

AFTER IMAGE, January 1984

# Post-documentary

## The Way We Live Now: Beyond Social Documentary

at P.S. 1, New York City  
Sept. 25-Nov. 20, 1983

and at the Gallery 400, University of Illinois/  
Chicago

Feb. 22-March 31, 1984

## Union Made

at 1199 Gallery, New York City  
Sept. 29-Nov. 11, 1983

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**A** GROWING NUMBER of photographers with explicitly progressive intentions are redefining traditional social documentary, incorporating formal analyses of how photographic meaning is communicated into their overtly political subject matter. "New documentary" is a term which has recently been coined to differentiate this

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work from that of their predecessors. Specifically, new documentarians set about to make work which avoids liberal sentimentality<sup>1</sup> and exposes generally invisible social structures.<sup>2</sup> In most cases new documentary photographers use written texts or montage techniques to construct their messages and avoid misinterpretations.

By distinguishing new from old documentary on these terms, the presumption is made that such strategies have been absent from documentary practices. However, to some degree, this perceived absence can be attributed to the disarming effect of aestheticization imposed by the art marketplace. For example, the removal of Lewis Hine's photographs from their original use as a part of graphic displays, such as those published in *The Charities and the Commons*, drains these pictures of their political meaning. The isolation of photographs in museums and galleries or their de- and recontextualization in the species of depoliticized photo essays on the "human condition," best typified by "The Family of Man," always renders the pictured subjects as romantic archetypes or pitiable victims. This systematic removal of older social documentary photographs from their original contexts such as books, magazines, workers' publications, and posters may falsely exaggerate their distance from newer forms. Furthermore, the prevalence of this aestheticizing impulse is not accidentally concurrent with the ascendancy of modernist documentary photography—e.g., the work of Lee Friedlander, Joel Meyerowitz, Garry Winogrand, and Nicholas

Nixon—which celebrates the artist/photographer's private vision.

The response by new social documentarians to these reactionary developments should be distinguished from (or within) similar contemporary photographic strategies which have been broadly defined as postmodern. Postmodern work, such as that produced by Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman, deconstructs mass media and fine art representations: an observation is announced, most often by some kind of visual appropriation; a political critique, however, is rarely explicitly made. In contrast, new social documentarians expose social conditions and representational modes in order to propose social change. Like postmodernists, they sometimes concentrate on media images, but new social documentary photography levels a direct attack on the socio-economic conditions which are maintained with the aid of representational systems. This work *always* has as its project the radicalization of the audience.

Two recent exhibitions in New York City brought together photographic works that address a range of social issues, including sexism, racism, class, nuclear threat, home displacement, working conditions, unemployment, and consumerism: "The Way We Live Now: Beyond Social Documentary," curated by Abigail Solomon-Godeau at P.S. 1 and "Union Made," curated by Lucy Lippard and Jerry Kearns at the 1199 National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees' New York headquarters. (Unfortunately, the latter

was the last regular gallery exhibition in 1199's Bread and Roses program.) Despite the differing conditions and purposes of the two shows, the overlap was notable, and I think it is instructive to compare some of the work displayed in these congruent exhibits.

In her preface to the P.S. 1 show, Solomon-Godeau stated,

Pushing the boundaries of social documentary as conventionally understood, and asserting the textuality of the photographic image, such work [as exhibited here] attempts to function critically in a double sense; externally, in that it deals with the actual social world (*The Way We Live Now*) and internally, in that its critical operation is turned equally, inward, upon itself (*Beyond Social Documentary*).

The work selected for the 1199 exhibition, was all produced with the direct involvement with labor unions and, like that in "The Way We Live Now," came from the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, and, additionally, from Australia. Unlike Solomon-Godeau's exhibit, "Union Made" did not focus on the performance of contemporary documentary photography, but nevertheless, for the vast majority of the artists featured by Lippard and Kearns, photography was the chosen medium. The main difference between these shows had to do with contexts—at P.S. 1 politics was brought to art while at the 1199 gallery political and cultural work were presented as unified. Another contrast was the installation of the two exhibits: Solomon-Godeau took great care to assure the best possible installation in a less than ideal space—a converted classroom. Lippard and

Kearns, on the other hand, did not manage to overcome the disadvantages of the union hall gallery—an unwelcoming institutional norm. Both shows contained a considerable amount of work, all of which was excerpted from larger series, and in both cases information on the full scale of the works was largely ignored. The one caveat, which might have been avoided by the inclusion of background information like previous installation photos, etc., is surprising since such work depends so much on context.

