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INTEGRATION OF SELF IN SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY WORKS

BACHELOR'S THESIS

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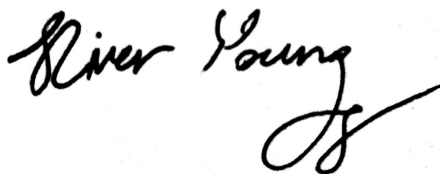
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Abstract

In the wake of Martha Rosler's Critique in her essay "In, around and afterthoughts" the genre of Documentary photography has experienced a crisis as to defining itself in the face of history and its own purpose. Leaving space for new kinds of approaches to creating work in this field that may not completely address or avoid the critiques, however lead to powerful ways of interpreting problems and challenges in the world around us. My interest in this topic comes from my own questions and doubt surrounding the genre of Social Documentary photography. My intention in writing this thesis is to find merit in projects that have personal contexts with the artists who make them. The strategy of the integration of the 'self' in the social documentary themed projects is the approach that I will attempt to define and discuss in this thesis. I will review artists Latoya Ruby Frazier and Sophie Calle and their approaches with specific projects. By defining and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of artists and literature surrounding this strategy I will prove the existence of social documentary works that yield more importance in the face of typical critiques like that of Martha Rosler's in 1980's. This theses will address the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy of integration of the 'self', however ultimately it will address this approach in context of contemporary ways of interpreting social documentary issues and its place in the current climate of the world.

Abstraktní

V návaznosti na kritiku Marthy Roslerové v její esejí „In, kolem a po ní“ zažila žánr dokumentární fotografie krizi, která se definovala tváří v tvář historii a vlastnímu účelu. Ponechání prostoru pro nové druhy přístupů k vytváření práce v této oblasti, které se nemusí zcela zabývat kritikami nebo se jim vyhnout, však vede k silným způsobům interpretace problémů a výzev ve světě kolem nás. Můj zájem o toto téma pochází z mých vlastních otázek a pochybností o žánru Social Documentary photography. Mým záměrem v této práci je najít zásluhy v projektech, které mají osobní kontext s umělci, kteří je tvoří. Strategie integrace „sebe“ do projektů zaměřených na sociální dokumentární film je přístup, který se pokusím v této práci definovat a diskutovat. Budu hodnotit umělce Latoya Ruby Frazier a Sophie Calle a jejich přístupy se specifickými projekty. Definováním a projednáním silných a slabých stránek umělců a literatury, které se týkají této strategie, doložím existenci sociálních dokumentárních děl, které přinesou větší důležitost tváří v tvář typickým kritikám, jaké má Martha Roslerová v 80. letech. Tato diplomová práce se bude zabývat silnými a slabými stránkami strategie integrace „sebe sama“, v konečném důsledku se však bude tímto přístupem zabývat v kontextu současných způsobů interpretace otázek sociálního dokumentu a jeho místa v současném klimatu světa.

Table of Contents

Introduction		9-11
Chapter 1	On Social Documentary Photography	12-15
Chapter 2	Martha Rosler and General Critiques Of The Genre	16-22
Chapter 3	Integrating Oneself In Social Documentary Works	23-28
Conclusion		29-30
Bibliography		31-32

Introduction

Social documentary photography has evolved over the years, and all the technological and social advancements in today's world have made it hard to place where one could see it today. Historically, social documentary photography was or would be used to report on an event, that not everyone was aware of or could access, in order to evoke a change or to illuminate issues in society.¹ Today photographs that fall under the social documentary category are ones that focus on or depict the situation and its effects on human life, otherwise known as the human condition.² Many photographers have become significantly influential in the eyes of the genre due to their outstanding achievements in stimulating change by the creation and distribution of this work. Photographers such as Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis, and Dorothea Lange have been established in history as significant figures for using photography to investigate social issues, inevitably inspiring generations of photographers to document society's problems as social documentary photography has been a relevant tool used to induce change. Historically, we can look at surface examples of photography intended for change such as, Dorothea Lange. Her employed work for the *Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration* was to illustrate the devastation and displacement of the American people during the Depression. Simply, Lange's method was straight-forward, in that she would photograph the overlooked victims of the period to expose and gain attention from the non-victims that, could or might help the situation as they were confronted with the reality of the situation.

Intention and relevancy adapt with the world and the methods of documenting, such as Lange's, become outdated and must change with the times. Her project

¹ Price, Derrick. "Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography out and About." *Photography. A Critical Introduction*, 1996, 67-113.

