The burning towers may be the iconic image of September 11, but what stays in the mind for most of us in New York is the vast outpouring of expression—the shrines, posters, photographs, messages that filled the streets of Lower Manhattan and our rush to every possible form of technology—e-mail, throw-away cameras, voice mail, cell phones, video cameras, websites—by which to communicate and find meaning in the midst of catastrophe. Individuals trying to find words, connect, give shape and meaning to unfathomable events.

This democracy of voices, this rich—often eloquent—outpouring of expression, stood in stark contrast to mass media, which (after a stumbling start that featured weeping anchor men) quickly settled on a narrowly framed story of “therapeutic patriotism”—nation unified in grief and on its way to war.

How will September 11 be told and remembered—how will it enter national memory and history? Will it be the television version—a kind of remembering that obscures the lived experiences of September 11 and the many acts of meaning produced on the ground and in cyberspace? Or will it, in Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett’s words “Reveal the role of history’s ordinary actors in creating the historical record even as they are living it.”

The events of September 11 produced an unprecedented shift in the global political landscape, in which communications and media played an unforeseeable role in opening circuits of information, connection and discussion, from the local to the transnational. This event brought into relief the importance of alternative networks and systems of communication. It was a moment when individuals, many of whom never before made media, created alternatives to what the mainstream media had to offer.

As a colleague in Amsterdam wrote to us,

Everyone of us, from those at the fiery heart of events grabbing mobile phones, to we the “universal eyewitnesses” scrambling to make contact with others attempting to make sense of a world turned upside down, became transmitter as well as a receiver…we all became nodes in the global media network.

9-11 and after: a virtual case book (www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb) is a web publication produced by The Center for Media, Culture and History at NYU and in collaboration with designers Alison Cornyn and Sue Johnson of Picture Projects, that provides a snapshot of responses to September 11. It brings together essays, first-person accounts, reports, visual images, and websites to provide a composite view of the ways in which people (as opposed to mass media and government) used media on September 11 and in the days after.

Its central subject is that ephemeral material—the shrines, poetry, messages, banners, e-mail, digital art, web logs, etc.—that filled our lives and is a kind of snapshot of what people needed to express, how they expressed it, and their many webs of communication.

With its multiplicity of views and voices, its overlapping stories and connections—9-11 and after demonstrates how new technologies and the development of network society have enlarged our means of creative expression and produced a relocation in time, space, and memory.

The contributors to this “virtual case book” are based in places as diverse as Delhi, Jerusalem,
and Amsterdam. But the focus is on Lower Manhattan—specifically the area below 14th street that was cordoned off for several days after the attack. We were physically isolated in what sometimes felt like a medieval town, but we were also a community at the epicenter of global communication, redefining the local and the global.

We all remember how city streets and the Internet were claimed and reconfigured to facilitate the urgent need to search for loved ones, express opinions, to mourn, or just to connect. As city surfaces were covered with messages, posters and shrines—turning the streets into what someone has described as a giant public art project—so too did the web and internet become public sites of mourning, commentary, and quest.

The vcb traces some of the ways in which virtual and physical worlds converged and intertwined, how old and new technologies were deployed to create new networks of communication and forms of expression.

Today I’d like to show a few examples from the site to suggest the range of expression and patterns of connection that were revealed. (CDRom—no live connections)

Amahl Bishara writes about Al-Jazeera satellite tv, which introduced Arab perspectives and images in unprecedented ways into the mass media mix—to both Arab and western audiences. A new flow of information from east to west.

Ravi Sundaram at the Sarai media center in Delhi, presents a selection of e-mails from the Sarai internet list—messages from South Asians working in New York. It is a conversation that quickly moves from first-person reports from Ground Zero (“today I shaved my beard”) to a discussion of impending war coming closer to home. To Sundaram, this provided suddenly vivid evidence of the south–north flow of labor and the human reality of labor migration.

Both of these sites emphasize reconfigurations of the local and the global, and new spaces for the circulation of ideas and information. But also the ways in which digital technology can make otherwise unobserved patterns and situations visible.

Public spaces, both in the streets and on the web, were claimed, overwhelmingly for shrines, memorials, and remembrance of all kinds. Shrines appeared not only in the streets and parks, but also virtually—digital shrines, memorial video quilts composed of photographs, and testimonials abounded. Practices of memory—both in real space and cyberspace—became social acts, as grieving individuals came together around rituals of remembrance.

