

THE ART OF THE DOCUMENT

1 See Williams 1983, p.42.

2 The term 'documentation' will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

3 Rancière 2009, pp.22-3.

4 Chéroux 2001.

5 Rancière 2009, p.23.

6 Ibid., p.27.



A document is usually thought of as 'artless', so that an artless photograph is one that makes itself invisible and privileges the referent of the image, the actuality that it represents. The perception of the photograph as a document flows from this notion of showing something plainly and simply, without artifice or artistic interference. Contrary to how it might sound, to be artless was once a positive attribute - even in art - implying spontaneity or a lack of guile.¹ In this sense, the snapshot, conceived as an instantaneous document, can be identified as typifying the artless artefact. To pick up a camera with the intention of showing things 'as they are' in this way can be called an impulse to document, which is the basis of documentary photography. However, the idea of the document in art introduces a number of complications, both in terminology and conception, along with the terms 'documentary' and 'documentation', which have different associations.² Perhaps this is why the French philosopher Jacques Rancière uses the term 'naked image' to refer to these types of photographic image.³

Naked Image

The example that Rancière gives of the naked image are the photographs taken at Nazi concentrations camps in 1945 by Lee Miller, Margaret Bourke-White, George Rodger and many others. These pictures represent the camps at the moment of their liberation, and all the horrors that were discovered there. Such pictures have since found their way into art exhibitions, like the 2001 exhibition *Memoirs des camps: 1933-4*.⁴ Troubling as these pictures are, they convey, as Rancière puts it, 'the trace of history, of testimony to a reality that is generally accepted not to tolerate any other form of presentation.'⁵ Their function is not so much to produce a dissemblance, an undoing of representation, but the resemblance of history to fact and reality. Their aim is to act as witness to a truth, and to provide a testimony to the process of human annihilation. Such pictures become a crucial trace of history, documents to prove that the bodies did exist and to reveal the extent of the atrocity. Rancière refers to a photograph by George Rodger (fig.35): 'the back of a corpse whose head we cannot see, carried by as SS prisoner whose bowed head shields his face from our eyes. This horrendous assemblage of two truncated bodies presents us with an exemplary image of the common de-humanization of victim and executioner.'⁶

While the naked image aims to show things as they are, without aesthetic pretensions, the role of the aesthetic cannot be avoided. Rancière suggests a two-staged semiotic reading of the holocaust photograph. The denoted perception is of the brute violence perpetrated on the visible human beings by absent others, with all the attendant suffering this brings. The second connoted understanding is that a process of

Figure 34
Nan Goldin, *Lil Laughing*, Swampscott, Massachusetts (also *My Mother Laughing*, Swampscott, MA) 1996
Cibachrome, 76.2 × 101.6

The photograph shows the artist's mother on the edge of a bed, gripping two 'stress balls' in her hands.

Figure 35
George Rodger,
*Belsen: Collecting
the Dead* 1945
Gelatin silver print,
20.2 × 25.4
Rodger photographed
Bergen-Belsen
concentration camp
after its liberation
in April 1945.

de-humanisation has occurred, in which the boundaries between victim and executioner, human, animal and mineral begin to dissolve. Sickening as this is, the second connotation, Rancière suggests, is the product of an aesthetic education, linked to other representations we see elsewhere.⁷ For Rancière, the immediate reference is Rembrandt's painting of a skinned ox (fig. 36), while for others there may be different associations with other art or media images. I am reminded, for example, of the famous photograph by Brassai (fig. 37) at a Paris meat market taken ten years before Rodger's Belsen image, the superficial resemblance offering a sort of cheerful counterpoint to the bleak nakedness of the camps.

Since a document is viewed in dialectical relations to other images, it can never be pure, or completely separated from other associations. There is a lesson here about all photographic images. Firstly, an image will always prompt associative avenues of thought in the viewer, whether consciously or not, which may divert it from its aim or obfuscate its subject



matter. Secondly, language can also lead the viewer down a very different path, just as Rancière's text leads us away from the historical Belsen moment in 1945 to Rembrandt's art. Thus the naked image poses questions about ethics and politics of images in art: how might such documents of barbarism retain their value as documents? What really is their function in this context of art? Is it to make art from the sensation or shock-effect of 'images of horror'?

In a short film about the history of art, filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville critique precisely this use of such photographic documents in an art exhibition. Photographs taken by the forensic scientist William Haglund after the war in former Yugoslavia, originally as evidence of crimes against humanity, were enlarged to show the exhumed bodies from mass graves. Godard and Miéville argue that to blow up these forensic pictures of war crimes to mural size and show them 'as if they were paintings' is to show a real misunderstanding and to transform their original function from evidence to spectacle.⁸ The crucial point here is the changed situation, of documents intended for a court of law

7 Ibid., p.27.
8 Godard and
Miéville 2006, p.47.

9 See Nesbit
1992, p.1. For a
critique of Atget's
canonisation
see Solomon-
Godeau 1995.
10 Nesbit 1992,
p.20.

transformed and celebrated in the forum of art for aesthetic contemplation. While it might be argued that the art gallery should offer such a space for contemplation, the dangers of de-contextualisation must be clear for all to see. Such controversial examples highlight the ethical problems and social issues that are perhaps less often raised or discussed in relation to other social uses of photographs as 'documents'.

Document Image

Passport photographs, identity mug shots, police crime-scene pictures, military reconnaissance images, personal snapshots, surveillance, scientific and medical photographs, aerial shots, geographical survey and satellite images, Google Street View - all these photographic genres are intended to function as documents, but it is surprising how many have ended up in art in one form or another. This is usually precisely because of their status as documents, and they have been surprisingly more central to the formation of art photography than is often perceived.