The only traditional documentary photography included in either show was Earl Dotter's straight-forward portraits shown at 1159. Though respectful of the people portrayed, the pictures run the risk of romanticizing the subjects without analyzing the working conditions. Perhaps the most extreme contrast to Dotter's old documentary photo of working people, were the highly manipulated photographs by Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge, included in both shows.

"The Way We Live Now" displayed a selection from the "Linda" section of Standing Up, a place about union organizing in factories. "Linda" included an excerpt from Conde and Beveridge's recent series dealing with women's participation in building the first United Auto Workers local in Canada. Each of the four large color photographs depicts a kitchen scene with a picture window view of the outside workworld. Using this device, Conde and Beveridge trace the history of the evolving relationships between women's domestic lives and industrial work since the onset of World War II. The first image, this series without analyzing the papers and other details, that the men work back from the war. A woman is shown in her kitchen donning her apron and, again, through the window in the factory locker room, where she and another woman pack up their belongings. Below this montage, the caption reads, "After the war... the single girls were transferred to Cutting and Sewing. The wives, well, they said our place was in the home. We should have fought it, right then and there."

This project was developed as part of an affirmative action drive by the Ontario Federation of Labor. Also exhibited was a poster from the same project featuring a contemporary woman at home writing checks to pay her bills while the view through the window shows her (a white woman), a black woman, and a white man at work.

In this work, the instrumental use of words in order to provide specific interpretations on key visual information and symbols, and most of the new social documentarians similarly use language to avoid ambiguities which pictures alone might suggest. In such cases, neither pictures or words are sufficient to guarantee a particular meaning, but are mutually dependent and reinforcing. Mass media has al-

ways exploited this kind of enclosed and extended meaning while photographers have often been resisted using hybrid forms, preferring to rely on conventional means about the gun-victim photography. The most notable departure made by new social documentarians, then, is their various unbrushed, often orthodox combinations of words and pictures, some more inventive and effective than others.

Perhaps because of the reading entailed in each work, "The Way We Live Now" and "Union Made" demanded more from viewers than most gallery exhibits. It was impossible to hastily scan the work, and the audience simply had to choose whether or not to give it the required attention. At each gallery I first spent time slowly surveying the various texts and a couple of hours reading the various texts displayed. Since I was taking notes, this may overestimate the amount of time necessary to adequately view the shows, but almost everyone I observed there had either too little time or patience. One factor to keep in mind: it's really uncomfortable to stand in a gallery that long. Ironically, under exhibition circumstances the density of the work is perhaps its greatest flaw. Progressive documentarians cannot influence people if they don't look at it.

Many of these works have been or could be published so that spectators can determine their own reading place and time. Some are clearly intended as wall displays, however, and need to be designed accordingly. For example, a thorough reading of Fred Lonidier's wall panels from the series "The Health and Safety Game" requires a touring and a second look. Acknowledging this obstacle, he designed his work as a series of bite-sized readings. This work, shown at 1156, has been exhibited in other union halls, where it has a recurring audience. But it has also been displayed in art galleries, and in those settings most viewers do not return or even read most of the text in the first place. Lonidier partially solves this problem by giving the superficial reader through concise critical information to grasp the basic terms of the relationships between labor, management, and workers' safety. The four pages at 1159 "Coke Oven Worker's Lamp," "Insulation and Bob Mason's Skin," "Dental Technician's Legs," and "Carpenter's Vertebrae," document illnesses and injuries common to work situations. Each is devoted to a case history and includes a medical-style photo of a typical injury along with others showing the prescribed therapy. The full text is comprised of a brief chronology of events concerning the disease, an expanded version giving added evidence, testimony from the injured worker, and examples of management strategies which place the burden of responsibility for safety on the workers. The panels have an institutional, almost bureaucratic look which discourages serious in-

terial sympathy in favor of analysis of workplace conditions and the economic factors which make workers' physical risks a given in this society.

At P.S. 1, Elizabeth Sisco's selection from "La Vida en El Rancho Grande" also integrated photographs and texts to reveal complex systems of workers' exploitation—in this case undocumented Mexican farmworkers in the U.S. The verbal portion consists of first-hand descriptions of how this employment system operates outside the law. A number of these quotes are from people who play different roles in the game—undocumented workers, a sociologist, and immigration officials. The most prominent theme is fear of the Migra (U.S. Immigration Office) who report workers and their families to authorities to have them deported to re-enter the U.S. legally—often within hours. Many of the photographs are scenes of Migra investigations; one ironic exception shows a man reading a magazine with an ad for a TV news program claiming, "Anyone can tell you the score. These men tell you why and how it happened." Without the text, the photographs are virtually meaningless; likewise, the photographs showing the residents of a housing tract (El Rancho Grande), its residents, and the men who police them, anchor the quotations. The greatest problem with Sisco's presentation is precisely what I discussed above: few people read the full text and therefore missed the point.

