

I think that the Documentary photographers in this country, we all come from different pockets and we all, although we ultimately aspire towards the same end, by virtue of the system that we live in, we come from different sectors. You can't compare....attitudes are really permeated in from a very early age. I mean you start taking photographs and you come from different angles and I think that it is easy to get lost in a passionate emotional rendering of photography. [I know for myself, very often when I point a camera, my motives are not correct in my own head. I haven't thought through what I am doing. My motives are not clear. It is really difficult to even talk about.]

White
conclusion
Bea

For so long I have heard people say, "Just go out and take pictures." And I actually don't think that one can do that anymore. I think that there are too many pictures that are going out that are not being thought through. And they are not good pictures and therefore not really saying anything. It's just another kid standing in a Kaya (sp?), or another tacky, tattered jersey. And I don't think the kind of influence that we are working with among each other, I don't think we are stretching each other, the photographers. I don't think we are pulling each other around. I am not sure who we are taking pictures for, and how we are taking them. But this is the whole tack that I have been on for a whole year now.

I think that there is not enough discernment happening. As a photographer you are just kind of caught up, "Oh, I must take this picture" and you come back and you look at your contacts and you see that is nowhere. It is actually nowhere. Now they might persuade somebody who doesn't know THAT, and they will go, "Oh Wow!" But in fact there are forty million pictures like that already. I don't think we are being discerning in the way we are going out to take pictures. And the people who really can guide and offer assistanceand don't....that seems to me also a phenomena.

I know for myself I have been saying for a long time that I am having problems with photography, and whoever I have spoken to who I respect, and I don't really respect that many photographers....because having taken those pictures, I actually know that there is a certain ease with going in a township and photographing....those classic pictures. ..they are not that hard to get. I mean I can recall pictures of Crossroads over a period of six or seven years now, and you almost can't even tell the photographer apart. You can't tell the years apart. Somehow, I think we have to go beyond that as a photographer. You have to sit down and say, "Wait a minute, 40,000 people have gone into Crossroads, what have they done photographically? Why am I going into Crossroads. What am I looking for." And probably I won't take any pictures because they are not there. The ones that are there, you've seen. You don't need to continue to taking those. I feel one has got to be more searching, come out of the classic documentary mode.

What would fascinate me is if the surface was being explored by the people who live in those areas. Because even that surface vision would be different by virtue of living there. So I am really not sure what the photographers are doing, and I certainly include me in that. And I find even more frightening is my own revelation that it is really difficult talking about this to other photographers because they literally dismiss it and just say, "Agh, just go and take pictures." But you actually can't take pictures unless.....in this frame of mind. I don't know if I am a good person to talk to.

When Omar asked me what I wanted to put in the Carnegie booklet, I said I wanted to put, "Bea Berman, photographer, female, White, South African." We had a marathon fight about this. I am not being difficult. I don't have any rights in any case.

Yes I did work at the theatre. And I started photography in 1980. I worked as a theatre photographer. I documented communities in Capetown. My work is not being used by any organizations anymore. Other people living in the areas start getting skills, and I thought it was more important for people in the communities to contribute to the community paper than a person living out of the area.

I was working mainly for "Grassroots" and for the UWO, the United Woman's Organization and NRD (?) started the UDF and photographed INAUDIBLE and like I said, up to about a year ago, I felt that the community people were trying to take pictures in the community. And that seemed to me to be more important, even though the quality might not be as good. I didn't think that was important. Better than outsiders coming in and snapping away at meetings. I've been trying to connect with all those academic people after the Carnegie thing, because I think for me that seemed to be a valid way to try and understand my own dilemma in photography. Because if I had more cerebral input to a situation, I would have a vision over and above the obvious, that with a greater knowledge it would alter my perception of viewing through a camera. So I've been trying to connect with those people, actually working with academics in the field, and just going in as the person who takes pictures.