Figure 36
Rembrandt
van Rijn, *The
Slaughtered
Ox* 1655
Oil paint on
wood, 94 × 69
Musée du
Louvre, Paris

Figure 37
Brassai, *Les fort
des halles* 1935
Silver Gelatin
print, 18 × 28
Musée National
d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges
Pompidou,
Paris



Perhaps still the most obvious and significant historical instance of this is Eugène Atget's albums of photographs of Paris, which were transformed into art, despite his own claim that they were 'simply documents'.⁹ Atget was an old neighbourhood photographer who earned his living by selling photographic images of shops, streets, carriages, carts, salons, staircases, bedrooms and many other spaces usually inhabited by ordinary Parisians, including Atget himself. He sold the photographs as 'studies' to customers in a variety of industries, and to magazines, museums and artists, such as Braque, Picasso and Utrillo, alongside many others.¹⁰

For thirty years Atget accumulated his pictures of Paris *populaire*, moving from tourist views to the outskirts of the old city, representing *Vieux Paris* and its environs (figs. 38, 39). Of the thousands of photographs, most are taken frontally or with a slight oblique angle view, others at unusual angles. Overall, most of the subjects are slightly off-centre and feel as though they were not 'composed', or only unconsciously so. This variation lends the albums an air of informality and innocence. Atget

Figure 38
Eugène Atget, *Boulevard de Strasbourg (Corsets)* 1912. Gelatin silver paper print, 22.9 × 18
The Art Institute of Chicago. Julien Levy Collection

This image was featured (uncredited) in the French surrealist publication *La Révolution surréaliste*, 11, 1928. The picture accompanies a written account of a dream by Marcel Noll, as was common among



the surrealists at this time. Another dream on the same page is by André Breton.

Figure 39
Eugène Atget, *Boulangerie, 48 Rue Descartes* 1910-11
Albumen print from glass negative, 21.1 × 16.5
From the album *Métiers, boutiques et étalages de Paris* (1912)

referred to his works, which are all characterised by this informal realism, as 'photographic documents'.

The Surrealists, especially Man Ray and the poet Robert Desnos, championed Atget's photographs of Paris, claiming that he was a pioneer of a new type of image-work that gave face to ordinary life. But even though the sign on Atget's door clearly read '*Documents pour artistes*' (Documents for artists), it was as though the surrealists took this to mean documents by an artist. In 1928, the year after Atget's death, Desnos eulogised: 'These are not the albums of an artist left to libraries, but the visions of a poet bequeathed to poets.'¹¹ Two years later Pierre Mac Orlan, theorist of the 'social fantastic' and of the role that photography could play in creating social mystery, described Atget as 'one of the purest poets of that anthill of small independent lives.'¹² Evidently the surrealists saw something in Atget's work that he himself had not.



Atget was clear that he simply earned his living selling prints of Paris in all its florid detail to any client who would buy them: artists, architects, builders, designers, interior decorators, libraries, museums, publishers, theatre set designers and more.¹³ It is an extraordinary array of trades, industries and professions that he supplied with his pictures. It begins to feel as though Paris life was caught in a never-ending circle of reference, with images of the old city informing the new designs recycled via his photographs. They were the raw material from which new designs, paintings and broader aspects of Parisian visual culture were reformulated. As Molly Nesbitt notes, the photographs were 'meant to be taken up repeatedly, to have several futures, and to exist as a point of detail on the way to one of them. They were meant to be incomplete.'¹⁴

11 Desnos, 'Spectacles of the Street - Eugène Atget', first published in *Le Soir*, Paris, 11 September 1928; reprinted in Phillips 1989, p.16.

12 Pierre Mac Orlan, Preface in Atget 1930; reprinted in Phillips 1989, p.48.

13 Nesbit 1992, p.26.

14 Ibid., p.27.

15 For the 'polysemic' photograph see Barthes 1991, p.28.

16 See Ian Walker, 'A Surrealist Atget', in Walker 2002.

17 See Florent Fels, 'The first Salon *Indépendant de la photographie*', 1928, reprinted in Phillips 1989, pp.23-6.

18 See '1929' in Foster et al. 2004, pp.232-7.

It is this sense of incompleteness that attracts viewers, as does Atget's intention that they be multiple in their use and plural in their meanings. As open texts - or to use a semiotic term, highly *polysemic* texts - many meanings can be attached to them, and this is certainly apparent in the diversity of Atget's clients.¹⁵

The story of how Atget's work entered the art museum is fascinating, not least because it gives an insight into the origins and direction of modern art photography. It was the surrealist photographer Man Ray, while living in the same street as Atget, who first obtained his pictures for publication in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926.¹⁶ Berenice Abbott, the young American darkroom assistant to Man Ray, also met Atget and started buying his pictures. They became friends. Abbott was an outstanding portrait photographer in her own right and photographed Atget just before he died in August 1927.

After his death Abbott bought what remained of Atget's estate, the other half having already been sold to the Commission des monuments historiques (Historical Monuments Commission). She became a tireless promoter of Atget's cause and ensured that others would see his work too.



She submitted his work to the First Independent Salon of Photography in Paris in 1928, which was started as an alternative to the pictorialist-dominated photography salons.¹⁷ Atget's pictures were highly popular and subsequently shown repeatedly in different exhibitions and magazines, most significantly in the hugely influential international exhibition *Film und Foto*, in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1929.¹⁸

Atget's photographs were suddenly connected to the new, wider international movements of modern and avant-garde photography: the New Vision of László Moholy-Nagy; the New Objectivity macro photography of Albert Renger-Patzsch, Karl Blossfelt and others; the Foto-Eye of Frank Roh; and movements such as the Worker's Photography of Willi Münzenberg and the political photomontages by John Heartfield. All these innovative European movements signalled a new confidence in photography, to which an explosion of popular interest also lent its support. Just as today, with the profusion of mobile phone cameras, the visual documentation of everyday life was easily achieved by amateurs. The

Figure 40
Berenice Abbott, *Bread Store (A. Zito Bakery)*, 259 Bleecker Street, New York, 3 February 1937
From the series *Changing New York* 1935-9
Gelatin silver print, 24.8 × 19.2
The Museum of The City of New York

Figure 41
Berenice Abbott,
Blossom Restaurant, 103
Bowery, New York 1935
From the series *Changing*
New York 1935-9
Gelatin silver print,
19 x 24.5
The Museum of The
City of New York

document photograph had come of age. Atget's 'simple documents' fed into these new ideas about the value and quality of photography, and as a precursor, also legitimated them. Thus his career as an artist was launched, involuntarily, after his death. His documents were commuted into a documentary oeuvre, an artwork, a visual atlas of Paris, which, like Aby Warburg's unfinished history project, *Mnemosyne Atlas* 1929, presented a constellation of images on the interval of life.¹⁹ For the new avant-garde photography movements, Atget's pictures were brilliant observations of Paris. For the surrealists, Atget's pictures championed the mystery of 'everyday' life, the enigma that haunts our ordinary lives, and for them, Paris as a psychological entity. For Berenice Abbott, Atget's work provided the foundation for a new documentary practice, which she set about developing in her own photographic work in New York, after she moved back there in 1929, coincidentally just before the Stock Exchange crash. She oversaw the publication of Atget's work in *Atget: Photographe de Paris* 1930, which included ninety-six photographs, published simultaneously in three editions, in USA, France and Germany (the German one published in Leipzig was seen by Walter Benjamin).