[https://books.google.cz/books?id=iRguXtdTMhsC&pg=PA65&lpg=PA65&dq=Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About.&source=bl&ots=VY3ZLzrlkr&sig=ACfU3U3G2bmheLwQxTGUKlditgebZYJvTA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiX1qDj6MPAhVKL1AKHUrdbVUQ6AEwAHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About.&f=false](https://books.google.cz/books?id=iRguXtdTMhsC&pg=PA65&lpg=PA65&dq=Surveyors+and+Surveyed:Photography+Out+and>About.&source=bl&ots=VY3ZLzrlkr&sig=ACfU3U3G2bmheLwQxTGUKlditgebZYJvTA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiX1qDj6MPAhVKL1AKHUrdbVUQ6AEwAHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=Surveyors+and+Surveyed:Photography+Out+and>About.&f=false)

² Arendt, Hannah. "The Human Condition." University of Chicago Press, 1998. Accessed April 15, 2019. http://sduk.us/afterwork/arendt_the_human_condition.pdf.

succeeded in stimulating change and was relative to the time period, though today this traditional method of social documentation would not be as significant. Our own intake of media and images in present day is at a higher level with the advancement technology and information sharing. One could assume that Lange's method is not fit for our world today. So what is fit for the world with all of the changes in technology and politics? To further explore the options we can investigate examples of discrepancies in social documentary today.

The written text, *On 'documentary photography' In around and afterthoughts*, by Martha Rosler, addresses issues within the genre which still hold relevance today.³ Rosler raises questions as to the true value of a photographic series in the context of the issues they depict. Her text begins with the critique of the phenomenon she observes in the Bowery district in New York City, NY USA. This district of the city during the 1980's was of a particular grit, known for having many bars and dirty streets. The phenomenon Rosler describes, delves into the issue of drunkards from this area being photographed in an exploitative fashion, with the photographs later being sold in high galleries and eventually ending up on the walls of homes or within a collection of the bourgeoisie. Rosler points out, that the proceeds of this business are never formally returned to the exploited, which raises the question of whether social documentary really aims to help those it so sincerely documents by bringing attention to the human condition of suffering and the ability that it can present.

In saying this, the importance of social documentary photography extends through modern history by displaying and showing parts of our society others would rather suppress, for example the journalist photography taken in the Vietnam war. Due to the reportage, the populus could realize the problems with the overseas war and protest them appropriately to effectively end it.⁴

³ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

⁴ Griffin, Michael. (1999). *The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism War Photography and the Rise of Photojournalism*.

The intention of this thesis is to explore relevant social documentary projects that have merit beyond the typical values we expect from the methods and intentions of social documentary as an influential tool used within our society.

The integration of oneself within a specific project or group of projects is a strategy used by social documentary artists, which is critical to understand for the basis of this thesis. This is defined, by means of, photographing oneself in an event or situation pertaining to an issue or topic addressed or by building a project around oneself using photography. Within the use of this strategy, the artist can also use a culture or minority group in which they may be apart of, in order to explore the social issues within the said groups or the problems those groups face within society.

To show how effective this method can be, I will discuss two contemporary artists Latoya Ruby Frazier and Sophie Calle who work from personal modes and mix photographs of themselves in their works to explore larger social issues. Before this though, it is necessary to define social documentary photography as a practice.

Chapter 1

On Social Documentary Photography

The term 'social' in social documentary, could be defined as a focus on exploring the life of underprivileged or disadvantaged people as said in the text '*Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About*' By Derrick Price,⁵ and/or defined as a focus on the 'Human Condition'.⁶ This term is important when discussing the effects a body of work can have. Meaning, how does the life of the people depicted change after the subjects are photographed or the work is published. Is this change positive for the lives of the disadvantaged? In my opinion, to make a body of work that would be considered social documentary it must be made with the intention to highlight a social issue in society and lead to effecting change for the documented. I will discuss what can make a social documentary work successful, using two examples of projects and movements affected by the works made about them: Lewis Hine's investigative photographic works on child labor and Gordon Parks's efforts in the Civil Rights movement. This chapter will discuss the effects of these projects and how social documentary photography came to be an important part of history by changing to address different problems.

Lewis Hine born on September 26, 1874, became one of photography's most prolific humanitarians to elicit change in the poor work conditions as a result of growth in industrialization throughout cities across the United States. He began to photograph in order to aid his teaching using pictures of plants to teach about botany. His first spot light came when he took a trip to the Southern tip of Manhattan in NYC. He began photographing the slums that were proceeding to intensify at the turn of the century during the arrival of immigrants after their examination at Ellis Island⁷. *New York Times* reporter Judith Mara Gutman said: "he believed that all one needed to do was to "instruct" a society - expose its ills - and the ills would vanish."⁸

⁵ Wells, Liz. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, London. 2000. ISBN 0415190576.

