

THE QUEST FOR APPROPRIATE REPRESENTATION

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SINCE its emergence in the late 1830s, photography has come to occupy a central place in the network of recording instruments of contemporary society. While direct access to this medium has largely been restricted to the middle classes, it can be taken for granted that virtually all human beings are familiar with the photographic medium.

What, for example, in the field of representation could be more common today than to take a snapshot of a friend or family member, a landscape or an urban scene? The camera, according to popular wisdom, has reduced the difficulties of realistic representation to the act of selecting a subject, reading the light and clicking the shutter. The rest can be left to chance and the science of the photochemical process.

But how often has the need to have a photograph of oneself taken not unexpectedly complicated matters? Suddenly questions such as what would be the most ideal portrayal of oneself come up in relation to aspects of the self one would prefer not to reveal.

Even the most casual photographer is familiar with disgruntled subjects who refuse to accept images made of them. This tension between the desires of the subject and how they wish to be represented constitutes the fraught relationship between the photographer and his or her subject.

This relationship is compounded by the authority popularly accorded to photography. Unlike other visual images, photographs, as Susan Sontag has



AWB AND VOLKSWAG COMMEMORATION OF THE GREAT TREK, 1989. GIDEON MENDEL (ORIGINAL IN COLOUR)

pointed out, are, because of their relationship to the real, often taken for reality. If we add to this the vexing question of aesthetics and what constitutes a "good" or "authentic" and a "bad" or "false" photograph, the issues at stake are extensive.

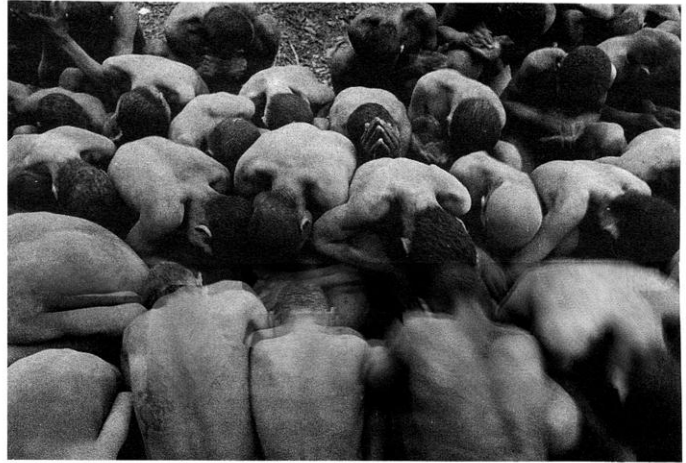
Photographers, writers and artists involved in representational aesthetics continuously have to deal with these problems. Generally, these problems are dealt with in actual work. Occasionally these practices are questioned in public. Locally, where every conceivable form of social division has been deployed in the service of an objectionable ideology, it is surprising that the question of representation has received such scant critical attention.

While the best South African photographers have individually and collectively crossed the barriers erected by apartheid in an effort to explore the problems involved in photographic representation, the public and even some critics seem to have inclined towards viewing social life in terms of the insider/outsider frame of reference nurtured by the ideology of cultural exclusivity. This was compounded by the traditional recourse to stereotypes which, until recently, permeated group perceptions locally. This bedevilled almost all forms of representational art.

For radical photographers and artists the only constructive way out of this quagmire was to adopt an oppositional perspective. This approach sought to galvanize perceptions in support of the oppressed. Many writers, artists and photographers, as David Goldblatt observes, "wielded their instruments like guns" against the prevailing order.

While this approach had its pitfalls, it produced a solid photographic tradition to which both black and white radical photographers, who identified with the victims of oppression, contributed. This tradition, according to Omar Badsha, happened in documentary photography "despite the arguments in certain quarters that whites, as outsiders, were ill-equipped to portray the real issues in, and capture the finer nuances of oppressed communities".

This new tradition, of course, was a continuation of the pioneering work by photographers like Ernest Cole, Bob Gosane, Eli Weinberg, and others in the



NORTH SOTHO INITIATION. STEVE HILTON-BARBER

1950s and 1960s. The new movement which emerged in the 1970s focused on the consequences of forced removals and the effect of apartheid on the lives of South Africans. It produced a powerful body of work intent on exposing the dehumanizing effects of oppression and recording the various forms of human resistance to injustice.