Lesha Torchin describes how websites mobilized individual testimonies of loss and grief into collective community practices, rendering visible formerly unseen or unacknowledged worlds (such as the undocumented workers lost in the attack) visible. She notes a site honoring gays and lesbians lost in the attack, including Father Murphy—whose leadership gay rights advocacy went unmentioned in official biographies. These are sites, she says, by people who want their histories to be part of the grand narratives that will be told about September 11.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also talks about shrines and memorial sites—spontaneous, inclusive and raw—which she says, “by encouraging creativity without artistic ambition, helped close the gap between art and life.”

The camera, of course, is central to the desire to remember BKG talks about this most-photographed event in history, and “the powerful sense that one is a witness to one’s own experience and obligated to express and record it.”
Thanks to digital cameras, the image became an instantaneous part of the event. That unparalleled project, *here is new york*, (that Charles Traub will speak about in detail) is a most notable example of the humanizing potential of technology, and the recombinant possibilities of digital imagery—hung in a gallery space (which was also a place of meditation, a town hall, a trauma center, and a tourist destination), exhibited and sold on the web, collected in a book.

The virtual case book is also an archive of archives. *The September 11 digital archive* is specifically concerned with the politics of memory. It is committed to telling the “history of all the people in their own voices” and as they lived it—their site is a compendium of counter-narratives that challenge the official stories. This site features personal stories, oral histories, e-mails, digital folk art (for example, digital shrines, memorial quilts, animations, videos, cartoons, and altered photographs).

The Digital Archive reveals the diversity of responses to the attacks—how common, for instance, was the desire (expressed in e-mails from the families of survivors, for instance, and from immigrants in NY who have fled terrorism elsewhere) not to escalate violence, the fear that violence begets violence; September 11 digital archive with its digital collections, political analysis, and portals to information, is an archive for historians of the future.

**TV ARCHIVE**

Television, is our national storyteller, a place where personal and collective memories are produced and claimed. At the same time, the television spectacle of the burning towers and surrounding events has been called by Diana Taylor a form of “percepticide”—a display of images that prevents one from seeing—or at least knowing what one is seeing.

The Television Archive has collected television broadcasts from September 11 and the days after, from 19 stations worldwide makes this material publicly available. It offers a unique opportunity use of media to challenge the media spectacle itself. These broadcasts, which might otherwise be regarded either as intellectual property available only for a fee, or as too ephemeral to collect, are a vital public resource. Here is an interactive site for research, commentary, and consideration of the nature and consequences of the role played by television our shared social and political experience.

The virtual case book itself is an *archive*—of ephemeral material that documents the lived experiences and many acts of making meaning by people who experienced the WTC attack. It is not only a depository, a source of evidence; lying as it does at the intersection of personal memory and social meanings, it also is a source of counternarratives to the official versions of September 11 as it becomes part of American history and memory. However, as a digital object, the vcb itself is a bit of ephemera.

We think of the virtual case book as a scholarly resource and a site of memory, a place in which history can be interpreted and reinterpreted, where evidence is preserved and memory reconstructed.

“But how,” in the words of Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett, “do you secure an ephemeral experience?”
EXHIBITING 9-11: A HISTORIOGRAPHY

Leslie K. Brown
Boston University

(Please note: this paper was originally presented with slides, hence the words LEFT and RIGHT indicate left slide and right slide)

On March 11th—the 6 month anniversary of September 11th—desiring a quite calm place of reflection, you enter a softly lit, warmly painted gallery. LEFT What you behold is varied in subject and media, but united in theme. You are greeted with a seven-foot tall grid of what looks at first to be a quilt of white paper squares hanging from the ceiling. When you approach, you realize that this grid is constructed out of magazine pages with images of candles sandwiched in-between. LEFT As the piece is back-lit, the candles glow ever so slightly. If you counted, you’d realize that there more than 3,000 of these squares held together with tape—the number of lives lost that day.

LEFT Next, you behold four images by a Boston-based photographer: a memorial around a tree at the Pentagon, a memorial to two of the airline pilots in Boston, a memorial to firefighters arranged on an office chair in New York City, and a memorial in the snowy fields of Pennsylvania. RIGHT You pick up a map of Ground Zero indicating viewing locations and temporary memorials. LEFT RIGHT A grid greets you next. Typed phrases emerge from a sea of black. Each of us will conjure up different, or maybe the same, photographs to accompany the words.