Back in New York, Abbott was visited by Walker Evans, whose work can be seen in a direct line from Atget and Abbott, both in the repertoire of the images and in the attitude of ways of seeing. Abbott had been a successful commercial portrait photographer, but in New York she began to borrow Atget's approach to document New York, his angles of view and subject matter, but modified for the new themes and context of the American city (figs. 40, 41). She also tentatively developed a 'frontality', which subsequently became a signature trait of Evans's photography. Evans and Abbott had studios in the same street and became friends in New York. At this time Abbott was busy making prints from Atget's negatives that she had brought with her to New York for the first solo show of his photography at the Weyhe Gallery in New York in 1930, which had also sponsored the publication of her book on Atget.²⁰ Evans would thus have seen Atget's work first-hand in Abbott's studio. Indeed, he even reviewed the book in his essay, 'The Reappearance of Photography', published in *Hound & Horn* in 1931, although he was rather unimpressed with the quality of the reproductions.²¹ He argued that Atget's pictures showed a 'lyrical understanding of the street', not simply a

19 Warnke and Brink 2000.

20 Weissman 2011, p.113.

21 Evans 1931.

22 Walker Evans, 'The Reappearance of Photography', in Trachtenberg 1980, pp.18-6.

23 Evans 1971; see Naomi Rosenblum, p.340.

24 Evans 1980, p.188. For Gustave Flaubert and description, see Barthes 1986.

25 Weissman 2011, p.43.

'poetry of the street' or the 'poetry of Paris', but also 'the projections of Atget's person'.²² These ideas would inform Evans's own 'documentary style', a phrase that he coined to identify his own version of photography as art. 'Documentary,' he would say, 'that's a sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear ... The term should be documentary style ... You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless.'²³ Evans, who had already spent time in Paris, had originally wanted to be a writer like Gustave Flaubert - the French writer famous for his unusual mode of descriptive writing - and clearly saw Atget as a kind of visual equivalent, a visual artist who could 'write' the real world in poetic 'photo documents'.²⁴

Abbott, on the other hand, despite having met many avant-garde artists, writers and critics in Paris, and in New York before that, maintained that documentary was more important as the mode and means of recording life.²⁵ She did not move towards surrealism or Duchamp's brand of conceptualism, but stayed with the project of documentary photography, inspired by Atget's photographic work as being 'simply documents'.



Writing much later in 1951, she was still opposed to the aestheticism of photography, of pictorialism and picturesque equivalents, and does not even mention the avant-garde surrealism of Man Ray and his friends, which she had seen at first-hand in Paris, nor indeed any other new tendency. Proudly American, she argued that photography should be thoroughly 'documentary': 'To chart a course, one must have a direction. In reality, the eye is no better than the philosophy behind it. The photographer creates, evolves a better, more selective, more acute seeing eye by looking ever more sharply at what is going on in the world. Like every other means of expression, photography, if it is to be utterly honest and direct, should be related to the life of the times - the pulse of today. The photograph may be presented as finely and artistically as you will; but to merit serious consideration, must be directly connected with the world we live in. 'What we need is a return, on a mounting spiral of historic understanding, to the great tradition of realism. Since ultimately the photograph is a statement, a document of the *now*, a great responsibility is put on us.

Figure 42
Walker Evans,
Painted Doorway
of 'French Opera'
Barber Shop on
Bourbon Street,
New Orleans,
Louisiana February-
March 1935 1935

Today, we are confronted with reality on the vastest scale mankind has known. Some people are still unaware that reality contains unparalleled beauties. The fantastic and unexpected, the ever-changing and renewing is nowhere so exemplified as in real life itself. Once we understand this, it exercises a dynamic compulsion on us, and a photo-document is born.²⁶

Even though Abbot rejected surrealism, its influence is apparent in her reference to the 'fantastic and unexpected', and the issue of aesthetics also inevitably returns too, since her formulation of realism and reality include the term 'beauty'. Perhaps there is a distant echo here of surrealist aesthetics, of their formulation of the convulsive beauty in everyday life. The surrealists could certainly see this in Atget's documents: the marvellous in the everyday and dream-like enigma of human experience.²⁷ The surrealists chose photographs from Atget's albums to suit their project, as did his other clients – a surrealist interest that the brilliant German critic Walter Benjamin would name as an experience of the 'outmoded'.²⁸

Affective Documents

Atget's photographs remind the viewer of the fashionless and *passé*, of timeworn buildings, the old products in shops and the residues of life that are made redundant by industrial progress. Such images warp the sense of modern time and space, turning the idea of progress back on itself, into an uncanny return of the past. Benjamin noted, 'almost all these pictures are empty ... They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant.'²⁹ The pictures are absent of any action, yet full of description, wherein Benjamin saw their revolutionary experience. He says in 1931: 'Not for nothing were pictures of Atget compared with those of the scene of a crime.'³⁰ Writing two years before Benjamin, the Belgian surrealist Albert Valentin had already remarked on the location of Atget's pictures: 'those dead-end streets in the outlying neighbourhoods, those peripheral districts that his lens recorded, constituted the natural theatre for violent death, for melodrama...'³¹

In fact, the streets in Atget's images already had moving stories attached to them through popular cinema, because, as Valentin noted, these outer Parisian locations 'were so inseparable from such matters that French filmmakers, Louis Feuillade and his disciples – at a time when studio expenses were what was skimmed on – employed them as settings for their serials'.³² Feuillade was the director of *Fantômas*, a popular series of mystery films based on the pulp novels by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain and loved by the surrealists. Feuillade set his movie scenes in the very same peripheral districts of Paris that Atget photographed in *Vieux Paris*. So while it is not surprising that the surrealists experienced déjà vu when watching these scenes, such filmic sources do not account for the subsequent continued fascination with Atget's photographs. Nevertheless, in this way it was the surrealists who were the first to aestheticise the non-aesthetic 'document' photograph. (The French writer Gustave Flaubert, so admired by Evans, can be said to have done the same thing for description in literature.)³³ Even today, these inert documents of empty spaces can still become dream-spaces, images formed in imaginary action with protagonists activated in events invented by the spectator.

26 Berenice Abbott, 'Photography at the Crossroads', 1951, in Trachtenberg 1980, pp.183-4.

27 David Bate, 'What is a Surrealist Photograph?', in Bate 2004.

28 Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in Benjamin 1985, p.229.