⁶ Arendt, Hannah. "The Human Condition." University of Chicago Press, 1998. Accessed April 15, 2019. http://sduk.us/afterwork/arendt_the_human_condition.pdf.

⁷ Gutman, Judith Mara. "Hine's Last Legacy." *New York Times*, April 17, 1983. Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/17/magazine/lewis-hine-s-last-legacy.html>.

⁸ Gutman, Judith Mara. "Hine's Last Legacy." *New York Times*, April 17, 1983. Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/17/magazine/lewis-hine-s-last-legacy.html>.

In 1908 Hine started making work for the *National Child Labor Committee* traveling all over the east coast documenting the violations of human rights against children working in factories. His focus was on corporations using child labor as a way to cut costs. He worked on this project until 1917, amassing an archive of over 5000 prints and glass plates. The strategy Hine would use included, sneaking into factories by using disguises and waiting till the overworked children would exit the factories after their, sometimes, 16 hour shifts in unsafe conditions. While the photographs are calm and gentle the effect of them on history would not be:

The children in these pictures - shown in the streets or in mines, mills and factories - seemed to sparkle, like so many diamonds in the rough. Hine's photographs contributed to the passage of the National Child Labor Law in 1916.⁹

The change came directly from the social documentary work made by Hine. Very simply, Hine would document thousands of childrens faces to show the scale of the amount of children affected. Hine represents, historically, a person who wanted to improve the conditions in society through illuminating the issues he observed. He included his pictures in pamphlets that he distributed on his travels. Hine's photographs affected real change by forcing the hand of government officials into creating more strict labor laws that protect children from unsafe conditions.¹⁰

Another example of change made by Social documentary photography happened during a significant event within the Civil Rights Movement. 'Bloody Sunday' occurred on March 7, 1965 in Selma Alabama, USA.¹¹ Selma saw protestors attempting to cross the bridge and were met with a militant response from local and state law enforcement,

⁹ Gutman, Judith Mara. "Hine's Last Legacy." New York Times, April 17, 1983. Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/17/magazine/lewis-hine-s-last-legacy.html>.

¹⁰ Gutman, Judith Mara. "Hine's Last Legacy." New York Times, April 17, 1983. Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/17/magazine/lewis-hine-s-last-legacy.html>.

¹¹Berger, Maurice A. *Seeing Through Race, A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. California University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780520268647.

in an attempt to hinder the march against the laws that oppressed black people. Peaceful protestors were met with tear gas and violence. On this day, many, now famous, photographs of the conflict compelled people to side in favor of the protestor's plight. This event and how it was photographed encouraged the voting rights act to be ratified by gaining the protestors federal and national support.¹² The photographs functioned to invoke feelings of compassion for the members marching for equal rights. This conflict if not documented photographically, may not have led to a very positive change in history for Black Americans. According to *Seeing through race* by Martin a. Berger:

*The iconic images of Birmingham and Selma presented black protestors as victims of unwarranted aggression by violent lawmen and thus generated white sympathy for blacks and hence generated more support for legislative change.*¹³

While not just one, but many photographers used photography as a way to spread awareness. Gordon Parks' is a photographer, in particular, who used his camera as a weapon. Parks' became inspired by the Lewis Hine and the photographers for the Farm Security Administration during the depression such as Jack Delano and Dorothea Lange.¹⁴ Parks' discovered from the social documentary works that he could use his camera as a weapon against segregation and racism. He became a key player in the Civil Rights movement from his work *The Restraints: Open and Hidden* (1956).¹⁵ Commissioned by *Life* to document a family living under oppressive Jim Crow laws in

¹² Berger, Maurice A. *Seeing Through Race, A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. California University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780520268647.

¹³ Berger, Maurice A. *Seeing Through Race, A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. California University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780520268647.