Accordingly, the "innocent" were identified and the "guilty" condemned. In such a polarized context this, Badsha advances, "literally meant lining up photographic subjects on the opposite sides of a line in terms of black and white". White photographers from middle class backgrounds who were sensitive to the problems and needs of black rural and urban communities participated in this. For Badsha, this demonstrates that factors such as race, class or gender do not disqualify photographers from successfully portraying communities other than their own.

Badsha's view is shared by photographers such as Peter Magubane, David Goldblatt, Lesley Lawson, Guy Tillim, Paul Weinberg, Herbert Mabusu and others I spoke to. Many mentioned that in literature and painting, the ability to depict worlds beyond the community of the writer or artist is often marshalled as an indication of the practitioner's talent.

Most photographers agreed that approaching a subject as an outsider requires knowledge, sensitivity, compassion, respect and the need to win the trust of subjects. The Cape Town-based photographer, Guy Tillim, who has produced some of the most outstanding pictures of communities in the Transkei, remarks that "communities have every right to be suspicious of intruders' intent on appropriating their experiences for personal gain or some undisclosed motive".

Peter Magubane, renowned for his photographs taken in Soweto and other communities since the 1960s is, like David Goldblatt, a link between the photographers of the 1950s and the 1970s generation. He categorically dismisses suggestions that the race of a photographer is an inherent impediment to the successful portrayal of any subject. "Irrespective of colour, the good photographer will succeed and the bad one will fail. It's like with any other artist who represents what he sees, to the best of his ability," he says unequivocally.

Herbert Mabusu, who works as a news photographer for *The Star* agrees that there is no inherent reason which prevents photographers from successfully representing subjects alien to their personal background. He does wryly point out that black and white communities in South Africa are not equally accessible to all photographers: "While whites were prevented from entering black communities without official permission in the past, black communities are currently far more open to white photographers from South Africa and abroad than white communities are for black photographers." The inaccessibility of conservative white communities are examples. "Black photographers cannot photograph AWB or Conservative Party gatherings without great risks," he points out. Particularly worrying to him is how foreign photographers without any understanding of local communities go about their business.

Paul Weinberg, like Mabusu, is critical of the international media and their ►

portrayal of South African society. Although he is sceptical of "the claim that only insiders and the oppressed can translate, depict or narrate the experiences of their community," he also points out the following: "It is important to keep in mind that people living in a particular society are often much more sensitized to the issues affecting them than outsiders. Some visiting photographers, for instance, arrive in South Africa looking for big names and media personalities. In the process they completely miss the complexities of the situation." To substantiate this, Weinberg refers to David Turnley's book *Why Are They Weeping?* and contrasts it with *Beyond the Barricades*. Both these books cover the events which took place in South Africa during the repressive period of the last State of Emergency.

The relative merits of the insider versus the outsider controversy in photographic representation is succinctly summarized by Goldblatt. "The history of photography," he mentions, is replete with highly successful work done by outsiders and so is there memorable work which could not have been done by insiders." This has not defused the issue, nor has it dispensed with what Goldblatt refers to as a "ceaseless challenge to produce all the layers of meaning and nuances of a reality fraught with complexities".

Recent photographic portrayals of sectors of South African society in terms other than the stereographic images of black people as victims and whites as oppressors, exploded in public controversies. Some examples are the snapshots by Kim Gray of black prostitutes exhibited at the Market Gallery in 1987. These pictures were rejected by the subjects and the public as images that suggested that all prostitutes are black and that all black women are prostitutes.

Two years later, in 1989, this outcry was followed by Gideon Mendel's colour pictures of the Groot Trek commemoration festivities. The pictures were admired by the subjects but denounced by many blacks as glorifications of right wing Afrikaner Nationalism. Some critics dismissed the photographs as grotesque caricatures of the subjects while others applauded the work for what they saw as its subtle visual irony and symbolism.

Last year, Steve Hilton-Barber's photos of a Northern Sotho initiation ceremony, were greeted with ferocious condemnation by the blacks and a cross section of whites including professional anthropologists and some photographic critics. He was charged with violating a sacred, private ritual and exploiting it for personal gain. The photographs were also met with intense opposition in Germany where they were exhibited this year.