29 'A Short History of Photography' in Trachtenberg 1980, p.251.

30 Ibid., p.256. See also Ian Walker's discussion of this comment in Walker 2002, pp.100-1.

31 Albert Valentin, 'Eugène Atget', first published in *Variétés*, Brussels Dec 1929; reprinted in Phillips 1989, p.20.

32 Ibid., p.20.

33 See Barthes 1986.

34 'A Short History of Photography' in Benjamin 1985, p.251.

35 Ibid., p.256.

36 Ibid., p.252.

Benjamin's readings of Atget's photographs differed from the surrealists', though. He saw their potential for 'giving free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.'³⁴ For Benjamin, the devil is in the detail, and the art of the document revels in it for sure. Benjamin goes on to suggest that in this 'new way of seeing' it is the anonymous aspect of the photographs that is illuminating. 'Is it not the task of the photographer', he asks rhetorically, 'to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?'³⁵ Atget's pictures, he seems to say, solicit in the spectator the curiosity of a detective. Of course, the images may not literally depict crime scenes, but the viewer construes meaning from them as such, scrutinising them as signs, to ask 'what is happening here?' But how do spectators interact with document photographs to produce a meaning? The mystery and adventure that Mac Orlan and the surrealists saw in Atget's work, the 'decidedly strange places where there appeared to be nothing of the slightest interest', as described by Valentin, is what creates a 'certain malaise' in the viewer. This malaise arises from how spectators find themselves split between being both the accused and the accuser. The common sense of guilt felt by every voyeur interacts with the curiosity of the detective, who aims to gain knowledge from seeing. This is the interplay of emotions to which many documentary photographs lend substance: a set of conflicting feelings, which pervade the effect experienced by the spectator when looking at the subject matter. 'Should I be looking at this?' 'What does this picture mean?' Sometimes the viewer's sense of guilt can be displaced or passed on to the photographer, or even on to the subject of the picture, who may be blamed for being depicted, and more easily so if they have elected to display themselves. These dynamics of identification are volatile and mutable, often aired with all the force of any intersubjective human relationship.

Benjamin considered the potential of Atget's work to elicit such conflict to be radical, and extended this to other documentary-orientated photography too. In August Sander's extensive series of German social portraits, *People of the 20th Century* (fig.43), Benjamin also recognised their value as 'comparative photography', as a veritable 'atlas of physiognomy'. Their level of detail in documenting otherwise anonymous persons of different social strata, professions and classes had its use: as 'a training manual', as exercises in how to see others.³⁶ From Sander's pictures one could learn about the people who make up society, and about their differences. This was the value of the art of the photographic document: the legibility of the world to its viewer.

In contrast to these two distinct modes of photography – Atget's documents of human spaces and Sander's comparative human portraits – a third form emerged: the action document or 'snapshot'. As cameras had become simpler to operate, the dynamic snapshot came to rival these older forms of document, and outstripped them, aided by automation of the camera and imaging technologies, with the digital form being most dominant today.

Writing in the early 1930s, when photography was industrialised, Benjamin was keenly aware of photography changing the definition of art and was eager to shift the argument away from the old debates. The old question of whether photography was art was exhausted, he argued, the new question was about *how* art was now photography. Benjamin



37 Ibid., p.253.

38 Alexander Rodchenko, 'Against the Synthetic Snapshot, For the Snapshot', 1928; reprinted in Phillips 1989, p.239.

39 Stalinism, however, would turn this realism into idealism, and the document into an advertisement for the right Soviet life.

40 Baudelaire 1965, p.162.

developed his own thesis regarding art where, he argued, photographic documentation was changing the viewing conditions, context and availability of art, and therefore the very meanings of paintings and sculptures. He wryly remarked: 'Everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to get hold of a picture, more particularly a piece of sculpture, not to mention architecture, in a photograph than in reality.'³⁷ Photographic pictures were becoming the primary means of encountering objects and places, and the actual experience of them was now secondary. In this sense, it was believed that photography could replace the experience of the original artwork and we would begin to live in a world of reproductions and re-presentations. Photography heralded a new era, in which to be photographed meant everything.

Indeed, in the new revolutionary Soviet Union, photographers like Alexander Rodchenko had hailed the end of art altogether, declaring snapshot photograph to be 'factography': 'Art has no place in modern life', he argued. 'It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and as long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception ... Photograph and be photographed!'³⁸ Rodchenko championed the snapshot as a democratic form of image over the values of art. Factography was more concerned with an urgent sense of the present, not posterity, with the multiplicity of images more than any singularity, and with reality over any romantic vision. To make a photo document was indeed to be realistic, but in a modern and socially relevant sense.³⁹

Imagination and Realism

The magnitude of the shift in attitude towards photographic realism becomes clearer if we look briefly back to the nineteenth century and the assertions that a document was not - and could not be - art. Documents were seen as related to the accumulation of 'facts', and cameras, as copying machines, were predisposed to gather them in depictions of mundane reality, rather than to appeal to the human imagination. This idea about photographic realism, however, was not peculiar to debates on photography, since it also applied to painting, literature and all the other arts too. Charles Baudelaire characterised the issue well, when reflecting on the work of painters in the Paris art salon of 1859. Having already complained of painters making their pictures too photographic in their taste for the 'True', he praised those who seek the beautiful, and subsequently divided artists into two camps: realists and 'imaginatives': 'There are those who call themselves "realists" - a word with a double meaning, whose sense has not been properly defined, and so, in order the better to characterize their error, I propose to call them "positivists", and *they* say, "I want to represent things as they are, or rather as they would be, supposing that I did not exist." In other words, the universe without man. The others however - the "imaginatives" - say, "I want to illuminate things with my mind, and to project their reflection upon other minds".'⁴⁰

In the early 1930s Benjamin reconfigured this distinction between positivist realism and human imagination, turning it upside down. The 'positivist' realism of the photograph could do far more for the social imagination of humans than Baudelaire had ever conceived. For Benjamin, it was the document that could be at the service of the spectator's imagination. Gone was Baudelaire's view of realism as static, absolute and

Figures 43

August Sander, *Beggar* 1930
From the project *People of the 20th Century*
Gelatin print, 27 x 16.4
Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne

Figure 44
Carl Mydans,
*Mountaineers 'spelling'
themselves in front
of store, Pikeville,
Tennessee March (for
the Farm Security
Administration) 1936*
Gelatin silver print,
22 × 16



really beginning to hit home. Tragically, his own life ended a few years later, as he fled from the Nazis. But he was right about the importance of the photographic document: the 1930s became the age of documentary, an era when photography and film became the new arts. The birth of the photo-document also gave rise to the modern photography book in an explosion of new and different profane illuminations.