LEFT You end your visit by reading a sign tacked to a fence in one of the photographs: “All of you taking photos, I wonder if you really see what’s here or if you’re so concerned with getting that perfect shot that you’ve forgotten that this is a tragedy site, and not a tourist attraction. As I continually had to move ‘out of someone’s way’ as they carefully tried to frame this place of mourning, I kept wondering what makes us think we can capture the pain, the loss, the pride and the confusion—this complexity—into a 4 x 5 glossy.—Firegirl, NYC, 9/17/01.”

These images and installations shots are from an exhibition 6 Months, A Memorial LEFT RIGHT (March 11 through April 28, 2002) organized by the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, seen here in the cover of the PRC newsletter featuring Marcus Halvei and the show’s closing card, featuring Susan E. Evans. Taking this exhibition as a point of departure, I will consider the phenomenon of the makeshift memorial in light of the proliferation of September 11th exhibitions featuring photography from a historiographical perspective. This discussion is not exhaustive, nor model, but merely a starting point for I believe it is as important to collect exhibitions as it is artifacts.

As a student of popular culture, I was fascinated by the urge to create anything on a tremendous scale to make up for a perceived void. Museum and history professionals responded with an overwhelming need to cull, archive, and present visual responses to the tragedy. Galleries and artists echoed the unchoreographed accumulation in the public arena as if normal presentation and art making gave way to the vernacular. The collage/grid format formed a sort of 9-11 iconography.

I wanted to take the time to point out that I have purposely not masked my slides to emphasize this idea of Vernacular Presentation as outlined by photohistorian Geoffrey Batchen to give you an idea of context the objects themselves, as many are exhibition flyers.
Fueled by a sense of mass amnesia, the race to memorialize seemed to be located at the end of the memory spectrum. To borrow the words of historian James Young, “In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events . . . may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.” Like the museums faced with too many donations, we’d hoard now and sort through it all later. It is likely that these displays will be recreated at some meaningful time. Intriguingly, this is already happening.

The idea to do some sort of 9-11 show was decided upon before I arrived as Curator. At an opening September 13th, the PRC’s board agreed, given Boston’s connection to events and the center’s mission, to hold open a slot for the 6 month anniversary. Since last November when I arrived in Boston, I have been collecting press releases, exhibition invitations, catalogues, and websites. In the early months of 2002, in addition to the five shows at the International Center of Photography, for example, fifteen exhibitions were listed at New York City cultural institutions alone, 9-11 history.net, a collaborative website between the Museum of the City of New York and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Behring Center, also documented the ever-increasing list of exhibitions, programs, and collecting efforts. In discussing these exhibitions, I realize that I am a participant/observer; my background as a museum professional necessarily affects my observations.

I would like to approach the following exhibitions as “artistic creations,” as outlined by Young. He explains in The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning, exhibitions “juxtapose, narrate, and remember events according to the tastes of their curators, the political needs and interests of the community, the temper of the time.” Studying exhibitions—their timing and tenor—reveals much. Taking this further, how do exhibitions relate to and expound upon memory? Moreover, can we have a memory of an exhibition we never saw? 9-11 exhibitions in particular veered from the norm, tugging at the heartstrings of the visitors, and multiplying at a dizzying speed. The shows allow us to meditate on the act of exhibiting itself. These 9-11 exhibitions let the processes that usually went on behind closed doors—from “acquisition” to “curation” to “installation”—to go public for all to see.

From the PRC’s exhibition alone, the vast majority of artists participated, either with the same work or with similar work, in different 9-11 exhibitions in 2002. RIGHT Cheryl Sorg’s work, for example, The Missing Peace was central in the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego’s show, Without Borders, Transcending Terror (September 1-October 13). LEFT Liz Linder’s God Bless America series was shown, as was LEFT Margaret Morton’s panoramas of missing walls, in an exhibition, RIGHT New York after New York: Photographs from a Wounded City (June 13-September 16), at the Musée De Lausanne in Switzerland. LEFT Steve Aishman’s series featuring Boston locations linked to the events was featured in RIGHT SohoPhoto’s Through the Lens of September 11 (September 5-28). As symbolized by this re-contextualizing, the mutability of memory is perhaps even more important to point out than issues raised by any single exhibition. The nexus created by the reshuffling of artifacts and artworks reminds us that meanings, and thus memories, are not fixed.

