

PHOTOGRAPHY
ART GALLERY
OF NEW SOUTH WALES
COLLECTION



Members of Aboriginal communities are respectfully advised that a number of people mentioned in writing or depicted in photographs in this publication have passed away.

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Dorothea Lange *White angel breadline, San Francisco 1932*

INTERNATIONAL PHOTO-DOCUMENTARY

Every photograph is in some sense a document of something else. The very essence of the photograph is its ability to make pictorial 'documents' of events, be they an abstracted photogram of glass objects arranged and exposed in a darkroom, or an image of a car running a red light recorded by an automatic traffic camera. Nonetheless, the word 'documentary' is now used to describe a very particular photographic practice or, perhaps more accurately, a very particular ethos subscribed to by some photographers. The word is used not so much to describe a discrete photographic style, or even a particular historical movement, but a complex set of borderline moral attitudes to the medium passionately adhered to by some photographers. To the documentary photographer the camera is a tool with which they can personally witness, and possibly even change, the world.

During the American Civil War (1861–65) the photographer Mathew Brady hired a corps of photographers to cover all of the major battles for him from their photographic vans, feeding a hungry market in the cities with more than 8000 stereo views and *cartes-de-visite* which were available for sale from Brady's New York studio. Some were also hand-cut into wood engravings for illustrated magazines. Although the vast majority of the photographs were relatively mundane, the battle views which, because of long exposure times had to be taken after the event, quickly became the most famous. Even though some photographers rearranged the corpse-strewn battlefields, dragging the corpses into more dramatic compositions and even getting assistants to pose as additional corpses, the visceral connection such photographs forged between the war and the viewer at home was overwhelming. In 1862 the *New York Times* commented: 'If [Mr Brady] has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it ... These pictures have a terrible distinctness. By the aid of a magnifying-glass the very features of the slain may be distinguished.'

Towards the end of the 1800s the New York police reporter turned social reformer Jacob Riis began to use the flare of magnesium flash powder to penetrate the obscurity of the slums of the Lower East Side. Riis's flash photographs captured his dishevelled subjects in a state of raw oblivion to the camera's presence. As the *New York Sun* reported, the 'night pictures were faithful and characteristic, being mostly snapshots and surprises. In the daytime [the photographers] could not always avoid having their object known, and struggle as they might against it, they could not altogether prevent the natural instinct of fixing up for a picture from being followed.'¹² Riis showed his pictures as lantern slides with accompanying commentary, and published them, not as hand-cut wood engravings but as direct half-tone reproductions, in the seminal book *How the other half lives* 1890. As a result of his campaigning, significant changes were made to the laws surrounding New York's tenements.

The National Child Labour Committee (NCLC) also recognised the persuasive power of the photograph. Between 1908 and 1918 they hired the sociologist Lewis Wickes Hine to travel around America taking photographs of child labourers in mines and factories. Hine used

deliberate camera angles and framing to emphasise the small stature and pathetic isolation of the child workers, and recorded their names, ages, origins and circumstances. The resulting images, such as *Dinnertime. Family of Mrs A J Young Tifton, GA 1909*; *Raymond Bykes, Western Union, Norfolk, VA 1911*; and *Norman Hall, Lindale, GA 1913*, were published in the social-reform magazine *Survey*, and used for lantern slide lectures and posters. In the posters the photographs were often laid out graphically to visually tell a story. In 'Making human junk', for instance, the 'good material' of healthy children is processed by a factory into the 'junk' of child labourers. To Hine the photograph was a 'symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality ... it tells a story packed into the most condensed and vital form ... it is more effective than the reality would have been because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated.'¹³

By the 1920s the word 'documentary' was being used to describe this new genre of photography. In 1926 the influential British film theorist John Grierson coined the most commonly used definition of the word: the 'creative treatment of actuality'. This phrase somewhat gnominically captured documentary's double sense of the camera penetrating a raw social reality, supposedly unaffected by the photographer's presence, while at the same time the photographer's 'vision' selected, interpreted, symbolised and narrativised that reality in order for it to have maximum impact on the viewer.

This ethic reached its full flowering during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 1935 the American Government, under its New Deal policies, set up the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Its Historical Section conducted a photographic survey of rural deprivation. The economist Roy Stryker hired a group of photographers, including Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, to travel across the continent, particularly in the impoverished South, and send back exposed film to him in Washington to be developed, edited, captioned and distributed to newspapers and magazines. By the end of its life the FSA had assembled an archive of 180 000 images.

