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ERNEST COLE: PHOTOJOURNALIST.

Interview with Rune Hassner, member of Governing Board of the Hasselblad Foundation, and of a renowned group of Swedish photographers, known as the Tio (ten) Fotograferna. Twenty years ago Rune Hassner introduced Ernest Cole to the Swedish public. The occasion was jubilee exhibition of Swedish photography. The pride of place, however, went to the young African's documentation of life under apartheid. In November the photographs shown then will go up again in a commemoration of the Pretorian's work at a photographic fair to be held in Göteborg, the home of the world famous Hassel-blad cameras.

In 1967, barely 27 years old, but with his life's work preceding him as smuggled goods abroad, Ernest Cole exiled himself from South Africa. The goods in question were black and white photographic negatives. On arrival in New York he used some of them for a book entitled "House of Bondage", a most comprehensive, most eloquent account of what it meant to be black in South Africa: a mother holding up the distended body of her undernourished infant in a land known for its plenty; the hand of a pass offender cuffed in arrest to another hand; muggings, carried out in broad day-light on city streets by youths deprived of the stability only family life can provide; the forlorn eyes of young boys peering through the window bars of a police van; mineworkers languishing in their womenless "hostels"... Like a latterday Moses, he seemed to have witnessed, mutely, all manner of injury done to his people. The haunting images would put to shame anyone wishing to speak up in defence of apartheid. But Ernest Cole had an eye for more than suffering. With fascinating insight he captured the varied ways in which his countrymen seek to fill their lives with meaning. There is much humour in his observations about the "consolation of religion" and the "African middle class", while his shots from the overcrowded black schools - an utterly exhausted teacher come to mind and a school-boy, sweat streaming from his concentrated face - bespeak a time when the "culture of learning" still held

promise. The "House of Bondage" earned coveted book awards. Life Magazine devoted a feature article on its author, proof, if any was needed of the admiration of old professionals for so accomplished a young practitioner of their demanding art. The Ford Foundation encouraged him to take his cameras and sharp eyes to the Southern States.

When his life ebbed out in a New York hospital in 1991 few of his countrymen could have known his name or what it had cost him to brave the world in their behalf. He was no doubt inspired by the widely held idea that in an age of mass communications, the pictorial image carries more punch than the written word. However, away from the Rand, he was as obviously out of place as a fish on the Kalahari's sands. I happened to meet Ernest as we were crossing an Oslo street from opposite sides one afternoon in late 1970. Are you South African I asked, and when he said yes invited him home - exile was that lonely and loneliness that compelling. "My pictures have to be conversational", I recall him explaining his work to me, "they have to have something to say". He seemed to have few other interests or personal attachments. The persons about whom he spoke with some warmth were his mentor in South Africa, Struan Robertson, and a friend in Stockholm, Rune Hassner. I visited him in Stockholm and in New York - where he lived in a spacious, but barren studio. Some years later I learned that drug abuse had sent him aground in New York. This was something I had feared. He had been smoking dagga in the firm belief that he could kick the habit at any time he chose. Upon failing to find him during a second visit to New York I called the Tio Fotograferna's office in Stockholm. There I was told that he had left them with a suitcase full of his goods that they didn't know what to do with. I assumed that it contained his negatives and that he had had the presence of mind to leave his priceless work with people who would know its worth. I recently discovered that while being correct as to the latter assumption - the Swedes had taken care of his things - I had been mistaken as to the former. No one seems to know the whereabouts of his negatives, the unique photographic

record of life during some of the darkest years under apartheid.

Ernest Cole left South Africa with a passport good for a fortnight. It had been obtained under the pretext of a pilgrims' flight to the French city of Lourde's - where the Virgin Mary is said to appear to perform miracles of healing. On the expiry of the passport his status became that of a political refugee. In Stockholm a group of photographers known as Tio fotograferna - the ten - welcomed him with open arms placing their laboratories at his disposal. What is more, at a jubilee exhibition of Swedish photography, they put his photographs at the centre of focus. To understand the measure of the honour thus accorded to the barely thirty years old, slightly built black refugee from Pretoria, it has to be mentioned that the photographers whose pictures flanked his were household names in Sweden while more than one were world famous. Rune Hassner, the man in charge, was himself well acquainted with South Africa; he had made his way there through the deserts and the forests of the continent to supply the photographs for a most entertaining travelogue written in collaboration with a penned colleague. Along with writers such as Herbert Tingsten, Pär Westberg, Sarah Lidman, and others well-known to the South African censors of the fifties and sixties, Hassner could be said to have stimulated an abiding and critical interest in South Africa among Swedes. Of all Ernest Cole's acquaintances I happened to know about, he seemed the one best placed to give a Northern evaluation of his work. I travelled to Gøteborg to interview Mr Hassner, for the Weekly Mail.

\*\* (HB): EC had a very high regard of you. He mentioned you all the time. I've always wanted to ask how you met him. What were the circumstances?