¹⁴ Frank, Priscilla, and Priscilla Frank. "The Importance Of Photography In The Fight For Civil Rights." HuffPost. February 16, 2016. Accessed April 28, 2019.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gordon-parks-civil-rights-photography_n_56c222c9e4b0b40245c7681a

¹⁵ Berger, Maurice A. *Seeing Through Race, A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. California University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780520268647.

the South. The photographs depict an average black family living in the South, engaged in common everyday activities of that time period. Parks' aim was to level what he called "evidence" against the negative stereotypes which dictated that black people were less than human, and also, that even under the oppression of Jim Crow laws there is evidence of the similarities of black and white people. Creating a vehicle to close the gaps in social status between races. The efforts of photographers documenting the injustices committed on Black people illuminated the problems to begin a discussion. Parks' presented irrefutable evidence to reinforce the discussion of equal rights. It is imperative to notice the distinct difference in methods of social documentary practice here as Hine's was focused more on an archival aspect to his work which would amount to a shocking sum of photographs to get his point across, whereas Parks relied on his ability to observe granted by his status within the black community.

Hine and Parks created works with the intention to highlight and stimulate change, both photographing the issues they believed to be paramount in society, thereafter becoming significant figures in the realm of social documentary photography. However, Hine's position on documentation would be to focus on child labor, as it existed in society to generate a discussion, and through this, one could estimate that racism is a more complicated issue and would require more complicated methods of social documentation. With this said, it is imperative to consider that as time progresses and the world becomes more complicated, we should consistently address social documentary methods and adjust them.

Chapter 2

Martha Rosler and General Critiques On The Genre

As stated in the beginning of the thesis, this chapter will be focussing on discussing the genre of social documentary photography and what changed in the genre to motivate critiques and question the true purpose of it. To do this I will use the essay *On 'documentary photography' In around and afterthoughts* written by Martha Rosler in 1981 to outline some of the common critiques weighed against the genre as a whole.¹⁶ Her critiques include issues with mythology and monetization in and around documentary work. She calls for an end to 'Liberal Documentary,' which she defines as when a documentary work wishes to supplant substantive social activism.¹⁷

The liberal documentary, in which members of the ascendant classes are implored to have pity on and to rescue members of the oppressed, now belongs to the past.

18

At the end of her essay she leaves space for new 'Radical Documentary' which in her description is when the documentarian attempts to address abuses caused by the society we live in.¹⁹ One could see how Rosler's critiques show the shift in the genre of social documentary works. The shift creates space in our current age to consider different kinds of documentary practice. To discuss the aspects of each of the general critiques I will use texts from after 1981 specifying a change or shift in the world of

¹⁶ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

¹⁷ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

¹⁸ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

¹⁹ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

documentary. I will discuss how a mysticism has infiltrated the medium and how it led a photographic obsession with the Bowery and how monetization of the photographic works has led to a shift in the way we perceive the photographs.²⁰

As stated in Chapter 1 in history there are photographic legends like Lewis Hine and Gordon Parks who proved that not only one form of social documentary is possible. That to create a body of work that lead to significant change the methods and intention had to change to fit the issue depicted. According to Rosler, time would show that not only did the world change but that history did not remember the reasons that social documentary stimulated change. She brings up how stories like Hine, Lange, Riis lead to create a mythology around social documentary work that leads to a belief that all forms are righteous no matter the intention or subjects. This leads her to introduce the phenomenon in the Bowery to question how this abrupt shift came in the intention behind social documentary work. Her own example of a causeless documentary hotspot Rosler states:

*The Bowery, in New York, is an archetypal skid row. It has been much photographed, in works veering between outraged moral sensitivity and sheer slumming spectacle. Why is the Bowery so magnetic to documentarians? It is no longer possible to evoke the camouflaging impulses to "help" drunks and down-and-outers or "expose" their dangerous existence.*²¹

She begins to describe the mythology surrounding social documentary photography that seemingly justifies a fascination with any marginalized group. A photographic focus on drunks and homeless people in New York City and places around the world is what she refers to. So what has changed since the era of Lewis

²⁰ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

²¹ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

Hine and Gordon Parks battling the forces of evil with righteous photographs of people in dire situations? According to Rosler, the world changed, and the War on Poverty ended. The unofficial name being The War on Poverty, saw legislation changes made by US President Lyndon B Johnson, as a response to poverty from what it was understood to be in the 1960s.²² This movement's directive was intended to be a 'cure' to poverty in all its forms. Important to note though, Rosler wrote about this during the dismantlement of welfare in the occupation of president of Ronald Reagan which is significant as in this time the government had halted their efforts in attempting to remedy poverty on a federal level.