LEFT of candles  RIGHT BLANK Defined broadly, the first “exhibitions” could be seen to be the public, uncurated make-shift memorials, located in various neighborhoods all across the United States. As quickly as two weeks later, New York City Park officials began to tear down these shrines. Interestingly, this phenomenon coincided with the time when major news networks stopped playing the television footage on endless loops. Batchen remarked that motion pictures were “replaced…with monochromatic still images, as if to displace the painful perennial present of the moving footage with the more comfortable ‘having been there’ of the static photograph.” Moving the memorials inside had the same ameliorating effect—placing them in the past tense and halting the accumulation. Memorials were thus memorialized.
Batchen also points out that many missing posters and exhibitions “demonstrated that no one image could capture the September 11 experience adequately; hence the need for this dense collage, this chaotic fragmentation of memory.” As stated by on the Legacy Project’s website, which is devoted to human tragedies of the 20th century—“As we feel the shock of the attacks in our own lives, we will build memories of people we did not know, at a time and place we were not present.” Like a fragmented computer, RIGHT different memories, personal and communal, were seemingly placed in vastly, disparate sections of our consciousness. We were not sure of how the parts could possibly relate to the whole. Each exhibition was a snapshot of what we, or others, thought one could deal with at the time. RIGHT Like a contact sheet of photographic images, visitors were shown responses—amateur to professional—unedited.

Photographing the memorials of September 11 is akin to the popular nineteenth-century practice of photographing extravagant casket floral displays. Both help to retain a trace of these ephemeral objects. In retrospect, one wonders how these memorials began. Who lit the first candle? How many people contributed to it? Curiously, it seems few photographs show the vastness of these memorials. Most documentary photographers of 9-11 memorials adopted an extremely close vantage point or documented them inch-by-inch in a composite fashion. LEFT This consistent photographic viewpoint might be metaphoric for emotional distance. If these memorials still existed, perhaps we’d take a step back.

LEFT RIGHT

503 photographs by 273 photographers from 68 countries, toured the world for eight years, making stops in thirty-seven countries on six continents. Over 9 million people saw documentary images of life and death by photographers known and unknown.

No, this clause is not describing “Here is New York”, LEFT seen here in an exhibition announcement from the Corcoran’s current manifestation, or “September 11 Photo Project”—LEFT two of the remarkable grass roots photography exhibitions mounted after 9-11—but a 1955 exhibition, The Family of Man. RIGHT The exhibition, curated by the Museum of Modern Art’s Edward Steichen, was in itself a kind of memorial to post-war America. The Family of Man featured copy prints hung in an unorthodox manner, a repeating image of a flute player separated the various themes. The trajectory of love, birth, and death was punctuated by a ghostly image of the atomic bomb. This image of destruction, however, is curiously absent from the eponymous publication.

“Here is New York” and “September 11 Photo Project” each displayed over 3,000 photographs responding to the tragedy. Both hung their photos in unconventional manners—taped and pinned to walls—and both are touring internationally with over 22 venues to date. After the run of Steichen’s masterpiece, it was housed in France to be reassembled almost 40 years later. While it is too early to say whether any of the numerous photography exhibitions will reach the stature of The Family of Man, these projects as well as the countless other exhibitions will likely make ripe subjects for many future dissertations.

LEFT RIGHT Like the Family of Man, many of these exhibitions produced companion books. Somehow, we still feel, even if we didn’t attend the original exhibition, that we “experienced it.” Not only is it important to collect the abundance of visual responses, but also to remember that they were affected by their contexts. For better or worse, we believe that the passage of time brings perspective. Normally, state and national programs echo this belief by requiring thirty to fifty years to pass after an event before a marker that commemorates it can
be erected. While exhibitions are different than markers and monuments, their effect on people and their attitudes is no less profound. In the case of 9-11, most visitors to the traveling exhibitions are likely not to have visited any of the crash sites. The exhibitions and books therefore serve as traveling memorials. Instead of a static plaque or statue, they are constantly transformed as they move through space and time. Ironically enough, they become less and less public—from gallery wall to museum archive; from bookstore to library shelf. RIGHT Seen here in a display from the PRC show.

Modeled after democratic projects such as these, countless other institutions offered their galleries as collecting repositories for community responses. “Here is New York” moved from storefront to the institution that defined modernism and hosted the Family of Man—the Museum of Modern Art. From February 28 through May 21, 2002, MoMA presented 150 photographs from their historic collections, together with invited images from everyday New Yorkers and a digital display of “Here is New York.” As chief curator Peter Galassi stated in the press release, “To make a photograph is to point out something that matters. . . . The exhibition is an experiment. . . . We hope it will teach us how people feel about the city. Perhaps it will also teach us something about photography.”

