

Alternative Photographic Exposures

Debra Livingston

As we navigate through COVID-19 currently impacting on every aspect of daily life around the world, we are all feeling the strain of constant lockdowns and self-imposed quarantine. Academia has responded to the pandemic by moving their educational and associated activities online, which has become stressful to many due to the lack of the necessary digital experience and appropriate infrastructure. Many academics have had to focus on how to transition to remote teaching, putting their research on hold. This has created unprecedented challenges for the journal.

For issue 40-2 2021, the layout of the journal will change to allow for showcasing of photographs and in the following, issue 3 for poetry. This issue of *Social Alternatives*, 'Alternative Photographic Exposures', considers the importance of viewing, memories, traditional photographic codes, the way images can tell a story and why photographs can create change in public perception.

In *Aperture*, a journal for photographers, Edgington discusses David Strauss's book *After 9/11, Do We Prefer Images to Reality?*, and considers 'the effects photography terror, and divisive politics have had on the twenty-first-century imagination'. In particular, he has long been concerned with what 'happens between things—image and belief, words and images, representation and the real, and the challenging of the age of believability in photographs' (Edgington 2021). According to Strauss, 'It's not that we "mistake photographs for reality", but that "we prefer them to reality"'. After 9/11 Strauss noted a transformation in the way people responded to images of a catastrophic event. That day Strauss argues:

...wiped away 'years of accumulated theories about their effects and meanings, and causing us once again to acknowledge and confront our irrational and enduring attraction to them'. Most of us had 'witnessed' the event through images ... we were the targets; that is, all of us watching from afar—us [as] image-witnesses ... we cannot bear reality, but we bear images—like stigmata, like children, like fallen comrades ... The complex relationship we have with [images] (Strauss in Edgington 2003).

Blakely and Lloyd discuss the importance of truth in photo-journalism as against those that propose that journalism is 'constructed imagery, biased reporting, exploitative image making and the pretense at objectivity' in 'Photojournalism and Documentary Practice: When sometimes we turn away'. They purport that storytelling in photojournalism continues to hold the power of traditional values on the still image and gives the viewer a moment to think, and to react. Blakely and Lloyd believe in honesty and showcase a narrative document of photographs that bring an innate curiosity beyond the obvious credibility and compassion. Their work engages and inspires us as a human race to be better. Photojournalism and photo-documentary shows us a glimpse of life's deeper meaning. Blakely and Lloyd present a photo-documentary series 'Never Again', 'Family Tree' and 'I Met A Man Today' sharing a brief history of the Genocide of Tutsi's in Rwanda. Lloyd reflects on personal experiences growing up in the 1960s in 'There Was a Time'. As photo-documentary this series imparts emotional connections. Blakeley's 'Control Yourself', tells us about women's identity and considers how the media stereotypes about physical appearance continue to contribute to the categorisation of the female body.

There is a fine line between photojournalism and photo-documentary. Both tell a story but photo-documentary can be many visual styles and the motivations of the photographers are various as opposed to photojournalism where images are taken straight-from-the-hip, in that they are deemed to hold traditional values of truth and abide by a code of ethics. Photo-documentary on the other hand can be crafted to tell a story or narrate an experience. It is still a document that tells a story in a different way:

'Over the past 15 years, documentary photography has been approached differently, and as a result, new ways of 'telling' have emerged. What was once the territory of the traditional photojournalist is now shared with photographers who see themselves as artists and collaborators, more interested in raising questions than in telling complete, digestible stories' (MGA 2021).

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For example, while addressing themes of consumerism, mass tourism and globalisation, Martin Parr uses exaggerated close-ups such as heads, hats, food, and dogs as repetitive motifs to explore the excesses of contemporary capitalism. 'Until the mid-twentieth century, documentary photography was a vital way of bearing witness to world events: from shoot-from-the-hip photographs of the Spanish Civil War by Robert Capa, to the considered portraits of poor farmers by Dorothea Lange' (Tate n.d.).

Dellas Henke documents his life-threatening illness in the US Health system, in 'Chemo-Waste' using text and images as an art-story. His printmaking includes photo-etchings and mixed media images produced from an abundant creative diary about his prolonged six-year experience with chemo-therapy. The images were produced as a document of sensations and feelings of events, of thoughts, of treatment, of the aftermath in which to evoke the emotions of experience or compassion in the viewer. Using the plethora of visual notes produced over the six years, Henke's images 'work as a witness, a document, a narrative for staying vigilant in the battles of strength and willpower to overcome cancer'. Even though his images are beyond the traditional style photograph it is an accurate documentary produced in a creative way to tell a story.