According to Susan Sontag, in her book *Regarding the pain of others*, conflict changed photography.²³ She discusses how conflict and disaster photojournalism changed photography in many ways, and one key aspect to this concept is the generated desensitization to empathic imagery. Due to the saturation of imagery being mass distributed and the accessibility to this saturation, it inevitably led to the desensitization of the populus consuming this type of imagery. Roslers essay critiques this strategy as it would lead to the highlight of the issue but not society's purposeful ignorance to it. By not properly representing or using these photographs and the effects of these topics, Sontag claims, we have undervalued them and subsequently created a failure of empathy.

Further exploring the issues Rosler investigates, the example she uses of the monetization of documentary photographs in the Bowery, New York City is imperative. Rosler states:

[...] the higher the price that photography can command as a commodity in dealerships, the higher the status accorded to it in museums and galleries, the greater will be the gap between that kind of documentary and another kind, a

²² Bailey, Martha J. Legacies on the War on Poverty. Russell Sage Foundation, 2013. ISBN 9781610448147.

²³ Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2003. ISBN 0312422196.

*documentary incorporated into an explicit analysis of society
and at least the beginning of a program for changing it.*²⁴

Rosler's reason of why monetary value is assigned to photographic works explores the effects of which this value starts to serve other factors within society. Elevating a photograph to the status of antiquity changes who the audience is, and robs the work of the public's availability to analyze society through it. This becomes counter intuitive when the direct purpose is to stimulate change. Instead of an emphasis on the purpose of the photographs, one can come to a conclusion that the monetization of the photographic works is a problem the perception of the viewer. This is not the first or the last time artistic and documentary works will be monetized, but the problem is the subjects within the works being of lower economic status and not being the sole beneficiaries of their own suffering. The reaction shifts from generating empathy to generating reassurance of wealth, according to Rosler, is one reason that this phenomenon exists and is for the validation of economic security. She states:

*This mainstream documentary has achieved legitimacy and has a decidedly ritualistic character. It begins in glossy magazines and books, occasionally in newspapers, and becomes more expensive as it moves into art galleries and museums. The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position.*²⁵

Rosler refers to an itch that is scratched for, and by, the wealthy or privileged. Rosler believes the intention behind the photographic works of Lewis Hine was to

²⁴ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

²⁵ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

illuminate issues in society. Thus effectively making the photograph a lens in which to view society through. Meaning, the ability to provide perspective to the evidence of a marginalized group of people. The genre, by definition, is geared as an attempt to improve the lives of marginalized groups of people, though is then used to reassure the lives of the wealthy and do exactly the opposite of the true intention, ultimately limiting the ability to further analyze society.

A number of different works have been made with completely different intentions than the results would indicate. One could perceive that the work of documentary art is intended to show a side of a conflict or event that of being truthful. As stated, there is a market for social documentary work that reassures wealth and security. What would happen in the hypothetical case of these roles being reversed?

Enjoy Poverty, a film by Renzo Martens, is an altogether critically questioning documentary.²⁶ In the film, Martens leads a workshop for the Congolese people based on the idea that they should profit off of the poverty they live in. It is his belief that their biggest resource is their own situational suffering in which they live in, and due to this should be photographing and selling their perspective on their situations. "Assisting Africa in taking charge of its own resources."²⁷ The film follows Martens training the young Congolese commercial photographers to exploit their own suffering from war and poverty. In this seemingly ridiculous documentary, the film falls back on itself as a self critical approach to documentary and monetary exploitation of impoverished people. One can learn from this, an error in intention. In the purposeful exploitation of impoverished people the documentarian creates work for an audience. What role does the documentarian play in this poverty? Martens seemingly reasons that the Congolese could make the best out of their situation selling imagery to make profits.

With the application of integration of 'self' as a strategy within the film, the question then stands, if the impoverished Congolese people were to photograph poverty, would the pictures have the same monetary value? Seemingly not. One could

²⁶ *Enjoy Poverty*. Directed by Renzo Martens. Performed by Renzo Martens. *Enjoy Poverty*. 2008. Accessed April 12, 2019. <http://www.enjoypoverty.com/>.

²⁷ *Enjoy Poverty*. Directed by Renzo Martens. Performed by Renzo Martens. *Enjoy Poverty*. 2008. Accessed April 12, 2019. <http://www.enjoypoverty.com/>.

reason that, the perspective of the uninvolved resonates to the viewers more than the challenging imagery and context that the Congolese would represent. Leading to the assumption that the monetary value of the documentary work is representative of Rosler's assertion that the work is in part purposed for assuring the relative security of the wealthy classes.²⁸

Martens' is using himself and his role as documentary filmmaker to question the role of the documentarians. It shows the viewers a possibility that is available to all documentarians. It would in theory improve the situation of the Congolese more than advocacy. Leaving one with the possibility that presenting evidence of poverty does not supplant the activism.

