



Photo Credit: Emelle Sonh: Wonder Valley Bicycle/Wonder Valley, CA. 2007.

Pictures with Words : Reflections on Documentary Photography by Hans Durrer

Most photo books show pictures without words. They rarely come with an accompanying text, often however without captions, or with captions we could easily do without – such as *Mexico 1934*, or *Dog* (when the photo shows a dog), for instance. While such an approach – “I do not want to influence you, trust your eyes, judge for yourself”, the photographers seem to say – might be acceptable for art photography (whatever that might be), it is clearly not appropriate for documentary photography or for press photography.

Documentary photography means to go out into the world, and to document what your eyes allow you to see, and what you allow your eyes to see. It means to get out of the prison of your thoughts and to discover what is out there – and then tell us about it, with pictures, and with words. I especially warm to Karolina Lewandowska's approach in *An Unconventional Map of the 'Documentary'* (in: “She-Documentalists - Polish Women Photographers of the 20th Century”, Warsaw 2008) that understands it (in regards to the exhibition in Warsaw), as “those projects, albeit selected ones, that required the photographer to go outside, to leave the studio and confront herself with people, projects that focused on documenting a certain phenomenon, or that, once realised, had to function in contexts other than the safe gallery context.”

Documentary photographs and press photographs (I do not really distinguish them, they overlap) should come with words that are not limited to (hopefully) informative captions but also include narratives that inform the reader about the coming into being of the pictures. As, for example, Alex Harris in *The Idea of Cuba* (an unfortunate title, I find, for what country, nation etc. is not an idea?) impressively demonstrates:

“In my first days in Havana I wondered how Cubans felt as they drove through their daily lives inside these symbols of capitalist triumph. Whatever can be said about failed U.S. policies toward Cuba, surely the continued existence of these cars on Cuban roads was a testimony to the North American way, to the success and durability of our political system. Yet the more time I spent in Havana, the more I realized that every car I rode in had been completely rebuilt from the inside out. Many of the parts were borrowed from Russian or European models or manufactured by Cuban mechanics who could not legally import anything from the United States. These 1950s-era cars may have had North American shells, but the fact that they continued to run was proof of Cuban ingenuity, determination, and the kind of sacrifice that José Martí admired.

Under the May Havana sun, I might as well have been working in a sauna. Sweating inside these cars with my view camera, film holders, tripod, battery pack, and lights, I sometimes worried about my sanity. And as I saw the richness of life on Havana streets unfolding outside my window, it seemed crazy to limit myself to this narrow view of the city. But as a photographer I recognized that the greatest depth of field is achieved by setting the smallest aperture on a lens. After almost thirty years of making pictures in the American South, New Mexico, and Alaska, I knew another kind of depth could be achieved by narrowing the subject of my focus as well. For the time being, I would continue to photograph Cuba from inside cars.”

Alex Harris had never heard of José Martí when he first set foot on the island but soon became interested in him (“I traveled to Cuba to make landscapes, and discovered José Martí”) for photographers sometimes travel with open eyes (and – in this case – with an open mind) and Martí is difficult to avoid in Cuba for his statues are everywhere. “Martí had a kind of nobility. He was stoic and wise. He seemed to know a secret I wanted to learn.”

By describing how he went about his work, what he experienced, where he went, and why, and what went through his mind, Alex Harris lets the reader participate in what he learns about Martí, and about Cuba – an approach that, sadly, is not very common.

“My larger problem was how to begin to encompass in a photograph something as complex and cerebral as Martí's idea of Cuba. Near the end of his life, in the early days of photography, Martí anticipated my dilemma in a question jotted in one of his notebooks: “Who could photograph thought, as a horse is photographed in full gallop

or a bird in flight?"

As I made my first photographs of his memorials, I saw Martí's words at the base of many statues. These aphorisms had been extracted by Cubans themselves as the essence of Martí's idea of Cuba, then chiseled into stone or stamped onto copper plaques. In one of the first I read, Martí seemed to predict his own future role. A nation that honors its heroes strengthens itself. I began to copy every Martí adage I saw. These words of wisdom read like agnostic Cuban cousins of Solomon's proverbs. With all and for the good of all: To be cultured is to be free.