Today the world is saturated with photographs. Technologies such as the smart phone allow people to document their world every moment of the day. But people have been recording their life and times over decades, particularly to share or to leave 'a non-contextualised visual family chronicle for following generations' (Rejakvam 1993, cited in Livingston and Dyer 2010: 8). Discovering photographs of relations and family friends can shed new light on how they loved, lived and died. Families' prized possessions are the albums chronicled as narratives through time, stored away to inspire future generations to explore their genealogy. Family photographs are emotional stories of people, families, and societies.

In her article 'Reprints, Review, and Refusing Ventriloquism of the 'Folk: Providing Tellability to the Storied through a Family's Photographs' Sally Busby questions if photographs of past relatives will stay interesting for future generations. Busby discovered a cigar box full of negatives that helped her unlock stories and connections among three generations on her mother's side of the family. She further encouraged her relatives to write their memories on the processed photographs to know who they were and the events of that day. Busby evaluated these writings and suggest they provided a way for individual reflexive thought and are a catalyst for conversations. Busby advocates however, that 'the visual mode without the voice of those within the image only provides a way to speculate on a story'. Further, 'The last three generations of photographers in my family took photographs with the eyes of artists and the deliberation of documentarians to record the process of their family's gradual attainment of rootedness and middle-class status'.

There are many states in America that produced a vast amount of deadly plutonium throughout the cold war era and solving the problem of storage is an urgent issue. Paltrow (2018) states that 'Washington has not even begun to take the steps needed to acquire additional space for burying plutonium more than 2,000 feet below ground – the depth considered safe'. Most of the buildings and containers are disintegrating and there is a risk of leakage and accidents with large amounts of radioactivity being released. The former Rocky Flats nuclear production facility in Colorado is now a national wildlife refuge for public recreation. After many incidents due to unacceptable safety guidelines that contaminated the local environment it was shut down in 1989. In 'Incendiary Iconography: The legacy of the Cold War in America' Anthony Thompson uses traditional film, an analogue photographic practice, to document the decontamination and deconstruction process at Rocky Flats including the Nevada Nuclear Test Site and the Waste Isolation Plant in New Mexico. His photo-documentary provides evidence that the decades of production at the nuclear weapons plant shows there was no designated place to dispose of the contaminated wastes and by-products of the production processes. By designating the Rocky Flats as a national wildlife refuge the Department of Energy could afford the lowest possible decontamination standards. On many environmental websites the public are warned to weigh up the risks of entering the park because plutonium remains active for many thousands of years and can be harmful even in very small amounts.

Nuclear annihilation has been hanging over our lives since the early 1940s and was much discussed and feared at the time. There were momentous marches by environmental and other

campaigns for nuclear disarmament. Since then, news of the consequences of nuclear war, and nuclear power is again currently relevant with the stand-off between the US, China and Australia planning to purchase nuclear submarines. Evidence now substantiates allegations that the atomic tests around the world during the cold war era have contributed to climate change.

Prävālie Remus (2014) considers the nuclear weapons testing conducted in the second half of the twentieth century produced radioactive pollution stored in the atmosphere and marine environment. He argues that the 'large number of nuclear weapons tests carried out in the atmosphere and underground during 1945–2013 (the last nuclear test was performed by North Korea) were responsible for the current environmental contamination with radioactive waste that resulted in ecological and social destruction due to high levels of radioactivity' (2014). The UK *Guardian* (2011) identified 33 serious incidents and accidents at nuclear power stations since the first recorded one in 1952 at Chalk River in Ontario, Canada.

In the last photo-essay 'Contemplating Climate Change', Debra Livingston's photographs illustrate a nightmare from childhood in the 1950s that envisaged an environmental holocaust. Was this nightmare influenced by hearing adults talk and news of marches for disarmament for fear of nuclear annihilation at the time? Livingston reminisces about her early childhood and discovers the symbols from the nightmare reflect current rapid climate change – so the question is, will we be able to change our complex and complicated practices fast enough?

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Biography

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Debra Livingston has a Doctorate of Creative Arts (Photography) and lectured in photography at the Queensland College of Art (QCA) and the University of the Sunshine Coast. She is a published artist and her photography work is presented in solo and collaborative exhibitions locally in Queensland, nationally in Melbourne and Sydney, and internationally in New York (NYC), Florida, Chicago, Paris and India. Her work resides in private and public collections, Livingston has published in the American journal, *Poets and Artists*, achieved honorary mentions in the PX3 Paris Photography Awards, finalist and semifinalist in the annual Australian HeadOn Foundation Photographic Portrait Awards, Sydney, Australia and twice finalist in the International Brisbane Art Prize.