



Photojournalism in Crisis

This development radically challenged documentary photography. "Is photojournalism dead?" *American Photo* asked in its September/October issue in 1996 and addressed a problem that has been the subject of heated controversies for quite some time. So far, one had the impression that the answer was always a stereotypical yes or no, depending on which group gave the answer – the more or less homogenous group of the makers (photographers, photo editors, agencies) or the more heterogeneous group of critics. It even seems that the answer was dependent on two very different language games linked to two very different concepts of how to record the world and of the world to be recorded.

In this issue of *American Photo*, it seemed that the makers were starting to be aware of this crisis, too. It was no longer rejected as a notion of outsiders. A survey among well-known photographers, agencies, and photo editors from all over the globe gave you the impression that photojournalists belonged to a fragile and assaulted profession. A lot of them believed that some things had to be changed and resolved if photojournalism wanted to survive and continue to play a role. I will pick out three of these statements:

Magnum photographer Luc Delahaye stated that "photography is playing a less significant part in today's media. TV with all its various opportunities to reach the masses is the leader." Susan Meiselas, the well-known New York-based photojournalist, complained at some more length: "I am pessimistic that new media will seriously support in-depth work. I cannot imagine that the multimedia world will accept photographers as the great story tellers. They just want pictures for their archives and consider us mere purveyors, which particularly hurts me." Robert Pledge, the owner of

Boris Mikhailov, Untitled. From "Red Series," 1968 - 1975. Gift Andreas Züst and Mara Züst

[The page contains extremely faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the document. The text is scattered across the page and does not form any recognizable words or sentences.]

Contact Press Images, concludes that "in its current form photojournalism isn't particularly helpful, as harsh as this may sound. During the past 60 years, from Erich Salomon to the Gulf War, its preferred role was to meaningfully inform the public. But these days TV is fulfilling this function, and sometimes does it even quite well. Certain individualists will doubtlessly continue the tradition of photojournalism. But books and exhibitions will be their media. They will produce long-term stories, often grant-supported, that will give us an understanding of the world different from the one we see on TV."

As a whole, these three statements talk about a fourfold crisis of photojournalism. First, there is a loss of space in magazines (at least for serious photojournalism); second, photojournalists have lost the fight against time since TV can inform people much faster; third, there is a loss of authorship because a lot of magazines and new media are increasingly less interested in the in-depth view of an author; and finally, they are talking about a structural change forcing serious journalists to find new outlets and new backers. These statements are talking about a misery of the circumstances under which photojournalism has to be produced, but they talk much less about a crisis of photojournalism itself, a classic mechanism of displacement. The actual crisis might turn out to be that only a few of them (or outsiders from other discourses) question what they are actually doing.

The reporting image, however, is not dead at all, it's just that a shift has occurred. The diminishing role of photography in mainstream magazines stands in a conspicuous contrast to its integration into other fields such as advertising, fashion, and art.

Benetton's use of documentary photographs of a water bird covered in oil, a military cemetery studded with candles, a blood-stained T-shirt, a burning car, a newborn child, a dying AIDS patient, or a boat overloaded with refugees are merely the most blatant, because most provocative, examples of the use of documentary photographs in advertising. What is happening here? Advertising effects in terms of market strategy are real, but its messages are fictional. Hence, the trace of the real, the documentary image and documentary film footage, are indispensable media for its fictions. In other words, the more brands of washing powder are washing

ever whiter – whiter-than-whiter-than-white as advertising wants us to believe – the more fictitious the message, the more it has to be embedded in the real and anchored in everyday reality. We could call the advertising world a "market of fictions" with "photo-real" and "cine-real" elements, a world full of castles in the air in need of a connection to the real in order to gain attention and to appear credible. Benetton even used the guise of socially committed journalism. On the level of visual language, they acted like Greenpeace in order to appear "real."

Fashion is leaving the catwalk, its exaltation and splendid isolation, its stazy theatricality, delving into the everyday and turning into street fashion. Fashion and documentary photography are starting to resemble one another. The difference between the document of an actual situation and a staged "real" situation is blurred. In this superimposition of documentary elements and fashionable fabrication fixed points are dissolving in a mixture of the real and the theatrical. Fashion photography as a fabricated fiction seems real, and the formerly homogenous, contained, and tangible real is refracted into hybrids perpetually reproducing and redefining themselves: fashion becomes a "bazaar of realities" with many colorful and gaudy textile components.