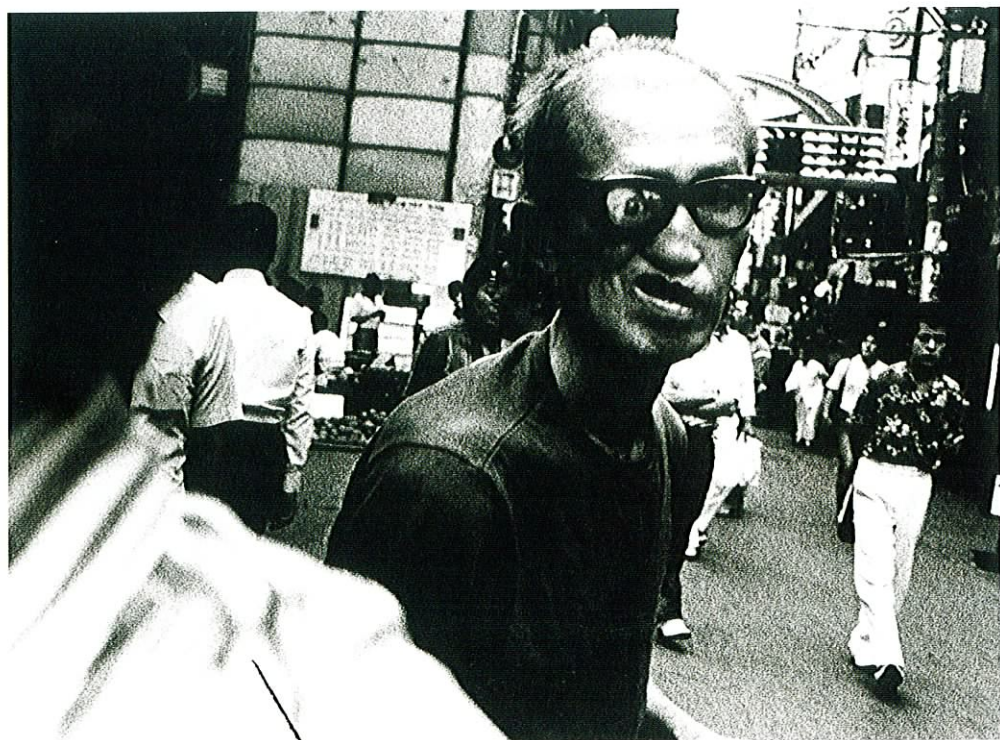
Dorothea Lange had previously produced documentary photographs of Depression poverty such as *White angel breadline, San Francisco 1932* which, with its dynamic composition, dramatically compressed the human tension in the scene. For the FSA she produced another image with a similarly compacted triangular composition – *Migrant mother 1936*. It was reproduced immediately in the *San Francisco News*, leading to food being sent to the pea-picker's camp where it had been taken, and was hung in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1941 becoming a national icon of madonna-like forbearance in the face of suffering.

Walker Evans shot his subjects frontally with a large-format camera, describing, as in *Untitled (street scene, Southern city) c1936*, the solidity of surfaces and forms in objective, rectilinear detail. In 1938 he exhibited his FSA photographs at the Museum of Modern Art and published them in the monograph *American photographs* where, for the first time, rather than being reproduced among columns of text in magazines and newspapers, they were reproduced as art in a careful sequence, one image at a time, and with minimal captioning. The introduction to the book described Evans's work as 'straight' photography: 'there has been no need for Evans to dramatize his material with photographic tricks, because the material is already, in itself, intensely dramatic. Even the inanimate things, bureau drawers, pots, tires, bricks, signs, seem waiting in their own patient dignity, posing for their picture.'¹⁴

In 1936 Evans had lived for a time in the shack of an Alabama sharecropper family. On assignment for *Fortune* magazine, he and the writer James Agee probed into the minutia of downtrodden lives as they shared this private space. When Evans's fine-grained images of the dry, scrubbed surfaces of the house and the lined, weathered faces of the family were reproduced (together with Agee's extended lyrical text) in the book *Let us now praise famous men* 1941, they served to not only dignify, but almost ennoble, the family's stoical poverty.