Of all Martí's writings, these brief sayings became a kind of compass I used to find my way around the island. If I couldn't photograph Martí's thoughts, at least I'd have his most important ideas in mind when I decided to snap the shutter. This seemed a way for me to look at contemporary Cuba through the lens of history, to see the present in relation to Martí's imagined future."

Unfortunately, not all the texts of The Idea of Cuba are as convincing (in the sense that they truly complement the pictures) as the above. This one, for example, that comments on one of the photos, is not: "In a rural village, a black boy watched under a huge bust of Martí while four light-skinned teenagers played a game of soccer in the rain. Perhaps the racial unity proclaimed by the Castro government and sought by Martí had not fully arrived." It goes without saying that there is racism in Cuba (where isn't?) but to conclude that from a photo, which is, after all, always just the recording of a moment, seems a bit far fetched for the black boy in the picture might have participated in the game a few minutes before or after the picture was taken or on another occasion.

And then there are the captions. Regrettably, they are far from helpful. The captions of the photos of "jineteras", as prostitutes are called in Cuba, for example read: "Red-haired woman, October 2003" or "Woman and daughter, October 2003." I could have surely done without them. Nevertheless, The Idea of Cuba is documentary photography at its finest. That it won one of the best "photo books of the year" award from Photo District News Magazine is well deserved.

Captions can of course also be used manipulatively. Sometimes they are, and, occasionally, they lead viewers on to quite unexpected readings. The captions of a German hobby-photographer, who achieved some notoriety some years ago for having had his picture taken with prominent persons, read, for example, like "Should you have wondered who the guy next to me is, it is the Pope."

On 12 June 2005, The New York Times Magazine, published a cover article by Joseph Lelyveld entitled "Interrogating Ourselves" that, wrote Byron Calame (in: "Pictures, Labels, Perception and Reality", The New York Times, 3 July 2005), "discussed the "lies, threats and highly coercive force" being used to pry information out of detainees held in military custody. What caught my attention was the full-page photograph across from the title page of the article. It was a color photograph with a mid-torso view from the rear of a person with wrists handcuffed. Below the plastic handcuffs, a red stain ran down from one wrist across the soiled palm onto the fingers. The credit at the bottom of the facing page: "Photographs by Andres Serrano." But there wasn't any explanation that the photograph had been staged. There was no caption. Four pages later, the same was true for the full-page staged photograph of water torture. The cover picture of a person with a sandbag hood also was identified only as a photograph by Mr. Serrano. For those who scrutinized the photographs, there was one possible clue that they were posed. The coloring of the backdrop in each photograph was similar. And a note in small type at the bottom of the contents page identified the artist who painted the backdrop for Mr. Serrano's cover photograph."

The problem is that hardly anybody ever scrutinises the photographs displayed in newspapers or magazines. And so we are constantly carrying images in our heads of which we do not know whether they depict something real or not. Is that relevant? In press photography it is. So what is there to do? A helpful suggestion provided David Travis, curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago in a letter to the New York Times: "Because photographs by themselves cannot clearly separate reality from appearance, it is good to know as much as possible about how, when, where, and for what reason they were made. This is especially necessary for subjects that may be part of a national debate about the practices and direction of a country at war. The photographs by Andres Serrano that accompanied your recent Sunday magazine article 'Interrogating Ourselves' would have been better described by the simple credit line: 'Photographic illustrations by Andres Serrano.'" (Byron Calame: "Pictures, Labels, Perception and Reality", The New York Times, 3 July 2005).

This should apply to all press photographs for without knowing that we are looking at a staged photograph we often cannot see that. Or, we might think a picture to be staged when it is not. To me, for example, the „Wonder Valley Bicycle“ by the San Francisco photo-artist Emelle Sonh seemed staged – however, it was not. "It would be interesting to see if most people would say it is staged. My guess is that people who have lived for some time in the desert, for example, are familiar with such views, and would recognize it as quite likely not staged ... this is not to say someone at some time did not put that old bicycle in that spot but that is different than the photographer setting it there for the purpose of making a "staged" photograph. People have different capacities to believe the improbable ..." (email to the author on 2 September 2008).

I do not disagree ... yet since most people have not lived in the desert for some time it would be helpful to include this information. For without be told what we are looking at we can only see what we already know

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