Social Documents

The Great Depression of the 1930s made many pictorialists and artists rethink what to photograph. Under the United States' New Deal programme, the Resettlement Agency was set up in 1935 to help unemployed and displaced farm labourers by providing loans, jobs and land for the migrant Americans. Setting up an 'Information Division' to publicise the

41 'Surrealism'
in Benjamin 1985,
p.239; Badger and
Parr 2004, pp.114-15;
Burgin 1986.

42 Hurley 1972.

43 Roy Stryker
took up employment
with Standard Oil
to set up and run
the photography
project to 'document'
its work.

agency's work, Roy Stryker, an economics tutor at Columbia University, who had already worked with the social reform photographer Lewis Hine on the book *American Economic Life*, was employed to gather visual evidence to record and publicise the activities of the Resettlement Agency (later renamed the Farm Security Administration, or FSA). Stryker, as chief editor, employed photographers to collect the visual data: first Arthur Rothstein, who like Stryker had worked at Columbia University, then Carl Mydans (fig.44), an experienced Wall Street photographer reporter, and Walker Evans, quickly followed by the appointment of painter and graphic artist Ben Shahn and photographer Dorothea Lange (fig.45). This core group accrued an astonishing record of rural life during the Depression years.⁴² Many other photographers came and went after 1937 too, and the project continued until it was hit by the impact of the Second World War, when the FSA was transferred to the Office of War Information, and finally closed with Stryker's resignation in late 1943.⁴³

Figure 45
Dorothea Lange,
*Heading towards Los
Angeles, California 1937*
Gelatin silver print,
22.6 × 23.4



Through the FSA, the idea of a social documentary project became honed, organised and institutionalised. Shooting scripts and questions were designed to lead photographers towards specific themes and arguments. The photographers were asked to fulfil assignments, to record particular events and activities and to keep written records of them too. Inevitable conflicts erupted over what, how and why to record particular social events and processes rather than others. Such disputes aside, the resulting archive of photographs and related material is immense, and a variety of meanings can be elicited from this vast photographic archive. These meanings and the stories derived from them are as diverse and multiple as the term 'propaganda' (a term often levelled at this project because it was state funded) is supposed to be certain and fixed. While the initial aim had been to highlight and publicise the problems with which the Resettlement Agency were dealing - desperate rural poverty, eviction, unemployment and hunger - what remains is a massive repertoire of photographs, the collective meaning of which exceeds any single function or purpose. No doubt the general aim of the photographic work was to

Figure 46
Raghubir Singh,
Employees, Morvi Palace,
Gujarat, India 1982

Raghubir Singh was strongly influenced by Cartier-Bresson's photography, using his mode of 'the fleeting moment' to create a social view of India.

show how and what the Agency was doing to help, but they also displayed the dignity and deprivation of those suffering to those who were not. Creating wider public awareness of the existence of these issues was intended to breed compassion and care among viewers, but no matter how much bitter reality it made visible, the unjustness of the social situation remained. Although different participants had varying views on the role, effects and use of all this visual material, nevertheless the FSA is one of the key founding projects in which social documentary photography was used as a sociological method. It is from such projects that documentary photography quickly gained much of its reputation and currency in social studies and photography, and in art.

Document Art

In 1938 Roy Stryker was invited to submit a selection of FSA photographs to the International Photographic Exhibition in New York, held at the Grand Central Palace and sponsored by the USA Leica representative, Willard Morgan. The FSA photography section of the show was so immensely popular that the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York offered to tour the work throughout the USA, and so social documentary photography came into wider circulation via the art museum.

The same year MoMA also held the first solo exhibition of a photographer's work. *American Photographs* showed work by Walker Evans, including some of his FSA photographs.⁴⁴ As what Evans called his 'photo documents' were installed in the modern museum of art, it also installed the prototype for art photography. Single prints in frames on the wall functioned as individual art objects, but also belonged together in a sequence. Under the guise of an exhibition catalogue, the layout of photographs in the book also became a permanent photowork in its own right. Like the book of Atget's photography, edited by Abbott and published eight years before, Evans's book followed the same clean and simple layout, and established the photobook as an artwork in its own right. The reproducible status of photography meant that viewing pictures in the book and visiting the exhibition could be seen in parallel, as equivalent, if different, experiences. The viewer of the exhibition and the reader of the book could move back and forth from one picture to the next, or browse across them in any order or direction, although sitting in a chair with a book is a more intimate experience than strolling around a public exhibition. The double-page spread of the book was designed to privilege the single picture on a plain white background, just as on the white-cube gallery wall. There were no captions or text on the image plate page, only page numbers, with contextual information appearing as endmatter and an introductory essay at the front. This would become the prototype for art photography books, conceived not only as a reproduction of photographs as prints, but as a type of popular art object or artwork in itself.⁴⁵ Benjamin had been right: photographs could supplant the visit to an exhibition. Art had become photography.

The accompanying essay in *American Photographs* by Lincoln Kirstein described the pictures as 'intensely dramatic'. This seems wrong, however. Like Atget (or August Sander for that matter), Evans had not been interested in drama, but in description. The frontal characteristic attributed to his photographs serves to emphasise this descriptive purpose, and when

⁴⁴ Badger and Parr 2004, pp.114-15.

⁴⁵ See the critique of this ideal by Victor Burgin, 'Seeing Sense', Burgin 1986.

carried across from one photograph to another creates a visually descriptive journey across America.

Evans was notorious for rejecting his FSA assignment briefs, often disappearing for weeks at a time to produce his own poetic commentaries on situations, environments, circumstances and events. Here was the idea of a personal mode of expression with documentary effect. Evans demonstrated how a photographer could pursue in depth and at length a body of work made up of a series of images that worked individually, but also together, like a visual novel. The photographer thereby becomes an author, a conveyor of 'facts' strung into a visual narrative, which Evans himself would later name 'lyrical photography'. If this art photography is



like poetry, why not make a poem about poverty? Should any life experience be excluded as a theme for art? In a way, the idea of photography as a poetic realism enabled the photographic artist to blur the distinction between a personal view and a social view, rendering the imagination of the artist and the depiction of facts as a common goal, although this distinction haunted modern art photography for many years to come.