Language was used more concisely and therefore more effectively by Connie Hatch in the excerpt from "Forn Follows Financ: The Alarm Neighborhoods," also shown at P.S. 1. Sisco's and Lonidier's photographs enumerate conditions which led to the destruction—which she attributes to arson—of her San Francisco neighborhood, the South of Market district. In and below each print are a few short phrases, e.g., "Alarm, alarm, alarm, alarm, alarm" (superimposed on the photo), "What are the City's priorities?" (below), that reveal the process of community displacement which necessarily preceded the construction of a community center at the site. Lisa Swack, Hatch proposes no solution other than to pose, but her analytic presentation constitutes an engaging and alarming indictment of real estate speculation.

In charting some of the defining principles for new social documentary, both shows included printed material not ordinarily hung on gallery walls. These provide some refreshing examples of work which exploits mechanical means of production, and therefore denies the notion of photographs as original works of art. All the pages of Lisa Lewin's 1984 calendar, "A View from Three Mile Island," were displayed side by side at P.S. 1. On each of the dozen pages, in a conventional folder format, is a well-composed, torally

rich photograph of an ordinary American domestic interior, and seen through a window in each room are the infamous Three Mile Island cooling towers. The cumulative effect of the repetition underlines the fact of the nuclear presence in our lives—and the subsequent dangers. The calendar dates are marked with significant anniversaries of events in the history of nuclear power. The first, on Jan. 2, reminds us, "Idaho Falls test reactor kills three workers." 1963 ended the most day's entry commemorates, "Reagan bill gives a plane temporary license before safety hearing." 1983. With this calendar Lewent has found an excellent way to state a clear political message without denying herself (or his) humor, sensuous pleasure (the photos are pleasing), and intellectual provocation.

Humor is also employed by Michael Wilkinson in his ironic "American Dream Postcards," which comment on familiar mass media images, and by Mary Lynn Hughes in "Knew Your Corporation Artworks," also a postcard series. Hughes and her collaborator, Barbara Margolis (unfortunately not credited in the P.S. 1 show) expose California fast food chain Carl Jr. Hamburgers' invisible system by capturing photographs with redlines, e.g., "Here is this Carl Jr.'s hamburger a treat to Walter's Rights?" On the reverse side of the same postcard Hughes and Margolis explain the owner's right-to-life politics and opposition to the ERA. The device works especially well as counter-propaganda because the cards are inexpensive and can be widely distributed. Such entertaining inversions of advertising techniques suggest numerous variations on this strategy.

Postcards, flyers, posters, and books, if distributed, can achieve the exposure potential all works need in order to be effective. After all, the production of political art is only useful if it is seen and read. For the most part, this requirement puts one more burden on the activist artist, but I think it's time that progressive political movements not already directly engaged in cultural activities encourage and support the work of their obvious allies. Political organizations often call upon visual artists to design posters, leaflets, or pamphlets. Culture is finally being acknowledged as a basic social component and political organizers must encourage and promote cultural development by sharing responsibilities for production expenses and distribution. That burden must not always fall on artists alone.

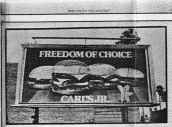
The published materials shown in "Union Made" provide some examples of this kind of support. Howard Sauters worked with the United Farmworkers Union to produce a set of recruiting posters for union organizers which parody contemporary ads for the Marines—with an affirmative action twist. Conrad Dickinson's sophisticated colored

posters were likewise 'union made,' in conjunction with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the General and Municipal Workers Union in Great Britain. In one dynamic poster supporting iron ore miners, slate quarry workers, and allied tradespeople, a larger-than-life pair of hands extends toward the viewer. On the right palm is written, "Who said 'Art and Politics don't mix'?" Well, it must have been ITT, IBM, GE, EXXON, GM, MGM...." Etc. On the left palm the message continues, "Because it certainly wasn't Charlie Chaplin, William Shakespeare, Pablo Picasso, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Robeson, Lilian Hellman, Charles Dickens.... or Conrad Atkinson and Tony Rickaby."