In conclusion, Martha Rosler's essay marks an imperative turning point in the history of social documentary photography in the exploration of new methods of documentation. *On 'documentary photography' In around and afterthoughts*, explains how she believes the true purpose of the genre is not yet being fulfilled. She calls for an end of 'liberal documentary' that only serves to fill magazines with images of disaster and conflict photographs. Leaving one with a feeling of dissatisfaction with the current social documentary works.

This chapter discussed the common critiques on social documentary works, the mythologies surrounding it, how the world has changed, and how documentary methods needs to change with it. Monetization of the photographic works has lead us into a problem of perception. As the world has changed the strategies of the investigative photographers like Hine, Lange, and Riis, largely regarded as legends of the genre, would not necessarily work anymore to instigate change. Now by Sontag's estimation we have a 'failure of empathy' by the overproduction of emotionally triggering imagery.²⁹ The perception has changed surrounding war, disaster, and events. The photographs no longer stimulate empathy which is essential to create a discussion. Rosler would submit that the change in the world has lead to new methods of perceiving conflict that

²⁸ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

²⁹ Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2003. ISBN 0312422196.

would align with the necessity for new ways to document the world. Thus making room for a Radical documentary. *End poverty* by Renzo Martens might not be the cure all to the holes Rosler indicates, however it does lead us to question the roles we so readily accept in the face of large issues like poverty and thus is radical documentary.

Chapter 3

Integrating Oneself In Social Documentary Works

In this final chapter of the thesis I will be discussing what one could identify in the documentary spectrum to be a new direction and purpose of social documentary photography. Similar to Roslers call for a 'radical documentary', this is by my own definition of 'integration of self.' To do this I will present examples and explain how they fit in this category and how they lend us to something more than what we would expect from social documentary in the past. As discussed in the two earlier chapters, there is a long history of social documentary work that has amounted to significant change, however, as the world changes these works are perceived differently than that of the time they were significant. This aspect leaves us for a need to discover new methods that would fit one's perception of the world and its complex issues.

The integration of oneself in social documentary works is a possible way of working and perceiving a social problem. The strategy I would like to highlight is the use of the oneself in a specific project or group of projects. This is defined, by means of, photographing oneself in an event or situation pertaining to an issue or topic addressed or by building a project around oneself using photography. With the use of this strategy, the artist can also use a culture or minority group in which they may be apart of, in order to explore the social issues within the said groups or the problems those groups face within society.

One way to consider these projects is that they are ethnographic. This is defined as the systematic study of people and cultures. Ethnography is designed to explore cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study. This factor is an important classification that must be satisfied to assure that we are moving forward from the social documentary that Rolser critiques. The project must further the perspective than a investigative approach of illuminating the issue, like that of how Lewis Hine would work. She states that we are in need of

projects that address, not only, the existence of child labour in the early 1900s, but the fact that it was allowed within society:

*[...] through the presentation of images combined with other forms of discourse, for the rectification of wrongs. It did not perceive those wrongs as fundamental to the social system that tolerated them.*³⁰

While it can be determined that social change is needed in every social problem, it is, however, important to address the social system that tolerated them. As stated in chapter 1, The Civil rights movement was in response to a complicated problem with racism and segregation. While photographers documented the violence of the movement, Parks understood the fundamental problem was the belief that black people were less than human. Instead of the visualization photography brought to the effects of racism against Black Americans, we can shift to a form of 'radical documentary'. In Latoya Ruby Frazier's work, *Notion of family*, she documents her family and hometown of Braddock, PA, from 2001-2014³¹. With this work, Frazier was able to address the status in the town she grew up in by using mostly self-portraits of her and her family. These portraits depicted three generations: Frazer, her mother, and her grandmother. The generations become simply representative of the lineage of black Americans in the effects of the decline in industry on the black family. She becomes an ethnographic participant in the generational struggle of poverty in her family and hometown. Maurice Berger writing for *New York Times* said:

By representing the substandard living conditions, hardships and withering effects of the pollution-borne illness that have

³⁰ Rosler, Martha. "In around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)." 1981. Accessed March 15, 2019. http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf.

³¹ "LaToya Ruby Frazier's 'The Notion of Family' Confronts Racism and Economic Decline (youtube Video)." *Aperture Foundation*, March 22, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w>.