\* \* \* (RH): He, I must really try to recall. I know that a lawyer, a friend of ours was in contact with someone at the Tio fotografernas group concerning a refugee passport for

Ernest. If it was in that way or it was that he wrote us first - I cannot remember. But anyhow we became very good friends, he worked in our lab where I was in charge. That was in 1970. I was also in charge of an exhibition in connection with a jubilee of the Swedish Photographers Association. We reserved a large room for his pictures - it was the first presentation of his work (in Sweden). I also worked at that time with a film on photography, altogether 11 films. I introduced E and we included several of his photographs there. That was after he'd been in the States from where he also brought his book "House of Bondage". He stayed with us for a while before returning to the States. On his subsequent return here he left for short visits to Oslo, and to England, I think. Back here he stayed with a friend of ours living outside Stockholm. On his departure he left behind two small bags with his belongings. We never saw him again. They told me that his negatives were lost. I don't know if somebody had mentioned that they had found his negatives...

\*\* No, I think I might have suggested it to you on the phone the other day. On returning from New York in late 1978 I called the Tio photographers to ask about E's whereabouts. The person to whom I spoke mentioned a suitcase they had of him. I was hoping that that would be his negatives.

\* \* \* No, it was merely a lot of junk, you know, some film reels, magazines, sheets torn from magazines... There were a few negatives - probably from the States - none that was very good but nothing from South Africa. We only had the set of prints he had made for the Stockholm exhibition. They are all that remained where we keep material stored, but no negatives, and I just wondered.

\*\* Your comments about his American negatives do not surprise me. On my first visit to him in New York I asked what he had done in the South. His answers were evasive so I was wondering if he had managed to do anything worth while. But, you mentioned the Stockholm exhibition. You had shown E the honour

of reserving a hall for his pictures only whereas your colleagues had to share walls. I have always wanted to ask why he seems to have made such an impression on you, why he was presented so prominently to the Swedish photographic public.

\* \* \* Well, simply because he was a very good, a very fine photographer. And I think we did it for the same reason why they had published his book in the States. In my view he had helped to give a, howshallwesay, not a newsreporterlike but a photojournalistic aspect to the background of how it is to live in the South Africa of apartheid. And since he did it in a rather soft way, nothing propagandistic about it, but in a very deep, a very heart-felt way I think that is what made people want to see and to understand (his pictures). At least that was how he intended it to be, as he says in my film for the TV series; he said that he wanted to create documents that could perhaps one day be seen by the coming generation who would have questions about life under apartheid. Of course some of his pictures are very strong but even so they don't show the actual shooting and killing of people like you can see in some of the newspapers. That is why I think he is prominent among photographers: the quality of his images - their content - must be counted as very important work in African photography. However, as you know, there are not so many photographers there who have had the chance to work and to work freely and to get their books published.

Cole was a very disappointed man. He tried to show his work for the people at the United Nations, you know: African ambassadors from other countries and so on. He said they seemed to be more keen on going to parties and seeing other people, his photographs seemed to make no impression on them at all. He was keen to have his photographs distributed - through Magnum, the agency in New York, the book, and also through Tio. He was hoping to make his work known and also to make his life under apartheid known. He hoped that his work would be of assistance in bringing about change. There was nothing presumptuous about this. He put it in a rather modest

way: he hoped it would be one of the keys that could open the door... Well, I think that those are not unimportant motivations.

\*\* In an article in the Swedish photo journal reviewing the Stockholm exhibition there was reference to the French photographer Cartier Bresson. Would you compare Cole to Cartier Bresson?

\* \* \* Yes, in a way. In a way, but I remember using a statement by EC to the effect that when he began to work he didn't know exactly in which direction his work should go until he saw a book by CB, the book on Moscow. Suddenly he saw: this is the way I have to work, this is the way I have to approach people, very quick shots, concentrated. So I would say that if you should compare Mr Cartier, he's more cool, more formal, whereas Cole is more warm and more politically interested in the subject. CB, well, he belonged to the anarchistic movement in France, once he was in the Resistance against the Germans but I wouldn't say that the weight of his work is on the political, or on the social side. He calls himself an anarchist but he comes from one of the richest families in France and he lives in the Rue de Mouilles in a fantastic flat. I mean this is a remnant of the leftist groups in art - Picasso called himself a communist, you know, but he lived in castles and places like that. But this is to move too far away from Cole now. I believe that he had a commitment in South Africa and when he came into exile, he was very keen to print his photographs and make them known. But when he started on the Ford Foundation and he began to work with other subjects in Europe it was not a battle that really was his own. Probably that's why he went under...

\*\* You're planning to exhibit his pictures at the photographic fair here in Gøteborg in November. What is the motive this time; what are the reasons for putting him up this time?

\* \* \* Well, this is a memorial to his work and we (the

Hasselblad Centre) were asked. I must mention that the Tio Photographers had made a deposit of the things that they had taken care of here at the Centre because they could not really have the facilities to keep them and do anything with them. Since I am also a member of Tio photographers we saw that we here had a chance to do something by way of organising exhibitions - which can be distributed. I think the fair is a very good occasion for that because if you think about it: an exhibition kept going here (at the Centre) might be seen by a maximum of 5-6000 people, but during a weekend at the photographic fair it could be 30,000. If you could also show this work at a larger photo festival in Houston - they are very interested in this - it may be seen by another 30,000 people - by as many people as those who bought his book.

I think EC's work now - with all the new developments in politics in South Africa - at this moment - I think in a political way his pictures are of great interest to a large public.

\*\* In South Africa...?

\* \* \* I mean all over the world because now people are observing what is happening in South Africa.

Hans Beukes.

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