation with “the American social landscape and its conditions.”⁸ In his catalogue’s introduction Garver held up journalistic practices as a mirror against which contemporary activity could be understood:

This exhibition is based on things as they are. Many of the photographs are of the evanescent, events as minor in importance as they are fleeting in time. They are anti-news—or at least, non-news—*things as they are* rather than things as they should be, could be or are thought to be.

These twelve photographers . . . are less concerned with explicit messages than with implicit commentary, though to call them “cool” for their seemingly noncommittal approach is inadequate. Their photographs are not visual “no-comments” but rather records of real events offered to an audience who may not always believe the events are that way.⁹

Garver used the word “record”; Lyons chose “snapshot”; Szarkowski (whose *New Documents* would open in February 1967) emphasized “document.” Although the terms are hardly synonymous, each suggests a focus on fact, authenticity, or reality. Garver, Lyons, and Szarkowski all pointed out these photographers’ appreciation for the ordinary, inconsequential, and trivial, and pointed to the individual nature of their achievements (in the catalogues and on the walls, their photographs were presented in distinct groups, not intermixed). Only Garver explicitly mentions Frank, but Frank’s ode to the uncelebrated aspects of American culture echoes throughout.

There is no word more closely associated with photography throughout its history than “documentary,”

and this association is both appropriate and misleading: appropriate because photography is uniquely and inextricably connected to the real world, and as such a vast majority of images captured through the camera’s lens might reasonably be described as documents (of a face, a landscape, an event), and misleading because throughout the twentieth century artists and art historians have struggled to define what “documentary” means. It can be understood as a style, a means of communication, a signal of authenticity; most photographs can function as documents, proof, records, or evidence. In 1975 Baltz noted that

there is something paradoxical in the way that documentary photographs interact with our notions of reality. To function as documents at all they must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively. . . . The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete.¹⁰

In 1975 William Jenkins organized *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* for the George Eastman House, with the purpose of “simply . . . [postulating], at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph.”¹¹ Eight young and fairly young Americans (Adams, Baltz [plate 16], Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke [plate 47], Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore [plates 22, 23], and Henry Wessel, Jr. [plate 24]) were presented alongside the German Bechers, whose association with Conceptual art practices was not as entrenched as it often seems today. Their work shows nary a human figure but evidences a keen interest in rendering the built environment with “a minimum of inflection.” Their apparent neutrality harkened back in part to Ed Ruscha and his deadpan surveys, beginning in 1962, of gasoline stations, apartments, and parking lots (plate 56); as Jenkins astutely observed, however, “There remains an essential and significant difference between Ruscha [and the photographs in this exhibition]. . . . The nature of this difference is found in an understanding of the difference between what a picture is *of* and what it is *about*. Ruscha’s pictures of gasoline stations are not about gasoline stations but about a set of aesthetic issues.”¹²

What this heterogeneous group of artists fundamentally share, as do those more immediately identifiable with the legacy of Frank in the mid- to late 1960s, is an ability to inflect what appears to be a straightforward document from the real world with individual meaning.

The photography historian Jonathan Green observed in 1984 that “almost every major pictorial style and iconographical concern that . . . dominate American straight photography in the late sixties and throughout the seventies can be traced back to one or more of the eighty-two [*sic*, there were eighty-three] photographs in *The Americans*. . . . Frank’s photographs . . . laid the groundwork for endless experimentation. The list of major photographers who . . . derive from Frank is impressive, and continually growing.”¹³ So it is a curious coincidence that during the decades in which the photographs in this chapter were made, Frank turned from photography to filmmaking. His legacy has nevertheless loomed large, both in the United States and elsewhere.

The primary emphasis of this essay has been on American photography, reflecting in part the specific makeup of the photographs in MoMA’s collection. The Museum’s database contains eight thousand photographs made between 1960 and 1980, and more than three-quarters of these were made by American artists, but MoMA was not blind to developments elsewhere. In 1974 Szarkowski and the Japanese critic and editor Shōji Yamagishi organized *New Japanese Photography*, which was structured, like *New Documents*, as a suite of fifteen solo exhibitions. Tōmatsu, Daidō Moriyama (plates 50, 51), and Kikuji Kawada (plate 31) were three of the featured artists being introduced to an American audience. *New Japanese Photography* did not outline an overarching theme, but many of the images

examined daily life in Japan in the aftermath of World War II. And although the curators embraced technical and stylistic differences, as they did in *New Documents*, many photographs featured rough grain and high contrast, evoking the raw grit of contemporary experience.

The market for photographs in the 1960s and ’70s was nearly nonexistent, yet Szarkowski regularly collected work made outside the United States and western Europe. He acquired the vast majority of the works in *New Japanese Photography*, purchased Koudelka’s photographs of Gypsies in his native Czechoslovakia in 1968, barely a year after the artist gave up engineering for photography, and a dozen works by the South African photographer David Goldblatt in 1978 (plate 35). In recent years, the Museum has made strategic efforts to collect works by artists from Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and Eastern Asia; the works by Paolo Gasparini (plate 28) and Facio represent but two of the fruits of those efforts.

To begin his essay in the *New Topographics* catalogue, Jenkins quoted the writer Jorge Luis Borges: “I should try to tell, in a straightforward way, plain stories, so that I will try to get away from mazes, from mirrors, from daggers, from tigers, because all of those things now grow a bit of a bore to me. So that I will try to write a book, a book so good that nobody will think I have written it. I would write a book—I won’t say in somebody else’s style—but in the style of *anybody* else.”¹⁴ Just as Borges’s straightforward prose bears the imprimatur of its maker, the multitude of individual visions represented in this chapter—despite their shared mechanical roots—present themselves clearly to those interested in seeing.

⁸ Contemporary Photographer 4, no. 4 (Fall 1963): 13.

⁹ Thomas H. Garver, introduction to *Twelve Photographers of the American Social Landscape* (Waltham, Mass.: Poses Institute of Fine Arts, Brandeis University, 1967), n.p.

¹⁰ Lewis Baltz, book review of *The New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range*, by Robert Adams, in *Art in America* 63, no. 2 (March–April 1975): 41. Quoted in William Jenkins, introduction to *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, N.Y.: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), p. 6.

¹¹ Jenkins, *New Topographics*, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), p. 92.

¹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, “A Post-Lecture Discussion of his Own Writing,” *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4 (June 1975): 710. Quoted in William Jenkins, *New Topographics*, p. 5.