Forty years later, *Mirrors and Windows*, the 1978 MoMA exhibition curated by John Szarkowski, addressed these competing tensions inherent in this approach to documentary art photography with two contrasting clichés: art as a 'mirror of the artist's soul' or as a 'window on the world'. The exhibition in effect fused these attributes together, with the resultant 'expressive realism', a composite idea implicit still in much art

Figure 47
Doug Rickard,
#41.214669,
Chicago, IL 2007
From the series *A New
American Picture* 2010
Archival pigment print,
52.7 × 84.5

photography today. The most exemplary popular and globally significant photographer of expressive realism in twentieth-century photography was Henri Cartier-Bresson. His form of poetic documentary photography, organised to narrate social events, has been developed by many others ever since (see, for example, fig.46).

However, this poetic image lyricism was not at the forefront of the ambition of the FSA social documentary project. Dorothea Lange's FSA photography book *American Exodus*, for example, published in 1939, a year after Evans's *American Photographs*, was quite different in emphasis. Lange's book included captions and quotes from those who featured in her pictures, giving them a voice. (Her most famous photograph, *Migrant Mother*, was not included in this book.) The accompanying essay by sociologist Paul S. Taylor emphasises the plight of farmers forced to migrate in the search for work. Evans's book, on the other hand, emphasises his own voice as an artist, although it included some of his FSA pictures. The people are all unnamed, remaining as enigmatic as the eponymous sitter in the world-famous *Mona Lisa* painting. The differences between the modes of presentation in Evans's book and Lange's documentary make clear the distinctions between the 'documentary style' of Evans's poetic document work and the FSA social documentary purpose in Dorothea Lange's photography - even if their image styles of description can be seen to overlap in some ways.

We can point here to a very long list of well-established practitioners who continued the poetic documentary tradition. Robert Frank's *The Americans* 1956, for instance, had a profound international influence. Frank, a Swiss émigré to the USA, made a book that was critical and poetic, but which also used the snapshot in a new way. The pictures were dark and moody, ephemeral, yet razor sharp in their social observation and critique. William Klein's photographic series *New York* 1957 comprised a less polemical but even grittier visual style, almost graphic in appearance, which had a special impact on the look and style of the photography of Daido Moriyama and other Japanese photographers, as can be noted in Japanese photography books from the late 1950s onwards.⁴⁶ The 1967 New York exhibition *New Documents*, curated by John Szarkowski at MoMA, featured the work of three younger American photographers - Diane Arbus, Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander - and was followed a decade later by an exhibition of new colour photography by William Eggleston, which included his desolate yet beautiful scenes from the Southern States in the 1970s. The social document of the 1930s had evolved into the art of street photography, with the photographer as a *flâneur* of modern life (or less frequently the female equivalent, *flâneuse*), as the one who 'botanises on the asphalt' as an 'unwilling detective'.⁴⁷

Perhaps one technological terminus of this type of street observation practice can be glimpsed in Doug Rickard's *A New American Picture* 2012 (fig.47). Rickard's work reproduces images grabbed from Google Street View. To construct its 'world' archive, Google uses vehicles and people mounted with multiple cameras to map terrains - in those parts of the world where this is politically and practically viable - and then transposes them into a fully virtual, photographic version of space, which can be navigated by anyone with a computer connected to the internet. But Rickard turns this into a new type of digital street photography, as a form

46 See Kaneko and Vartanian 2009.

47 Benjamin 1989, p.40. For a founding critique of the male *flâneur* see Janet Wolf 1990.



of documentary. Indeed, the book's title discreetly suggests an update of Walker Evans's *American Pictures*, since the scenes he chooses also focus on dispossessed and marginal figures. The automated cameras of Google have accidentally caught the American 'homeless' and transient life. In some pictures pedestrians gape at the passing camera. These exchanges of looks between people and cameras in ghettos and run-down streets points to a general sense of social neglect, and to the irony that a highly sophisticated device designed to map streets has also recorded the activities and poverty of neighbourhood life. Although these scenes were automatically captured and digitally stitched together using computers, Rickard's pictures are nevertheless chosen and composed. To navigate Street View the user/viewer has to click their way down the street and select a point of view, a camera angle from which to record the scene of choice. The click of the shutter has been replaced by the click of the mouse. What is curious is how even an automated process can produce pictures that look as though they might have been sought out by a human, and this ambiguity of intent has a curious effect on the viewer. The pictures have a renewed sense of the authentic, as a new aesthetic actuality, driven by the computer taking a picture as a document. Yet while this long tradition of street photography continues, it has also mutated, drawing on the snapshot aesthetics of its origin to return towards that other domain, the opposite of the public sphere – private life.

Private Lives

In the 1980s Nan Goldin's intimate and brutal *The Ballard of Sexual Dependency* and Larry Clark's monochrome series *Tulsa* sparked an international explosion of projects investigating the private lives of photographers or those around them. In the 1990s, highly intimate themes, often sexually explicit, were explored through a focus on difficult situations or dramatic personal events in life.

With the increasing accessibility of fast, automated film cameras during the 1990s, many practitioners from a wide range of social backgrounds began to address personal experience as a social issue. The automated camera was less visible, the taking of a photograph a less intrusive event. Some might see this tendency to make work about our intimate lives as a general sign of social change, hailing the destruction of privacy through the public exposure of personal dirty linen – quite literally in some cases – and heralding a new transparency or an openness to showing private lives in public. This was compounded by the rise of paparazzi photography and their intrusion into the lives of celebrities, suggesting that private life was no longer 'private'. Roland Barthes already hinted at this demise of privacy in *Camera Lucida* in 1980, when he wrote, 'publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such publically'.⁴⁸ On the other hand, such intimate work can be seen as a sign of social enlightenment, which is perhaps how Benjamin might have understood it to be, as a demythologising of the realm of private and personal life. The dynamics of sexual relationships, private habits and dramas are, it could be argued, regarded as less shameful precisely because their photographic visibility has normalised them. The neorealist exposure of the details of intimate lives, whether autobiographical or biographical, has certainly been prevalent internationally in art photography since the

48 Barthes
1984, p.98.

49 The critique of such forms of practice is well known; see for example Martha Rosler, 'Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?', in Rosler 2004.

late twentieth century. The sexually explicit scenes in Araki's photographs of women, Boris Mikhailov's radically 'anti-aesthetic' snapshots of homeless people, in a documentary of what he calls 'Russian capitalism' (fig.48), or the abject depictions of Richard Billingham's family in *Ray's a Laugh* are all different, but recognisably related by their depiction of intimate lives, as an art of the private document.⁴⁹

Public and Private

It is interesting that the distinction between private and public space did not really preoccupy the early pioneers of the photographic document, such as Atget, Sander or even Evans, who photographed across different spaces as if they were one continuous place. It is only in later documentary photography that these distinctions appeared, reformulating the relations between them. In Mikhailov's work, for instance, the idea that social and private spaces are distinct and opposed is abolished and deconstructed, so that personal tragedy is recognised also as a social tragedy.