The entry of photography in art as a sign of the real has been described above. In contrast to the disappearance of photojournalism in its traditional field, representations of the "real" are entering various areas of life as mere particles, as a guarantee of presence, as a guiding post in the midst of uncertainty. In earlier times, this function was fulfilled by the relic, the mortal remains, which have now been replaced by the photographic document performing the function of the "reliquia," tangible remnants of a fleeting and changing reality.

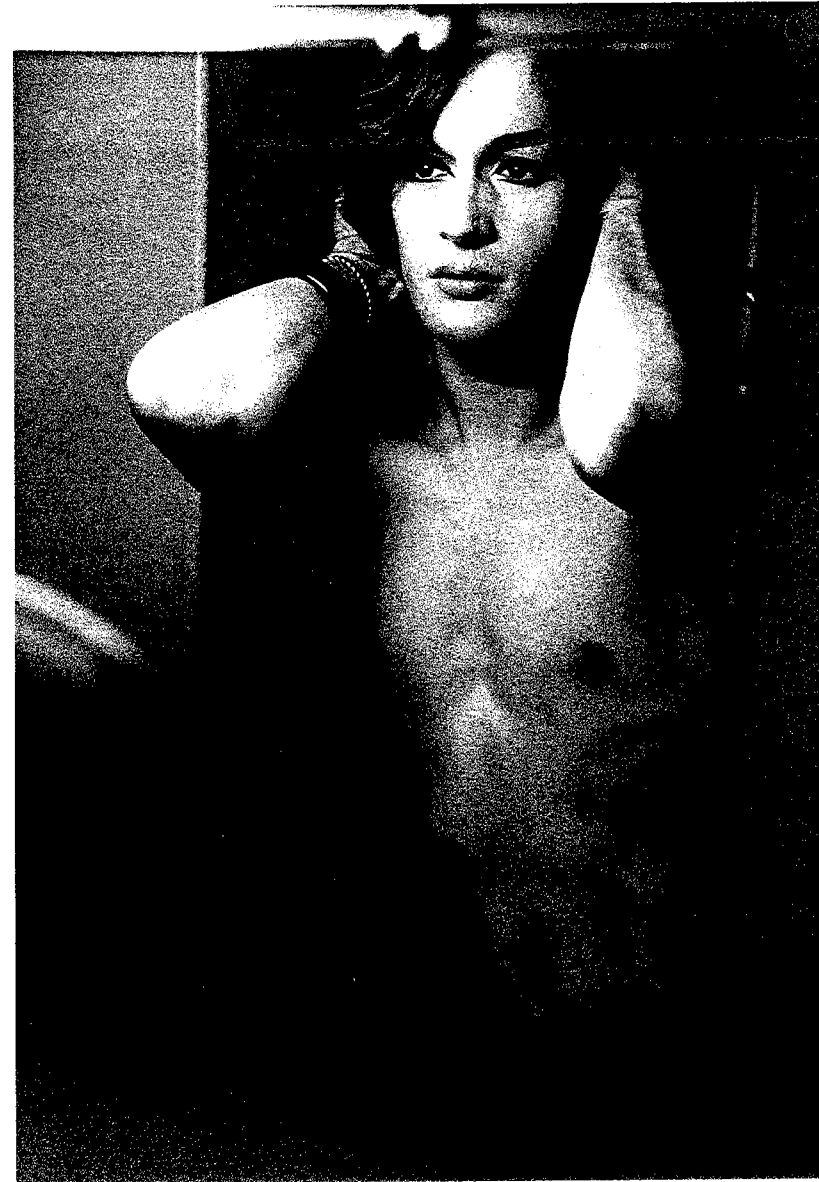
We are dealing with a paradoxical movement. In its traditional professional field photojournalism is disappearing, whereas in other fields, such as fashion, advertising, art, in image banks, and in the documentation of our own private daily life, we are confronted with an increasing accumulation of documentary photographs purveying particles of the real, evidence of our hunger for the real, however mediated it might be. Upon closer inspection, these developments are only apparently contrary

and incompatible since we are looking at different types of photography that have to fulfill different types of expectations. Serious documentary photography is about investigating the world. It attempts to generate and communicate content by photographic means. Advertising and fashion love to use the rough appearance of this type of photography, but not as a serious investigation of an issue. They use it as a mere Baudrillardian shell, a decorative wrapping paper. It's not about content, but the mere semblance of it, an attractive rustling of the real. Douglas Crimp talks about the transition from "information" to "expressive style," Rosalind Krauss calls it the shift from the "view of the world" to the aesthetic concept of the "landscape." The landscape of reality is woven into advertising, just like you season a dish or spray a scent in the air. A mere whiff of the real.