RIGHT A more recent exhibition, Picturing What Matters: An Offering of Photographs is currently on view at the George Eastman House through January 20, 2003. Like, MoMA’s exhibition, the Eastman House’s show is trifold: Thousands of images by community members are shown alongside 125 works selected by the museum staff and images from international news agencies. Intriguingly, the second portion includes “Joe Rosenthal’s historic flag raising at Iwo Jima, Ben Fernandez’s portrait of Martin Luther King outside the United Nations, and Dorthea Lange’s poignant Migrant Mother” and will travel worldwide. Seen in the Norman Rockwell-esque exhibition announcement, images are presented as antidote, further ingraining already iconic images into our minds.

LEFT Another exhibition had a similar morale-boosting aspiration. Life magazine photographer Joe McNally captured almost 300 portraits in the weeks afterward 9-11, 85 of which are currently finishing a national tour. The nine-foot by four-foot Polaroid images depict the “Faces of Ground Zero.” The vernacular entered into these portraits in the form of the accoutrements the sitters were encouraged to bring: a jackhammer, a flashlight, an oxygen tank. In typical Time-Life fashion, this exhibition catalogue was only one of the many keepsake books published. LEFT RIGHT The others included A Year in Pictures, One Nation seen here, and most recently, The America Spirit: Meeting the Challenge of September 11. Curiously, echoing the grid motif seemingly connected to 9-11 iconography and exhibition display, both of the latter books featured photo mosaics.

A few days after the attacks, photographer Joel Meyerowitz contacted the Museum of the City of New York about documenting the World Trade Center and its destruction for the purpose of creating an archive. LEFT Ultimately numbering over 5,000 images, it will become a part of the museum’s permanent collection. For Meyerowitz, documenting the tragedy and recovery was linked directly to memory. He stated, “To me, no photographs meant no history.” The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US State Department later asked the museum and Meyerowitz to create a special exhibition from the ever-growing archive. The show of 28 images is traveling extensively all over the world through 2003. Among the almost 100 venues cited, the settings include Jakarta, New Delhi, Islamabad, Jalalabad, and Kabul.

As stated on the website, 911exhibit.com, the aim is to “visually relate” the events to the public and “to provide over overseas US diplomatic missions with a dramatic exhibit that reminds foreign audiences of the extraordinary extent of the World Trade Center attacks, documents the recovery efforts and portrays the threat terrorism poses to any metropolitan area, a threat that must be combated at all costs.” Thus, the only photographer who was granted unprecedented
access to ground zero has not only built a powerful memory bank but one that will speak for and about American politics as its travels all over the world. This seems to be the illustration of what Young has observed regarding the promulgation of the illusion of shared memory, “if part of the state’s aim...is to create a sense of shared values and ideals, then it will also be the state’s aim to create the sense of common memory, as foundation for unified polis.”

The work of folklorist, ethnologist, and photographer, Martha Cooper brings us full circle. Cooper was featured in both LEFT 6 Months, A Memorial in Boston and in a fascinating exhibition on the same occasion, RIGHT Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning March 12-July 7, 2002 at the New-York Historical Society. LEFT Shown in stark contrast to the Magnum September 11 show which once occupied the same gallery, Missing showed real and recreated memorials in a museum context—the public becoming artists unaware—and was a collaboration with Citylore, a center for urban folk culture. LEFT RIGHT Merging high and low, the gallery space allowed memorials from disparate places and times to come together. This show fell under a larger, curiously-named rubric at the historical society—History Responds.

As stated on their website, History Responds included a collecting effort: “Residents in the area have donated charred papers, shards of glass, a violently contorted Venetian blind (found in a tree), and even vials and dust and debris gathered instinctively in the aftermath.” LEFT Echoing this, the Museum of the City of New York intends to lend out sections of the preserved Bellevue Hospital Wall of Prayer, while Fire Engine 6, the first to answer the call at the WTC, is on exhibit at the New York State Museum. The strange lists of objects reads like an inventory of a deceased person or the ephemera of a morbid museum. RIGHT Akin to issues raised by a series by Joel Sternfeld seen on the right, is this the detritus of mourning, a bizarre national fetish, or the stuff of material culture?