Herbert George Ponting *D Lillie with a large glass sponge* 1910



Daido Moriyama *New Japan's scenic trio 2: Ueno terminal station* 1982

Many FSA-style photographs were reproduced in *Life* magazine, the most famous picture magazine of the period. Commencing publication in 1936, *Life* used new high-speed presses, coated paper-stock and quick-drying inks to cheaply reproduce photographs in both quality and quantity. Featuring easy to digest 'picture stories' – that is, photographs with short captions spread across several pages – *Life* reached a circulation of six million by 1960, before the alternative entertainment of television began to erode its sales figures.

Life's optimistic patriotism and belief in American values fed directly into a massive exhibition of 503 giant photographic enlargements selected from 273 photographers by the famous photographer and curator Edward Steichen. Called *The family of man*, it was exhibited as a spectacular installation at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, and then toured the world in several versions as a form of Cold War propaganda, even reaching Moscow in 1959. It saw the human race as one big 'family', modelled on the supposed ideal of the American nuclear family, and celebrated birth, love, marriage and death as eternal humanist values. The exhibition was massively popular, but was not without its critics. When it reached Paris in 1956 the cultural theorist Roland Barthes excoriated it for cloaking continuing social inequalities across the world with supposed 'universal' values:

Whether or not the child is born with ease or difficulty, whether or not his birth causes suffering to his mother, whether or not he is threatened by a high mortality rate, whether or not such and such a type of future is open to him: this is what your Exhibitions should be telling people, instead of the eternal lyricism of birth. The same goes for death: must we really celebrate its essence once more, and thus risk forgetting that there is still so much we can do to fight it?⁵

The advent of smaller cameras such as the Leica, designed to use cinematographic 35mm film stock and introduced in 1925, allowed photographers to work in more difficult and different places. Picture agencies, such as Berlin's Dephot agency founded in 1928, or New York's Black Star agency founded in 1936, began to supply photographs from their networks of photographers to the new, cheap, mass circulation, flick-through picture magazines such as *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (established 1884), Britain's *Picture Post* (established 1938) and Paris's *Vu* (established 1928), which used skilled graphic designers to lay out visually exciting collages of image and text.

In 1936 *Vu* sent the Dephot agency photographer Robert Capa to cover the Spanish Civil War, where he photographed a falling republican soldier. When the photograph was republished by *Life* the following year it was captioned: 'Robert Capa's camera catches a Spanish soldier the instant he is dropped by a bullet through the head in front of Cordoba.'⁶ Although recent scholarship has convincingly suggested that this famous photograph was staged, it is still a touchstone for 20th-century photojournalism because it gave the viewer a strong sense of the intrepid bravery of the photographer risking his own life so the viewer could be vicariously immersed in the unfolding event.⁷

Henri Cartier-Bresson switched to the Leica in 1932 and began a career photographing around the world and selling his images through picture agencies. He photographed nimbly, moving quickly and unnoticed through events, seeking the instant where the three dimensions of the event, and the two dimensions of the photograph, would cohere into what he called the 'decisive moment'. In his 1952 book *The decisive moment* he wrote: 'In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, [a] product of the instantaneous lines made by movements of the subject ... But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.'⁸

This famous philosophy, which is evident in various degrees in all of his photographs, including *The crowning of John XXIII* 1958, became a shorthand way to describe the visual power of the attuned photographer to apparently encapsulate an entire event in a single image.

In 1947 Cartier-Bresson, Capa and other photographers founded the photographic agency Magnum, which became the most prestigious and famous face of the documentary ethos. In the 1950s Ernst Haas (*Egyptian boys* 1955), Elliot Erwitt (*New York City* 1953 and *Moscow* 1959) and Willy Ronis (*Le vigneron girondin* 1945) were members. Recent members have included Sebastião Salgado, the English art photographer Martin Parr and Australian photographer Trent Parke. Salgado works on global projects with humanitarian themes, such as his book *Workers* 1993. Although grittily 'real' his photographs are also highly stylised, with the compositions echoing Old Master paintings and endowed with a heightened sense of universal significance by dramatic high-contrast printing. Parr, on the other hand, who also works in book form, celebrates the pleasures of the British working-classes in bilious colour and with cruel irony in such books as *The last resort* 1986.