The constant friction of photojournalism and magazines, allied forever in friendship and enmity, has been intensified by this development. First, on the pragmatic everyday level of production. Photographs are shown the wrong way round or an upright format is tilted. A caption slyly manipulates the "reading" of an image. Photographs and ads start to ironically or cynically comment upon each other because of their inept placement. Photographs are digitally distorted, elongated, or compressed. All of these accidental or intentional blunders, testifying to the precedence of design over image, challenge the idea of the photographer as author. The exaltation of authorship and its insistence on the simple, unadorned reproduction of an image, however, often prevents an exciting and dense intertwining of text, photography, and design. The black borders of many documentary photographs are not only proof that the photographer was actually there, took a picture, and enlarged it without modifications; they should also protect the photographs from interventions on the part of the photo editor or the graphic designer.

A second aspect is the friction of photojournalism and magazines on the level of structure and content. The perpetual fight for attention and

Christer Strömholm, Place Blanches (Vanda), 1960s



market shares, the internal fight between editors and advertising managers, and the demand to keep up with the rhythm of MTV and CNN, the fast-paced editing of video clips, has completely changed the structure of documentary photo stories. There is hardly any space left for a narrative or a complex arrangement of images. In the 1970s and 1980s, photography was forced to increase its visual impact and its sheer size. Two or three double-page photographs, together with the title, set a story in motion, followed by a short illustrative text – and the article is ready. Its message should be immediate, forceful, up-close, and instantly readable.

That's the fate of images in magazines. The photographs had to become closer, more direct, and as easily understandable as advertising's message on the opposite page. In the context of the media's armament in the war for market shares, they had to be as shocking as possible. Shockingly close to the event, to the front, to the wound, to sex and death. In the 1990s, the emerging infotainment relied not so much on shock tactics, but on the attractive, surprising, and entertaining visual event. Everything has to be an event, i.e. subject matter and images must not be too serious or too gruesome, but neither are they allowed to be too careful or too contemplative. This is the current framework for what used to be called "photojournalism."

But photography and magazines are also fighting with each other for financial and ideological reasons. Magazines are increasingly less willing to fund stories requiring costly research. Cutting costs is certainly one reason, but there is also an ideological aspect. Many magazines no longer desire an in-depth perspective. Increasingly, like in fashion and advertising, a mere whiff of subject matter should be enough. It's not the "thing itself" in all of its difficulty, complexity, and consequences that matters. It's the mere flavor of Afghanistan, Kenya, Kurdistan, Zaire, or the Lebanon they desire. They are not interested in information and an in-depth look at a situation or conflict, just the look of it. Three days here, three days there, most of the images are set-up shots, posed and staged portraits – and that's it. In *American Photo*, New York-based photographer Harry Benson called this type of photojournalism "the *ValuJet* of photojournalism – stuck in the mud," referring to the crash of a *ValuJet* airplane in the swamps of Florida.

This development has several consequences. There is a trend towards two different types of photojournalism. Entertainment-industry photojournalism – event photography, feature photography, or illustrative photography – continues to function within the existing framework and is well paid in comparison to the work involved. In a strict sense, however, it cannot be considered journalism. It belongs more to the category of "attractive photographic page adornment." Serious photojournalism, carefully researched, time-consuming, and labor-intensive series of images, has to find new ways. We have to find new models of funding and new types of publishing them.

Photojournalism today is in danger of being eliminated, if it does not face some basic questions. What does and should photojournalism still show us? Haven't we seen everything? What kind of photojournalism do we need? And do we *really* need it? What is our idea of a photojournalist today? And in which media will they feature their work? And are we as viewers satisfied with photojournalism? Are we interested in the viewpoint it represents? Are its images relevant to our age and its problems, or are they in danger of looking at complex circumstances from a "false" point of view, disregarding the impossibility of representation?

Questioning the concept of the "author." The growing importance of "authorship" in photojournalism was certainly justified for a while and in several respects, in particular with regard to the publishing industry and its standards. In terms of content, however, we have to make a few objections. When the Kunsthaus Zürich showed a large-scale Magnum retrospective in 1990, Niklaus Flüeler reviewed it in the newspaper *Weltwoche* under the headline "No photography is greater than Magnum." At the end of the article he described in almost hymn-like words how the photographer goes to the limits of his psychological and physical capacities to bring home images of joy and sorrow in the world. "To document these realities without artifice and gloss, but with supreme mastery of the craft, while remaining stoic at the limits of the physically and psychologically bearable – this is ultimately only accomplished by a type of photography that Magnum might not have invented, but certainly carried to an almost

absolute perfection. Time and again, it achieved the almost incredible: capturing the decisive moment – man in his/her beauty and mortality, at beginning of life, at apex of power or of an age, at end of his/her days – in a single, unforgettable image of incredible or horrifying but always overwhelming beauty.”