Even one year later, responses to these tragic events in the Boston area are still slowly emerging. As a non-native Bostonian, I was struck by the city’s unique way of healing as well as how it collectively dealt with its role in the tragic events. RIGHT On the right you see one of the sentiments written on the PRC’s comment wall. Recent exhibitions in the Boston area include Marcus Halevi’s year-long documentation of 9-11 memorials in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, a group show, Paradox: artists respond at the Somerville Museum, and Vermont photographer, Kevin Burbiski’s images of 9-11 spectators, Looking at Ground Zero, at the Decordova Museum. A native of the Boston suburb Dorchester, photographer Eugene Richards traveled to Boston to speak the week of September 11th, 2002 on the occasion of his elegiac exhibition and book, Stepping through the Ashes.

LEFT Seen here on the cover of Somerville, Massachusetts–based Doubetake Magazine’s special edition, Burbiski allows us to bear witness to the formation of memories. As stated on the Decordova’s exhibition card, Burbiski “chose to document people’s emotional reactions to Ground Zero rather than the site itself.” LEFT RIGHT These moments of realization show people grasping the situation in an intensely personal way. We imagine a multiplicity of individual memories, not a sanctified remembrance of the state. It is fitting here that at this juncture that we now choose, or museums have chosen for us, to observe and absorb people’s reactions.

In his book, Lies Across America: What Our Historical Sites Get Wrong, James Loewen reminds us of the importance of realizing by and for whom as well as when a monument or memorial is constructed. What makes a successful memorial is not the passage of time—but its ability to encapsulate historical perspective. Each tribute is a tale of many eras: the person or moment being historized and the time in which the memorial was erected. New York Times writer Michael Kimmelman affirms this: “You will notice the speed with which the Oklahoma City memorial...was undertaken. It wasn’t until 1922 that the United States got around to building a memorial to Lincoln, and even then it was controversial.”
Loewen offers a useful distinction that can be used to help us conceive of the immediate and widespread memorializing that was and still is occurring after September 11. According to societies in Eastern and Central Africa, the deceased are divided into two categories: the Sasha and the Zamani: “The recently departed whose time overlapped with people still here are the Sasha, the living dead. They are not wholly dead, for they live on in the memories of the living…when the last person knowing an ancestor dies, that ancestor leaves the Sasha for the Zamani, the dead. As generalized ancestors, the Zamani are not forgotten but revered.” The New York Times echoed this observation: “In 38 years, if present trends continue, half the population will have been born after Sept. 11, 2001, says Prof. Andrew A. Beveridge of Queens College, using Census Bureau projections.”

Most tombstones, Loewen cited, are products of the Sasha. Under this definition the September 11 make-shift memorials, art, and even this exhibition are Sasha-inspired as well. Those memorials erected within weeks of someone passing, Loewen explains, “[are] sometimes the most accurate….often located in quiet cemeteries or quiet parks. Sasha monuments and markers often simply remember an event and those who died in it, often listing them (and sometimes the living) by name.”

For, coming from the Sasha, these exhibitions, like this paper, are merely products of their time. However, it is important to collect and consider them now, for the Zamani. What future 9-11 exhibitions will be like, we can only guess. In the end, perhaps the “official” responses are no grander than the assemblages of melted candles and crumpled photographs.
PHOTOGRAPHY THROUGH DOCUMENTATION AND INTENTION

Anna Heineman
Iowa City, IA

Through time, art has literally been written in stone. Whether it be the early Egyptians preserving Pharaohs on the Palate of Narmer or the glory days of the Romans captured in carvings, we can gain insight into their culture and lives through the documentation they left us. Both early and contemporary critics have claimed that photography is purely a mechanical process that documents objects but leaves no room for artistic interpretation. My argument is that the artist can use photography as a powerful tool to document time by capturing the essence of the subject, for the artist presents an image of the subject that will become a permanent memory for the viewer.

The artistic intent of the photographer is vital to the outcome of the photo. Photographers, defined here, are of a different caliber than the parent who takes pictures of a child blowing out candles on a birthday cake. The exhaling cheeks captured mid-blow is a great picture for the family photo album. To clarify, in order for a photograph to embody an essence, it must speak to a broad audience of all ages and cultures, being powerful enough to print the image on the viewer’s mind.