Figure 48
Boris Mikhailov,
untitled photographs
from the series
Case History 1997-8
Chromogenic colour
print, dimensions
variable

Perhaps this deconstruction of public and private was already implicit in street photography, which usually shows individuals in an intimate moment within the given social space. David Goldblatt's photographs taken in apartheid South Africa (fig.49) hint at hidden feelings in the face of racial segregation at a public event, showing the complex dynamics at work in the regime's social relations.

It would be possible to write a number of different historical narratives of the use of photography as document, using other selections of art photographers, whose emphasis on social conflict and private personal relations vary according to the specific aims of the work: Bruce Davidson, Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz and Alec Soth in the USA; Mohamed Bourouissa's photographs of ethnic culture in Paris's suburbs; Yto Barrada in the Tangier straits; Allan Sekula's photographs of globalisation protests; and Bruno Serralongue's refugee camps in northern



France. All these photographers take social issues as the explicit basis of their work and emphasise its documentary function, yet navigate and manage the nuances of social and political problems and tensions within a variety of visual forms. Contemporary photographers are often all too aware of the limitations of specific visual strategies and the problems they pose. On the one hand there is the risk of imposing old forms on new problems, the same world-weary repetition of conventions and tropes applied to different situations and events. On the other, a sense of unfamiliarity through radical compositions may also alienate the viewer from the photographic document altogether, making them too uncomfortable or precipitating a loss of interest in the theme or issue. Some try to question these conventions directly and develop new strategies and tactics to avoid them, to reconstruct the idea of what a document is. We might include here Jeff Wall's pictorial tableau photographs too, since he describes them as 'near documentary', bringing a sense of social conflict to the realm of staged 'fictional' photography. Wall frequently bases his staged scenes on actual events that he has seen, and restages them, as it were, with ideal photographic models (see pp.42-3).

What all these practices have in common is a sense of advancing the idea of the document in different ways, away from an entirely sociological account of reality and from the bureaucratic accountancy of facts, towards a more psychological effect, aiming to trigger a set of thoughts in the imagination of the viewer. Artists and photographers have thus found other ways to dissociate the photograph from simplistic ideas of evidence or truth. Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan's book *Evidence* (1977/2003), of anonymous photographs from the photographic archives of corporations, implicitly addresses the question of how far any photograph is a document at all; and Sophie Calle's quasi-realistic stories test the viewer's limits of credibility (see p.117). In some instances these strategies involve language; in others it is photography itself that is handled differently. The examples that follow are but a selection to highlight the ways in which the logic of the photograph as document has developed. The first tactic is the 'hyper-document', through which a viewer is saturated with an excess of visual information; the second uses collage and seriality or narrative to emphasise critical questions about the definitions of reality, and the third uses language, where a text lays photographs open to the interrogation of meaning.

Hyper-Document

A clear example of the 'hyper-document' is Thomas Ruff's series of huge facial portraits (fig.50). These large photographs of anonymous Germans (we are given their first names as subtitles but nothing more) comprise high-definition images of the subject's head and shoulders, their face mostly filling the frame. We can scrutinise the details, the very pores, hair, skin and flesh of their faces. But while we are offered everything to see, we realise how little we actually know about these people. The document displays its own limits through our surveillance of it. The format, if not the scale, is that of a passport photo; it prompts associations of nationhood and identity, as well as state surveillance and the control of free passage. While Ruff's sitters are given a choice of background colour, he asks them to look expressionless, as a passport photo requires.

Figure 49
David Goldblatt,
Saturday morning
at the Hypermarket:
Semi-final of the Miss
Lovely Legs Competition
28 June 1980
Gelatin silver print,
60 × 60

Figure 50
Thomas Ruff,
Portrait 1986
(Stoya) 1986
From *Portraits*
C-print, 160 × 120
Tate. Purchased
1998

The viewer is then placed in the position of a passport control officer, asking: who is this, what are they like as a person, why are they here? Are they nice, honest or whatever else might be in the mind of the spectator? Inevitably, the viewer finds some sort of expression, reading friendliness, coldness, warmth or malevolence in their features. We become aware of our own complicity in constructing the meanings of the so-called documents.

The document seems blank, inert and denotative, despite the information it clearly contains. But it refuses to give up any meaning, unless we invest it with one ourselves. Mostly, spectators cannot resist and inevitably betray their thoughts and feelings as the interpretation of what they see. While they are apparently given the possibility of visually controlling the image through looking, the hyper-document reveals the ambiguity in the source of this process of making meaning. The huge scale of the pictures on the gallery wall converts these would-be victims of our scrutiny and surveillance into towering, dominating presences. There is no one-to-one relation here: our heads are tiny in comparison, and they look out from their pictures – and through us – with an imperious gaze. The whole value and meaning of the portrait becomes tenuous and uncertain, yet the lure of the document brings us back to the facticity of what we see.