As other forms of mass entertainment began to compete with picture magazines, documentary photographers relied more and more on the art book and the gallery exhibition as venues for their work. Weegee blasted New York's late-night streets with a flash-gun and press camera to produce images such as *Tramp* 1940s. But his shocking high-contrast crime scenes only became true pulp-opera when they were assembled into the inkily-black book *Naked city* in 1945. In 1955 Robert Frank received a Guggenheim Fellowship to travel through America on a Beat-style road trip. Taking 28 000 photographs with his Leica, he sequenced 83 of them into the book *The Americans*, published in 1959. Although Frank was inspired by Evans's *American photographs*, his book subscribed to neither the desiccated nobility of the FSA, nor the cosy humanism of *The family of man*, but rather discovered isolated and lonely Americans caught within a worn-out, grainy country in the process of fracturing into subcultures.

In subsequent decades American photographers such as Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand and William Eggleston incessantly worked the sidewalks with their 35mm cameras, cramming the jumble of the street into their photographic frames. They edited the hundreds of thousands of photographs they took into thematic books and exhibitions with little or no text. An exception to this model of the street photographer was Diane Arbus, perhaps the most famous of the postwar American documentary photographers, who was still working for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* when she was selected, along with Friedlander and Winogrand, for the Museum of Modern Art's seminal *New documents* exhibition of 1967. Her portraits of eccentric, marginalised, vulnerable people undergoing 'slow-motion private smashups', to use Susan Sontag's words, gained in universal power as they were removed from the narrative context of the picture stories for which they were taken, and exhibited in isolation on the gallery wall.⁹

Although it is now considerably more threadbare than in its glory days of the 1930s the genre of documentary photography still survives. The advent of digital photography has not changed the fundamentally 'documentary' nature of the photograph – we all still habitually believe that a photograph represents actuality. We are all still curious about 'how the other half lives', be they the desperately poor, the obscenely rich or the distantly exotic. The decisive moment of the photograph retains its power to stop us in our tracks and momentarily mesmerise us, in a way a video grab still can't.

Perhaps the aspect of documentary to have suffered the most damage is the idea of intrepid documentary photographers heroically seeking the truth. Now they have to share space in the public's imagination with less savoury types of photographers, such as the paparazzi. In addition, many of their icons have been revealed to be as theatrically staged as the rest of photography's genres, and their motivations and effectiveness have also come into question.

Once their photographs are out in the public domain, can they protect their meanings from being hijacked by the many different contexts in which they are used, and the different captions they are given? Are they not just feeding our desire for short-term spectacle, our need to visually consume a momentary 'hit' of pity or disgust before we turn the page?

Photographers have responded to these questions in a variety of ways. For instance Larry Clark in *Tulsa* 1971 or Nan Goldin in *The ballad of sexual dependency* 1986 abandoned any sense of sociological objectivity or creative distance as they photographed from within their own lives, documenting the subcultures they were members of and the desperate events they actively took part in. Other photographers, such as Laura Mulvey in *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* 1975, attempted to reveal the 'constructed' nature of photographic truth by treating their photographs not as self-sufficient and self-explanatory chunks of reality, but by embedding them in laborious structures of textual qualification which declared that photography too was just another language system. The Chilean photographer Alfredo Jaar took photographs in Rwanda, Africa, just after the massacres of 1994. He wanted to bear witness to the genocide, but refused to flood the world with yet more disposable images of horror and despair. Instead, in the work *Real pictures* 1995, he built funereal monuments out of 372 sealed black boxes, each one containing one of his colour photographs of the massacres, with a textual description of the unseen image on the top of the box. Recently the 'other half', once the mere passive subject of the documentary photographer's compassionate camera, has now become an image-maker as well. Examples include Britain's Black Audio Film Collective which was set up by black photographers and filmmakers in Hackney in London in 1982 in the aftermath of inner-city protests against racism.

Perhaps the enduring thing documentary photography has bequeathed to us is not so much the familiar historical icons it has produced over its history, but its vast repositories of millions of unknown images which are now collected in picture libraries and data banks around the world. Many of them, like the Corbis archive, founded by Bill Gates in 1989, are now online and instantly accessible. But even these mammoth documentary archives, which have consumed older picture libraries, photo agency and newspaper collections, are being rivalled by the smaller quirky personal collections and the diverse vernacular archives which are constantly being unearthed. Perhaps these personal snapshots and anonymous record photographs, which were taken not in order to advance a social cause or express a creative vision, will ultimately be just as valuable to us as those taken under the banner of 'documentary'.