It is one of countless examples demonstrating how the visual author is stylized as modern-day hero or stylizes him/herself as such. The will to endure pain and to face the world’s horrors, fearlessness, personal commitment – these characteristics, together with a mastery of craft, are redefined and stylized as criteria defining the image’s truth value. With a little bit of malice, one could even say that life “on the road,” combined with a lust for adventure and the male cult of the lone wolf, the desire to be a solitary observer in the desert or at the front, are covertly redefined as measurements of the truth, accuracy, and moral rectitude of a photo documentary. The author’s psychological predisposition becomes a touchstone of truth and authenticity.

During the past thirty years, however, science and art have aspired to the exact opposite. They have de-personalized the point of view, underlined its relative character, and tried to show a situation from as many viewpoints as possible – based on the insight that a singular point of view is not going very far in an ever more complex and interconnected world, where nothing is what it appears to be. The personal point of view is always reminiscent of the notes of solitary *flâneur* in the city, in this case disguised as a socially committed observer. But life in a world over-determined by various media requires other concepts of observation.

Questioning the image of the world. Do we consequently need photo-journalists who may not change their attitude but are able to change their vantage points at will? Photographers in command of a whole range of ways of looking at the world – whether it is the scientist’s detached, objective gaze, dissecting things and examining situations, or whether it is perspective of the committed and compassionate observer taking ravishingly personal and movingly intimate images? Aren’t we in need of photographers constantly searching for the approach appropriate to a specific situation?



Gilles Peress, *Untitled*, 1972. From “Power in the Blood (The North of Ireland).” On permanent loan from Volkart Foundation

Photographers who reflect their own position while representing the various positions they are confronted with? Photographers who can switch from the close-up view to the view from afar, from a personal filter to a generalizing panoramic view? Photographers aware of the complexity of the world and of its various contexts? Photographers who can think conceptually and develop new visual languages that could adequately represent the world today? Photographers who know that every representation of the world creates it anew for reality is not a stable fact but something we constantly create and change by means of our actions, including our representations of it? Photographers who are not in denial of authorship, but have a different, more open and varied (and hence more contemporary) understanding of authorship in a complex, highly mediated environment. Are we

maybe not so much in need of authors but of operators who know what to focus on in order to represent something as a readable event?

Questions of style and attitude. It seems that photojournalism remains unfazed by the paradigmatic changes in the understanding of the image and the world. Apparently, it remains addicted to various outdated lofty and heroic formulas and unaware of radical change. They still believe, for example, that they can track down the truth of the real by means of a photograph without realizing that truth has become functional and invisible. They do not understand that in media society even images with an honest intention merely function as non-stop entertainment, as an alibi and opiate, or even as an instrument of supervision and control. Photojournalism is more or less the only genre in today's media that still insists on the world's truth. They don't not realize that the new ways of thinking and representation that have developed since conceptual art are offering unique opportunities. They still believe that a critical examination of the truths engendered by image-making itself is not pertinent to photography and merely artsy.

The media's arms race simultaneously led to an over-saturation of the viewer. The ever newer, ever closer, ever more horrifying images have become redundant. We are familiar with them. Who is still moved by images of starving children, sick Africans, firing soldiers, and workers on strike? As close, immediate, and penetrating the images may be, we have become immune to their entreaties. On the other hand, as a character in a story by Ingeborg Bachmann complains, "Do you believe that you need to photograph the destroyed villages and the dead bodies to make me imagine war? Or these Indian children, so I will know what hunger is? What kind of stupid presumption is this ... You don't look at the dead to stimulate your convictions."

Photojournalism at large is suffering from stylistic and intellectual exhaustion. The photographs are only too confident of what a good documentary photograph is. Consequently, photojournalism has become academic. It is their home-made crisis complemented by a crisis of circumstances. And yet, we need their images as we still have to rely on the

visible. Visual narration, despite all the new uncertainties, remains a feasible form of understanding and documenting the world. But photojournalism will only survive if it becomes radically subjective, radically daring and distanced, or radically ambiguous. It has to give up petrified attitudes and must become as agile as a cursor.