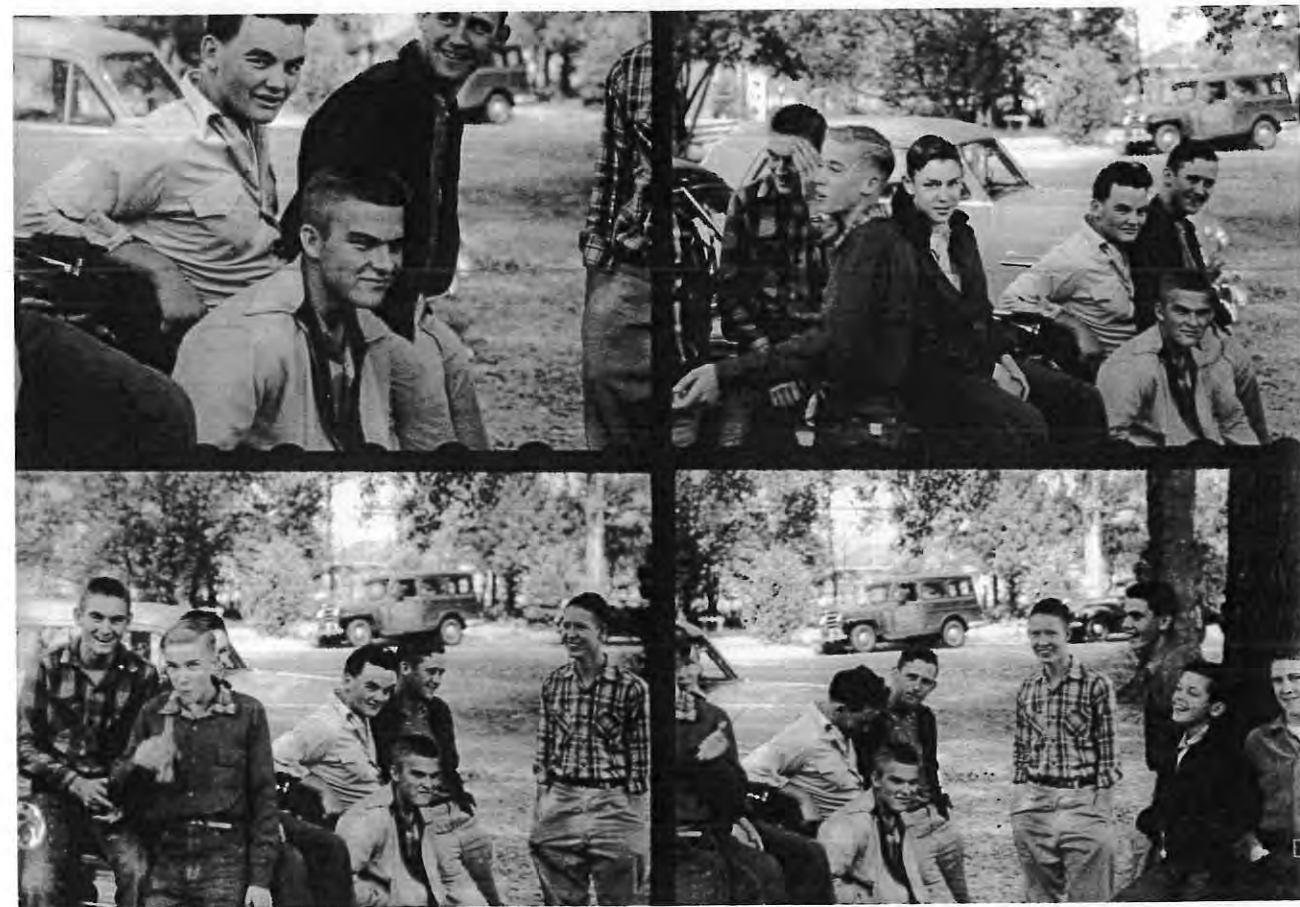
In another series, Ruff enlarges pornographic and newspaper images, but with the opposite effect. The blurred or pixelated scenes are disguised, frustrating all attempts to see the details or to identify and deduce any significant meaning. These works draw on an art/non-art relation of what Rancière calls the 'metamorphic image', where media images are quoted or reworked in order to question their original function. The danger of these strategies for Rancière is that the aesthetics of such work may be recuperated by the very systems of meaning they set out to contest.⁵⁰ Perhaps this was not the positive social future of the document that Walter Benjamin imagined, but we shall never know. It is certainly hard to see Ruff's cool descriptive portrait series in any kind of continuity with, say, Diane Arbus's warm, expressive portraits of people, where faces and gestures are central to the meaning of the work, even if they are about pain. Nor are Ruff's pictures like the much earlier social typology portraits of August Sander, for whom the link between the appearance of his subjects and their profession or trade was a matter of certainty. In this sense, Ruff's work is postmodern, sceptical of the certainty of meaning. It throws the idea of the document into question precisely through its excess of visual information claiming to be a document of something.

Collage and Seriality

The Atlas Group, an imaginary collective founded by Walid Raad, set out to document, study and question the contemporary history of Lebanon. The artworks often use found photographs alongside other documents, treated as one family of artefact amongst others. *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines 2000-3* presents, in a grid in the gallery, one hundred framed inkjet prints of the remains of car bombs detonated in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991, each accompanied by a documentary-like caption, with details of the explosion, the photographer if known and notes transcribed from the back of the picture.

50 Rancière
2009, p.27.





Commonly featured in newspaper reports, the original naked photographs are thus recuperated for scrutiny in the art gallery. This process introduces into art a new iconography of modern conflict - the car bomb - and refutes the media's narrative of them as singular events. The seriality of the work creates a 'comparative photography', to use Benjamin's phrase, much as Sander's portraits did, constituting something that is more than the sum of its parts, like bricks in a wall. What may have seemed like separate events, random acts of violence become a unified, potentially knowable whole. The spectator is challenged to find consistencies and therefore answers, just like detectives in crime movies who pin up pictures of suspects to look for patterns in their behaviour. Indeed, the collective's name echoes Raad's ambition to collect and group together these photographs into an atlas of auto engines, which in turn documents violence. But then the fictional status of the group's authorship also serves to cast doubt on the authenticity of the documents themselves, which plays against the photographs' apparent journalistic artlessness. The factual claims for the work strongly echo earlier conventions in conceptual art. Indeed, the work is very knowing of art-historical references to conceptual art (Walid Raad teaches art in the USA), yet the work also pushes against them, bringing something new into the field of art through the use of documents.

Written and Visible

For the work of language and image, consider Robert Frank's *Port Gibson, Mississippi in front of the High School, September 1955* (fig.51). The four pictures of young men, with their friendly humour, are clearly interacting with the photographer. These scenes take on a different meaning after we read Frank's text: 'He must be a communist. He looks like one'. The brief exchange between photographer and subjects betrays the apparent innocence of these youths, and lays bare a slightly more hostile set of values within their group. The reading of the words changes what we think about what we see. The naked image is contaminated by language, creating a dissensus. Frank counters the friendly visual scenes with a different sense, which undoes assumptions about the picture's subjects, and giving a different meaning to it as a document. The use of language can derail the anticipated reading of any picture, taking the reader/viewer by surprise.

And so we find ourselves back at the issue with which this chapter began: the question of the role of the 'artless' in art and how it brings something new to art. The artless document brings a kind of virtue or purity back into a practice, reaching or striving towards a new actuality. The fact that this is a kind of work that still exists, which today finds it hard to escape the world as already represented and totally photographed, means that art is far from exhausted when it looks outside itself. This idea of the document as a type of modern art also comes into view from another direction - the history of conceptualist art.

Figure 51
Robert Frank, *Port Gibson, Mississippi in front of the High School, September 1955* 1955