Martyn Jolly

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9 Sontag S 1979, *On photography*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth p 36

CONTRIBUTORS

George Alexander is a widely published art writer and educator. Since 1996 he has coordinated contemporary art programs at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, lecturing extensively on the collection and developing educational material for schools throughout New South Wales. He is also an award-winning novelist.

Judy Annear has been senior curator of photography at the Art Gallery of New South Wales since 1995. She instigated a program of collection-based exhibitions, including *The Image of Man: photography and masculinity 1920–1950* (1997); *Portraits of Oceania* (1997) and *What is this thing called photography?* *Australian photography 1975–1985* (1999). She was curator of *World without end: photography and the 20th century* (2000–01), *Len Lye* (2001–03), *Bill Henson* (2005) and *Lewis Morley* (2006). She was co-curator with Emmanuelle de l'Écotais of *Man Ray* (2004).

Anthony Bond is director of curatorial services at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. He has also been curator of international contemporary art at the gallery since 1984. He has written extensively on the arts and curated exhibitions, including *Trace*, the inaugural Liverpool Biennale, United Kingdom (1999); 9th Biennale of Sydney: *the boundary rider* (1992–93); *Self portrait: Renaissance to contemporary* for the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales (2005–06) and *Body* (1997).

Donna Brett is curatorial project and research officer at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and an arts writer with a background in arts practice. An active contributor to the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, her recent research interests include violence and third space in the work of Mona Hatoum and Doris Salcedo (Master of Arts thesis, University of Sydney), and post-war German photographers.

Natasha Bullock is a curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; from 2001 to 2005 she was also assistant curator, photography. Recent exhibitions and publications include the *Anne Landa award for video and new media arts* (2006), *Reflections in time: 19th century portrait photography* (2005) and *Australian postwar photodocumentary* (2004). In 2005 she guest-edited (with Lily Hibberd) *Photofile 76: shifting ground*.

Bronwyn Clark-Cooler is an artist and writer. She completed her Master of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, in 1999. She has worked extensively in visual arts education, including teaching art history and theory at Sydney College of the Arts, and within the School of Design at the University of Technology, Sydney. She also worked in Public Programs at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1997 to 2005.

Dr Martyn Jolly is head of photomedia at the Australian National University School of Art, Canberra. He is a writer and artist. He received a doctorate from the University of Sydney in 2003. His book *Faces of the living dead: the belief in spirit photography* was published in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia in 2006. He designed the photographic component of the ACT Bushfire Memorial which opened in Canberra in January 2006.

Steven Miller is the archivist of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. He has worked in both public and commercial galleries and contributed to monographs on Rosalie Gascoigne and Colin McCahon. He co-authored *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins* (1995). His most recent publication, *Degenerates and perverts: the 1939 Herald exhibition of French and British contemporary art* (2005), was awarded the 2005 Australian History Award.

Denise Mimmocchi is an assistant curator in the Australian Art Department at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She worked on the exhibitions *Robert Klippel* (2002) and *Margaret Preston* (2005), and their publications, and is currently working on an exhibition and book on sculptor Bertram Mackennal for 2007. She previously worked as the study room coordinator, managing the gallery's prints, drawings and photography collections.

Rose Peel is the senior conservator for works on paper in the Conservation Department at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She has lectured widely, given conservation workshops, produced a film on scroll mounting and in 2004 convened the Third National Symposium for Paper, Books and Photographic Materials – *collaboration & connections*. In 2005 she co-curated the *Margaret Preston* exhibition.

Dr Nicola Teffer is a curator, writer and researcher with a particular interest in the history and theory of photography. She has worked on exhibitions for the Art Gallery of New South Wales (*Man Ray; World without end: photography and the 20th century*), the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and the City of Sydney. She currently teaches art history and theory at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales.

Commissioning editor Judy Annear
Editing Claire Armstrong
Proofreading Jessica Perini
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Photography Jenni Carter, Chilin Gieng,
Diana Panuccio, Christopher Snee,
Mim Stirling, Ray Woodbury, Lyndell Brown
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Publication assistants Donna Brett,
Ewen McDonald
Research Nicola Teffer, Anna Ridley,
Elizabeth Maloney, Art Gallery of New
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designated: Judy Annear [JA], Deborah Jones
[DJ], Elizabeth Maloney [EM], Ewen McDonald
[EMcD], Anna Ridley [AR], Nicola Teffer [NT]
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