Sexism was a recurring topic in both exhibitions, but was the direct target of four pieces at P.S. 1. Karen Knorr and Mira Tabrizian both used pictures underscored by verbal commentary to undermine patriarchal cultural representations of women. Five from Knorr's "Gentlemen" series capsize hand-some, fine art style photographs of the interior of an upper-class men's club with brief typeset ironic commentary. Although these were obviously disparaging, the pictures were overly precious, and the result resulted in a very lady-like attack on gentlemen. There were subtle references to male domination and imperialism but no clear analysis. (I have seen others from this series that were more pointed.) Tabrizian's photographs of a fashion model training course were explained in a printed statement about the objectification and feminization of women. Although the issue is important, the pretentious text, loaded with psychoanalytic jargon, was practically incomprehensible—at least in a gallery situation. The elegant fashion scenes, which I assume from the gist of the text and the spirit of the rest of the show, were intended to reveal sexist oppression, but suggested instead that the model had been seduced by the glamour of her subject.

In the gallery display of "The Desublimation of Romance," a group of photographs of men looking at women, Connie Hatch, too, presented a theoretical and unnecessarily difficult verbal text. Regrettably, this ended up mystifying the pictures. Nonetheless, in the 12 photographs Hatch's insistence on woman-as-visual-target, man-as-voyeur, was as engaging as her witness to the destruction of her neighborhood in "Form Follows Finance"—communicating extremely well what Martha Rosler has described as Hatch's "bold rage."

Mark Lewis's excerpts from "A Simple Love Story" were the only examples in this group in which the entire text was incorporated in the photographs. Viewers are made responsible for decoding the huge and very



Q. Where is the irony in this Carl's Jr. billboard?

striking graphic juxtapositions of newspaper headlines, commercial signs, sexual and military symbols: a four part grid pairs table-top arrangements centered on a larger-than-life typewriter (the text, taken from Cervantes, was thus pictured as typescript) with staged street photos. In his contrived tableaux Lewis considers Great Britain and Argentina's recent episode in the Malvinas (Falklands) as a specific historical military event and as a psychological arena. One Cervantes excerpt recounts a dream about the heroism knighthood would bring and is accompanied by the headline, "WAR LOOKS INEVITABLE." In the frame below the Cervantes text laments the nightmare knighthood did bring while a newspaper announces posthumous awards for valor in the Falklands. The words, postures, and symbols within these four images set up a series of reverberations: in front of a defense department building a man poses, legs set apart in an aggressive stance, echoing that of "The New Goddess" on the cover of an *Esquire*

magazine; this V shape is inverted in the Prince Edward Theatre's poster for *Evita*, whose arms are regally raised echoing Margaret Thatcher's gesture in a newspaper photo. The complexities of Lewis's pictures are appropriate to the complexities of the gender roles and representations he exposes, conceding men's physical and psychological vulnerability—but at the expense of picturing women as the new authority figures.

The curators of "The Way We Live Now" and "Union Made" would probably agree with me that the works they selected were, in almost every case, more meaningful outside galleries—in original locations, addressing immediate issues. But collected here, these affirmed the significance of developing progressive visual cultures. In this context, other artists with similar political purposes had the opportunity to see work which challenged and stimulated their own practices. Since social change cannot come about without integrating cultural forms, progressive political

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Top left: from the series "Form Follows Finance: Five Alarm Neighborhoods," by Connie Hatch. Bottom left: postcard by Mary Lynn Hughes and Barbara Margolis. Right: page from the 1984 calendar "A View from Three Mile Island," by Lisa Lewent. All from "The Way We Live Now: Beyond Social Documentary."

groups and artists who acknowledge social responsibility must forge new ways of working together. Both exhibitions propose a variety of questions and some promising directions for anyone engaged in this ambitious task.

NOTES

1. See "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," by Martha Rosler in *Three Works (Hollis, N.S.: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981)*.
2. See "Disarming Modernism, Raising Democracy (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," by Allan Sekula, in the *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 208-63 (reprinted as *Photography 1*, London: Photography Workshop, 1981, pp. 171-82).
3. For a description and discussion of *Standing Up*, see "The Production of Meaning: An Interview with Connie Condie and Karl Beveridge," by Martha Fleming, *Afterimage*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (November 1982), pp. 10-15.
4. Rosler discusses this series and other work by Hatch in "Some Contemporary Documentary," *Afterimage*, Vol. 11, No. 1 & 2 (Summer 1983), pp. 10-15.