*beset the three women — as well as their struggles to survive — Ms. Frazier makes visible the human cost of political indifference and neglect.*³²

Frazier explains in an interview for Brooklyn Museum, how working with her family allowed her to record her family's experiences wrestling with character and identity shifts underneath systematic oppression. She said:

*Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I have all been shaped by external forces: on the micro level, we are three women from an abandoned community, but on the macro level, I see us as symbolic of state oppression and neglect.*³³

According to Frazier this oppression had shaped them systemically, enforcing limitations of economic and social factors on the family. Which effects who they are at home due to the limitations of their own self perceptions. Her own integration in the pictures and her life are inseparable from the work. It gives a validity of who she is speaking about and leads to easy comparisons in the larger society in which we all live.

Frazier expands on the future of Braddock, “After being ignored and exploited, now we are being erased.” She believes what happened in Braddock in the 1970s is comparable to the deindustrialization in parts of the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s. She uses photographs taken from a helicopter ride in 2013, where she the viewer experience a moment of an extreme perspective change. Starting from the small dynamics of the relationships in her household, it builds to show, “a whole macro level.

³² "LaToya Ruby Frazier's "The Notion of Family" Confronts Racism and Economic Decline (youtube Video)." *Aperture Foundation*, March 22, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w>.

³³ "LaToya Ruby Frazier's "The Notion of Family" Confronts Racism and Economic Decline (youtube Video)." *Aperture Foundation*, March 22, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w>.

A universe of things, things that we have to deal with.”³⁴ She means to connect her own small world to the larger using perspective changes. These shifts work in and out of the ‘self’. Firstly, giving us a tangible family struggle, and secondly, showing the viewer the small details that are representative of their struggle. As well as the entire towns struggle with poverty and deindustrialization.

A different kind of example of ‘Integration of self’ as a strategy, is building a project using what is around you. Sophie Calle’s three part photographic work on surveillance show how, with this strategy, an artist can question their own role in society. She is not typically considered a social documentary artist, however one could determine surveillance to be a social documentary issue as it affects everyone with the technological advancements that define current day.

Calle’s focus in these works is to explore the roles inside private and public spaces.³⁵ In 1979 her project, *The Detective*, Calle starts with hiring a private detective, through her mother, to follow her around and photograph her in her daily errands.³⁶ According to *Experiment and experience in the photo-textual projects of Sophie Calle* by Johnnie Gratton, Calle’s approach to the viewer is an ethnographic idea of when the observer meets the participant.³⁷ As she was fully aware that she was being followed, the participant becomes the observer. This is a really nice example of ‘integration of self’ because she flips the roles of surveillance and in doing so questions the roles themselves.

³⁴ "LaToya Ruby Frazier's "The Notion of Family" Confronts Racism and Economic Decline (youtube Video)." *Aperture Foundation*, March 22, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w>.

³⁵ Gratton, Johnnie. "Experiment and Experience in the Phototextual Projects of Sophie Calle." In *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, 157-70. Manchester University Press. July 2018. Accessed April 17, 2019.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327124884_Experiment_and_experience_in_the_phototextual_projects_of_Sophie_Calle.

³⁶ Calle, Sophie. "The Detective." In *Double Game*. Violette Editions. 2013. ISBN 9781900828062.

³⁷ Gratton, Johnnie. "Experiment and Experience in the Phototextual Projects of Sophie Calle." In *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, p. 157-70. Manchester University Press. July 2018. Accessed April 17, 2019.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327124884_Experiment_and_experience_in_the_phototextual_projects_of_Sophie_Calle.

She continues to find roles where she can explore general assumptions about privacy and surveillance. In the project 'The Hotel' (1980) Calle works as a maid for three weeks in a Venetian hotel. In her daily duties she photographs the belongings left in the rooms.³⁸ Calle pairs this with detailed notes of the goings on in the hotel as she observes them, including a guest and a bellhop's advances toward each other until they have sex in a room on the floor she worked. Calle takes a place that is widely believed to be private, and alludes through her personal entries to the fact it is not private. In the largest part of this work called *Suite Vénitienne* where she follows a man to Venice describing the daily goings on an average man she met at an art gallery opening.³⁹ Possibly an attempt to prove how easy it really would be to be followed and spied on or to call into question what it is that would be really found. At first glance these projects might seem exploitative, however it is her intention with text to create a narrative that walks the a line between fact and fiction. Leading one to question the agreements we walk into when entering public spaces. In every work Calle uses her own self perspective and challenges the boundaries of her various statuses. In doing so she leaves space for speculation on how we are seen by others. The result of her self integration into the work creates complex relationships between the roles she plays. In this highly performative work she successfully leave us to question public and private spaces by infiltrating the roles in surveillance.

