

# **Documentary Photography**

*Visual storytelling*

# Documentary

Telling a story with pictures is an old device (e.g. stained-glass windows in churches, tapestries, illustrated manuscripts, paintings depicting historical and biblical stories), but documentary photography gave the idea a new life and social function. Neither art nor advertising, documentary drew on the idea of information as a creative education about actuality, life itself. Documentary aimed to show, in an informal way, the everyday lives of ordinary people and the photographer's goal was to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work, and in many cases, to pave the way for social change.

Documentary has been described as a form, a genre, a tradition, a style, a movement and a practice, but it is very problematic to try to offer a single definition of the term as it could be said that every photograph is in one sense of another a 'document', since it is always a record of something – a document of an occurrence of light and shadows recorded in time and space.



**Walker Evans** American, (1903-1975) *American Photographs*, 1938



**Robert Frank** American, (1924-) *The Americans*, 1958



**Martin Parr** British, (1952 -) *The Last Resort*, 1986



**Richard Billingham** British, (1970 -) *Ray's A Laugh*, 2000

# History and development of documentary photography

The actual term 'documentary' was originally used by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century but as a reference within visual culture it was British film maker, John Grierson who famously in 1926 in a review of a film by Robert Flaherty about Polynesian youth, described the film as having 'documentary value.' Grierson was describing the kind of cinema that he wanted to replace what he saw as the dream factory of Hollywood and within a few years the word was being applied to photography. Some 19<sup>th</sup> century photographers had regarded their work as 'documents' (the French photographer Eugene Atget's referred to his photographs of empty Parisian streets at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as 'simply documents' and the pictures made with the aim of social reform by Danish reporter, Jacob A Riis showing poverty and the squalid conditions in notorious Manhattan slums in the 1880s. The later work of Lewis Hine is more exemplary of modern campaigning social work as he disseminated these documents in magazines as proof of the need to legislate against child labour.



**Eugene Atget** French, (1857- 1927)  
Paris ca 1900



**Jacob Riis** Danish (1849-1914) from *How the Other Half Lives*



**Lewis W Hine** American  
(1874-1940)

# History and development of documentary photography

The birth of documentary as a popular form is clearly linked historically to the development of print technology and the proliferation of large-scale mass press in the 1920s and 30s of popular illustrated photo magazines and publications such as *Life Magazine* in the USA, *Picture Post* in Britain, *Vu* in France, *Illustrierte* in Germany, *Drum* in South Africa and many others. These magazines which were based on the extensive use of photographs to tell stories to the needs of a newly literate urban population constitutes the start of the modern movement of photojournalism. This new breed of photographers were the ones 'out there' bringing photographs home – a reporter of everyday life who supplied the pictures (and in some cases stories too) for this growing market.



**Josef Koudelka** Czech, (1938 - )  
Invasion 68: Prague



**Trent Parke** Australian, (1971 - )



**Gilles Peress** French, (1946 - )  
Telex Iran, 1980

# Documentary ethics, representation and aesthetics

There are many different styles, approaches and practices within documentary photography across a variety of different genres and disciplines such as *photojournalism, reportage, street photography* and *contemporary fine-art practice*. Also, the way that photographs which are documentary based are used is diverse from mass media (journalism, books, web/ internet), fine-art (galleries, museum), institutions (legal/ judicial system) and science (anthropology, medicine etc). But documentary within the context of story-telling may be seen to belong to the history of a particular kind of social investigation and we can therefore identify certain central aesthetic, political and moral associations (though highly contested ideas in the debate around documentary photography.) Such as:

- **The objectivity of the camera.**
- **A sense of morality and concern for what is shown.**
- **The depiction of places, people and events unlikely to be experienced by the viewer outside of representation (due to class, gender, age and cultural differences.)**
- **The need for the images to be distributed to a wide audience, usually via the mass media.**
- **The repetition of a range of visual tropes and gestures in the construction and composition of pictures.**

# Questions regarding documentary truth or fiction

- Can a photograph lie?
- Are all photographs reliable?
- A certain delivery of facts?
- ‘The camera was there and recorded what I saw’.
- Claims of truth that most people take for granted?
- Photojournalism is based on assumptions that the photograph represents a one-to-one correspondence with reality, which is nearly accurate and adequate, and that the photographic image is capable of conveying information objectively.
- Traditional documentary believes the viewer to be a receptive subject taking in the objective information of the world through the photograph
- Can we rely on its ability to capture a moment in time accurately as historical evidence or as a witness to the world?
- Postmodernism points out that all forms of representation is subjective? How? Why?
- Digital photography has made manipulation much easier?



# Contemporary documentary as art

The term 'document' is virtually synonymous with the medium of photography itself. Indeed, it could be said that every photograph is in one sense or another a document, since it always a record of something, a document of an occurrence. Photographers working with documentary in a fine-art context use a wide range of approaches to think about how the document functions and how people respond to it. Many question its assumed authority while at the same time undermine the supposed truth inherent in photography. The different approaches to documentary photography and documentary strategies used by contemporary artists not only take their reference from photography's own history but often reference art history, cinema, literature and in particular the role of performance. There are those who use the photograph to document performances or who turn to found photography to create elusive fictional stories.



**Michelle Sank**, South African  
from *In My Skin*



**Alec Soth**, American  
from *Sleeping by the Mississippi*

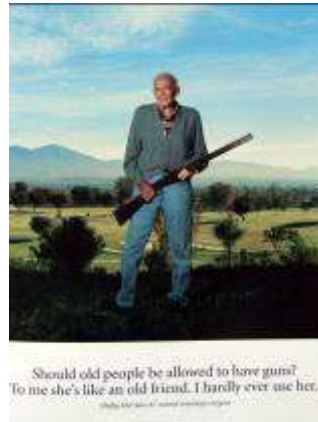


**Paul Graham**, British  
from *Beyond Caring*

Contemporary documentary has not lost its power to convey information as it did in the past; it has just moved on and become a reflective practice. Images are now more open to interpretation from the viewer, using ambiguity as their strength rather than an authorial voice dictating meaning. The majority of artists here produce work primarily for the gallery and for books as the space between the photographic document and the art photograph is expanding. Indeed there has been a noticeable increase in documentary practices and exhibitions in the last 10 years. This is not only due to the changing landscape of the illustrated magazine which are more fascinated with celebrity and lifestyle than providing space for 'documentary stories' to be published, but also a reaction to the more elaborately staged colour tableaux that have come to take over the contemporary art scene of recent. Often contemporary documentary work in series of photographs which collectively convey a narrative. These pictures can be a combination of portraits, landscapes and still-lives but this is not a rule.



**Stephen Shore**, American (1947 -)  
from *Uncommon Places*, 1982



**Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin**, South Africa  
from *Ghetto*



**Simon Norfolk**, British  
from *Afghanistan*, 2002