All art can capture a moment, though photography does it literally with the instantaneous snap of a shutter. One only needs words to recall the famous images of a screaming Vietnamese child running from the burning napalm, or the unforgettable pose of Marilyn Monroe with her skirt billowing up around her. Although words have the power to express the horror of world chaos or the voluptuous Monroe, descriptions are incomparable to the vivid black and white photographs depicting the essence of both. Photography is a documentation of the times. This photographic documentation that has only recently made a fingerprint in the entire history of art has changed the way we view life.

The intent of the photographer is similar to that of the painter when documenting individuals, for both artists aspire to capture the essence of the person. The painter has the power to manipulate the subject to produce his or her intent. Painters and photographers sculpt their subject with light and shadow. The difference being that painters can easily manipulate their subject whereas photographers must work with what literally lies in front of the lens. A portrait painter, such as Paul Gauguin, can choose to soften the edges and capture the look in the eye to heighten the inner being of the person. A talented painter can easily sweep the blemish off the cheek with the stroke of a brush. Rosiness to the cheeks can be added and the squareness of the shoulders can be more easily defined. A photographer, such as Imogene Cunningham however, has the raw facts staring her in the face, with light and shadows being her paintbrush. The photographer must manipulate the external factors, namely sunlight, darkness, or a lone spotlight, to capture the same softened edges or glimmering eye that portrays the individual’s essence.

Capturing the epitome of an individual is challenging, especially when the person’s profession is acting. The essence that defines an actor by nature is depicted most often on moving film. Capturing a still frame portrait that displays personality can be challenging when body language and movement define an actor. Clarence Sinclair Bull, George Hurrell, Joseph von Sternberg, and Ruth Harriet Louise are only four of a group known as the great Hollywood portrait photographers. These Hollywood portrait photographers of the 1930s had the talent to idealize their subjects. They captured the essence of the stars during their era by epitomizing their essence, and glorifying their individuality that made them actors. These portrait photographers
not only captured Greta Garbo, Carole Lombard, Marlene Dietrich, and Clark Gable on film, they created the stars as the world knows them. By shadows, light, and composition, they could make the actors look sad, sullen, or seductive. These portrait photographers did not merely capture the image of the actor; they created the image of a star. The image of Greta, here, has an almost angelic presence. Clarence Sinclair Bull used her hands to frame her face, with everything being drawn to the perfect right eye. The illumination of her face and hands creates the essence of a movie star rather than the presence of the girl-next-door. The hands and face of an actor are used in provoking emotion from an audience. The clenched fist of anger or the worried lines of a forehead are an actor’s instruments. He chose her two features, the hands and face, which are Greta’s tools in her field. The photographer intentionally takes her tools and moulds her to how he desires. He centers on her face and hands, creating an idealized beauty. Photography has the power to immortalize the stars, allowing them to remain forever young and beautiful.

Photographing the effects of war, however, can make the viewer wince and shudder. Capturing the essence of the moment can transport a viewer to the scene, exposing all harsh details and rough exteriors. Robert Capa, a World War II photographer, shot this tragic scene on D-day. The blurry movement of the picture compounds the palpable fear and determination of the soldier. This shot shows a man’s brave effort to swim to shore. The moment captured in time epitomizes the determination of a soldier. The viewer, decades after the incident, either remembers a part of our country’s tragic past, or becomes a part of what previously had been.

With patriotism in mind, the photographer can intentionally inspire the viewer. “Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima” is an epic moment that captured the passion of our country. Five faceless men hoist the flag into position as Joe Rosenthal, the photographer, captured the scene. Although fifty-six years separate the soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima and firemen raising the flag after September 11th, the same nationalism is still embodied in these two photographs. Both works of art make the observer remember the moment as well as those lives that were lost, by giving them a glimpse of the scene. In both these instances, a brief moment in time was captured, and will remain permanent.

Photographers can use the essence of a subject for evidence of the horror that is witnessed. Margaret Bourke-White photographed the Holocaust, blatantly showing the harsh reality of life behind barbed wire. The powerful title she chooses, “The Living Dead of Buchenwald” has the power to stir up the uneasiness in one’s stomach. She personifies individuals, making each one human by showing every pair of eyes behind bars. The black and white contrast adds to the solemn feeling, depicting the dismal truth of the concentration camp. This powerful photograph is terrifying evidence of our world’s history. Bourke-White’s work of art reminds us of the dismay that should never happen again.