One could now explore how integration of oneself functions as a strategy in social documentary works. Specifically, photographing oneself and one's situation to question roles within society's issues, how this process addresses ethnographic concerns, and how oneself can become radical documentary. This fits into social documentary as the new wave by showing us multisided perspectives on specific problems that are applicable all over the world. Latoya Ruby Frazier uses 'self' to show the macro mechanics in generational poverty and systemic racism in her hometown of Braddock, PA. To do this she shows us her own personal journey through it intertwined

³⁸ Calle, Sophie. "The Detective." In *Double Game*. Violette Editions. 2013. ISBN 9781900828062.

³⁹ Calle, Sophie. *Suite Vénitienne*. Siglio, 2015. ISBN 1938221095.

with perspectives of the town and its history to create a larger picture of the macro universe that exists inside this large issue. She shows us a small world that stems from an enormous issue. This leads us to see how such a large issue effects a small family in a forgotten town, ultimately testing how well we understood the issues that plague the town of Braddock and many like it all over the US. Sophie Calle's work on surveillance questions the position of oneself in society while under surveillance, ultimately leading one to question the agreements we walk into when entering public spaces. By integrating themselves both artists approach the viewer in a unique way that allows for deeper understanding of the issue depicted.

Conclusion

The purpose of integrating oneself into a social documentary work is to explore a new way to present and interpret society's issues, abuses, and perspectives. This differs from the specifically observational strategies of the origins of social documentary. The efforts of prolific photographers across history have led to instigate large scale changes. Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange made investigative photographs that illuminated the issues in society. One could reason that with the historical knowledge that photography could be used to expose. This exposure could then be used to create a discussion. That being said, Gordon Parks' found that a photograph's power is in its ability to challenge racist perceptions. Maurice Berger reasoned that perceptions of black people needed to be challenged before change could happen.⁴⁰ However Parks' understood that exposing racism would not cure it, but using photographs as a weapon against racist perspectives would instigate the ability for change. Lending a foundation on which social documentary would stand for years.

All this considered, this foundation would come under question by Martha Rosler in 1981. She discusses in her essay, *In around and afterthoughts*, how the mysticism and monetization present in the genre could be detrimental to it. Leaving one to consider how to make social documentary work that would be built off the methods of the past while addressing and aligning with the current state of society. Rosler suggests a radical documentary, that could be accomplished by addressing the abuses of society.

Every method, that is considered within this thesis, is tied to a specific time period and perception of media. Integrating oneself in social documentary, as a method, is especially relevant to today due to our mass media sharing. Hine and Lange distributed their investigative works on pamphlets to the public to expose the issues in an attempt to make the overlooked looked at. Parks relied on journalism to print and distribute his weapons against racism. One could reason that there is an error with this

⁴⁰ Berger, Maurice A. *Seeing Through Race, A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. California University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780520268647.

method, as Sontag has outlined strategies of media outlets that have desensitized their recipients. One could argue that an outlet for this kind of work is best suited for the art world. The examples discussed as integration of oneself in a social documentary work both rely on deep concentration and reflection to experience and understand them as a whole. Frazier's work, *Notion of family*, is an unfolding series of layers that plays out as you experience them, page by page.

Calle's works on surveillance counts on the viewer to have to question which perspective she would like to communicate. This moment of indecision is where her work awakens the individual.⁴¹ Much like the topic of surveillance, it will never be about only one perspective. These works are fitting examples of the current climate of validation of self identity in society. Specifically, social media's effect on the empowerment of the self. One could connect this to the success of personally oriented work like that of Frazier, of which its power is in disturbing the idea of how oneself operates in positions of oppression. Or that of Calle's work breaching privacy, long before the technological advancements that define this time period (i.e., cell phones, digital security cameras, satellite imagery/tracking, A.I., etc.) were in common use.

Integrating oneself into social documentary works can give resounding power to a conflict and its ability to uniquely approach the viewer. Whilst there are examples across history of works with similar methods, the political and social climate of today would inevitably benefit with the consideration of the other. Leading to the betterment of society in the true intentions to the social documentary genre.

⁴¹ Gratton, Johnnie. "Experiment and Experience in the Phototextual Projects of Sophie Calle." In *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, 157-70. Manchester University Press. July 2018. Accessed April 17, 2019.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327124884_Experiment_and_experience_in_the_phototextual_projects_of_Sophie_Calle.

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