Prior to these incidents, Goldblatt's book, *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, published in 1975, in which he represented some marginalized Afrikaner communities, was also met with resistance. Although, according to Goldblatt, it was never spelt out, it was suggested that he, as an outsider, had no right to depict Afrikaners. He recalls that Tertius Myburgh, the deceased editor of *The Sunday Times*, forbade his review editor from reviewing the book. Goldblatt subsequently realized that some Afrikaners, like some Jews, resented being reminded of their impoverished past. "Today the book is a collector's item sought after by many Afrikaners," he concludes.

If anything, these incidents have pushed the problems inherent to visual representation to the fore within the local photographic community.

Lesley Lawson, who has worked on a wide range of photographic subjects, ranging from black women in the workplace to the relationship between communities and the environment, points out that the problem of representation is so central to photography, that it is difficult to understand how it could have been left hovering in the background for so long by local photographers. She argues that while matters such as race, class and gender play a role in the problems a photographer faces, the problem of representation is not simplified by a subject which coincides with the photographer's race, gender or social position. "Whenever one raises a camera with the intention of portraying someone, including yourself, a series of problems and challenges confronts you," she observes.

These problems, Lawson mentions, include the attitude of the photographer towards her or his subject, the style and form of the representation, as well as the range of meanings which the photographer wishes to include in the image. This, and the irreverent tendency of the photographic medium which leads to the inclusion of unselected, random detail, makes it almost impossible to guarantee success before hand.

Lawson confronted this challenge by making an effort to strike a balance between formal difficulties and what she calls "surface rules". These involve refraining from photographing the subjects in private moments without permission and ensuring that a relationship of trust is developed between her and her subjects under other circumstance. In the case of street or public photography, Lawson's basic rule is to respect the wishes of anyone who objects to being photographed. "The morality for me," she reflects, "is to be open and visible while keeping in mind that the political and cultural context

can contradict my personal morality."

Badsha stresses that while South Africa with its history of segregation and conflict, presents its own problems to the photographer, the ethical problems concerned with photographic representation are not unique to South Africa. It is an international problem which affects photographers who wish to represent any community or human subject, including subjects which ostensibly are part of the photographer's personal history.

For Badsha photography always involves expressing the vision of the photographer in relation to the interest and needs of the subjects. The photographer has to negotiate the degree of control which both parties will have over the process. While this does not necessarily ensure success, it could establish that both the photographer and the subject retain the right to evaluate and criticise without the right to censor. He observes: "In photography, like any other discourse, there will be areas of agreement and disagreement. This dialectical relationship should be what informs the photographer".

Along with these ethical problems photographers also have to deal with the formal problems involved in making images in a genre which is a synthesis of visual art and documentary recording. More often than not photographs have to function in terms of the power and coherence of the single image as well as the scope and depth of visual narrative. Simultaneously, the photographic image has to strive to communicate to large audiences the complexities of reality and the interconnections between objects. It has to marry the subjective vision of the photographer with objective reality. In the words of Goldblatt it often involves "making something coherent and meaningful out of a fuck-all situation based on a critical decision at a given moment in time and space."

To illustrate this he refers to a recent picture lying in front of him as he speaks to me over the telephone. "I am looking at a photograph of a man building a house in Kerton-on-Sea. It is a small, match-box type house. The mast of a security light is visible. In the foreground the man is tipping a wheelbarrow of cement with his back turned to the viewer." Goldblatt pauses to reflect on this description



WEDDING ON FARM NEAR BARKLEY EAST. DAVID GOLDBLATT

before proceeding. "For me all the elements are right. The man building his house with body language indicating pride. The context is really Soweto by the sea with the shadow of the security mast falling across the picture." It took him quite a while and several exposures to arrive at a satisfactory treatment of the reality before him.

For Tillim, the medium in which he works is: "a matter of capturing a moment in time in black and white as well as in intermediary tones. Sometimes in colour. Regardless of the subject matter, which can often be unpleasant, the beauty of a photograph can lead the viewer deeper into the picture and the subject matter". To achieve this, he stresses, is never a simple and straight forward matter of composing and framing a picture. It depends on the haphazard coincidence of capturing a gesture, a mood, or a tone in the search for aesthetic balance.

Weinberg too, reflects that photographic success for him revolves around moments. "Like when a man looks up to see where his roof was leaking. Capturing his expression in that relative moment of time and space and crafting it into an image which connects with the subject matter is what documentary photography for me is all about."

In the context of a rapidly changing society South African photographers are already focusing in on new issues and themes in which the personal and the intimate are blended with social perspectives. But in the quest for appropriate representation the problems related to their medium will not become any easier.