Photography was the weapon Lewis W. Hine used for evidence to protect children. Hine, himself, was a victim of child labor. His childhood scars inspired him to free children from horrific working conditions. Hine’s photographs showed young children, barefoot and dirty, working from the wee hours of the morning into the late hours of the night. Hine photographed these exploited children, and the evidence was used as documentation to end the child labor practices. His photographs succeed as both evidence and art, changing the laws to help better society as well as giving us poignant pictures of diligent children taken with an artful eye.

Photography as documentation is widely accepted, though photography as art is a common topic of debate. Although Alfred Steiglitz defined photography as art long ago, the issue remains scrutinized even today. Roger Scruton, a philosopher who published “Photography and
“Representation” in the late 1990s, accuses photography of being a surrogate of an object. A surrogate, as he defines it, is the capturing of an object or person on film that is exactly the same in reality.² To simplify his theory, if one takes a picture of a toadstool per se; it is the surrogate of the toadstool that is displayed on film. Since the surrogate has no expression behind it, neither the photograph nor the object represented has artistic value. In paintings, the observer may look for the creator’s motivations in the properties of the works of art. If the photograph is a surrogate, Scruton believes the aesthetic interest is diminished to appreciating only the object represented.³

I dispute this by pointing out the influence photography has had on other mediums. Degas’s painting of The Place de la Concorde imitates a photograph in his depiction of the candid pose of the pedestrians. The subjects are captured in a photograph-like manner. The spatial arrangements of the off-center Parisians have a snapshot appearance. They are depicted as walking off the canvas with their minds cluttered with thoughts. With this idea, Degas’ painting may be looked at as a surrogate as well, capturing people and objects on canvas that mimics the actual scene. Perhaps Degas captured the surrogate by painting this particular still framed moment he witnessed without manipulating the scene. Alfred Stieglitz’s The Street captures similar candidness along the snowy urban streets. The off-center tree leads the eye down to the horse and carriage. The carriage, with only the front wheel apparent to the viewer, has not yet come into the picture. The horse-drawn vehicles disappearing into the blustery weather was created by Steiglitz for purely aesthetic purposes. He shot this scene to record the feeling of the place and the busy feel of the street corner mid winter. Degas’ painting embodies similar informality of the Parisians walking in and off the scene. The still-framed shot of Degas’ The Place de la Concorde and Stieglitz’s The Street intentionally incorporated the candid feel of the place exemplified as art.

Although images of horse-drawn buggies and moon lit skies are created though a series of chemical reactions, the artistic intent can still be included to make the work art. However, individuals, both contemporary and past, have favored photography to be as science as opposed to an art. The technical processes of a camera are simple enough for a child to press a button with a picture immediately being taken on film. This stigma of the simplicity of photography still looms. However, compare the technical processes of a photographer to that of a sculptor or a painter. All use outside mechanisms to create their finished product. Ansel Adam’s camera, Michelangelo’s chisel and Picasso’s brush are all tools used to aid in the making of art. Think of Rembrandt’s wood cut prints and Whistler’s etchings. Surely these are more than mechanical processes that lack artistic intent. Photographers, printers, sculptors, and painters alike strive for the concrete essence of their intention. Though a painting is different from a photograph that is in turn unlike sculpture, all have an artist or a collaborative group to strive for the vision each individual intends.

Intention in photography has changed dramatically through time, from capturing a seated family dressed in their Sunday best to the compound eye of a fruit fly. The beginnings of the Brownie camera led to posed and literal “still-lifes” of objects with people stopped in motion. We have now progressed into the evocative, to produce photographs that invoke the mind. Photographers now strive to capture the fleeting moment that those before us never thought possible. Science is caught on film, such as the uniting of the sperm and egg. Life being created is visible to the world through the aide of a camera and film. The essence of life is created before our eyes and is trapped in history for the viewer to wonder in amazement. Photography can epitomize the brief fleeting seconds that happen so quickly one forgets to take notice. Through the photographic documentation of these moments, the world will learn, become informed, persuaded, and convinced.
A photographic image can be fused into an individual’s memory as quickly and irrevocably as it is captured on film at the click of a shutter. The power of a photograph can evoke feeling, emotion, and desire in a viewer. Photographs can transport the viewer to the heat of the Sahara desert to the depths of the blue sea. They show the poverty stricken, as well as the innocence of a child and the gaze of two people in love. Photographs can take a viewer back in time, to get a glimpse of society before we knew it, or to show minute life that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Photography is an art form that documents existence. These photographs lead you by the hand, showing the beauty of life. All you have to do is open your eyes.

NOTES

3. Ibid.