I was born in Capetown 1949 and I've been here all my life. In 1980, I was working at the Stage, and the Stage was run by Brian Asbury who was a photographer, and inadvertently, I started working in the darkroom, but without any deliberate working system. I would be standing and chatting and I would stand and agitate. And Brian left for England 1979 and literally two weeks before he left he said, "I think you have got a good eye and I am leaving you all my equipment." And he walked out and flew to London. And I for six months sort of ignored it. I was very sore that he'd gone. I didn't take photographs at all. Then people phoned and asked for work that he had done which I started doing. And then I started taking pictures.

From 1980, from the start, I was taking documentary pictures. I belonged to a woman's group and I belonged to the woman's movement, and had my cameras. It was nothing deliberate. Other communities began to

hear that there was this person doing this. They would phone and say, "Were you at this meeting or were you out at Crossroads?" And I would say, "Actually I was." And they would say "Do you have some prints." And I would say "Sure." It was like that. So suddenly I am a photographer, taking pictures. It was as inadvertant as that.

I knew very early on that all was not so hot in the State of..... I was very aware. I had a very heated conversation with my parents, especially my father about it.

[And actually, never....I can remember quite clearly my first brush with the word, Apartheid. I could't quite grasp what it meant. It was the most strange abstraction that I remember being very confused that you could seperate people with a word. I was very young when that happened. I was about eight or nine. I couldn't grasp that, like people can't make one and one make two. I couldn't grasp the concept. I was young. I was a child. I think, like a lot of people, I certainly most probably do carry around a reasonable amount of guilt which I try and deal with, as a white South African. There is a tremendous feeling of helplessness, of not belonging, a most peculiar feeling of not belonging. I don't feel comfortable in my white environment at all. I feel that is imposed on me. And I don't feel comfortable, I don't feel comfortable ever in an environment that has only got whites in it. Because it feels totally wrong. It feels...and I feel forced into it. You sort of have no choice. If you want to catch a train between here and Johannesburg, you have to go into a compartment for white women. I think they have changed that now, but you are forced into a mold that was the most uncomfortable mold to be in.]

As soon as I started work, I worked at the State theatre, which was the first multi-racial theatre in South Africa. And it had no segregation at all. And that was the first place I worked. So as soon as I had control over my life, no more school and that sort of thing, I made that choice. And as much as I could, I tried to be involved.

My father was actually always strangely interesting. And I always would get him off the hook. Because he spent a lot of time in a concentration camp. And he had this wierd sort of feeling that he was very pleased that there was another group of people who were in the front line, no longer the Jews. It sounds really bizarre but he, I remember him once saying, this incredible fight we had, because he said, "Do you not realize that if it were not for the fact that there were black people here, it would be the Jews all over again?" A complete strange logic, and yet, he himself didn't have any, I mean he had friends right across the board. He had card friends, but it was a very strange comment, to hear him come out with, but I know he had a very very very bad time, and he was a very ill man all his life, very very ill, because of his experience, and I was quite gentle with him about it, because I felt he had a really hard four years.

But I think one is aware of all the pockets of anti-semitism, but because it is so much less than the broader issue, I've never myself come across it.

[Deep down, somewhere along the line, I sometimes look at things and

Political awareness as a child
White Guilt
Bee

Bee

Purpose of
Photos
Bee

think, " People must see this condition. This has got to be brought to the notice of THEM." Not sure of who them are, but somebody has got to bear witness with me to this, because nobody should be having to exist like this. And very often, what will happen then is that I am so staggered by what I see, that it pales in a frame, it pales, and that is because I don't think I am connected into the issue. It goes a full circle.

I remember once looking in on a most incredible situation, and not picking up the camera at all, and coming away and thinking, "Why didn't I take pictures? What has happened, what has...?" And in fact I suppose there is such a futility, that you feel that people have seen so many dire pictures, how can it not have had some marathon effect, that you look at it with a kind of despair. It is like it is sore. I don't even know how to explain it.

I think that I know that it is very important to photograph. I don't ever....I've never ever gone out to take pictures with any aim. I neverIt's like the Carnegie thing for me was remarkable because it got so big. Like you sit in George which is a long way away and I worked with people who had never really been out of the area. And it was all very innocent at the time. And then coming back and seeing this big talking, it just seemed so difficult to link with... Poverty is a very humble issue....not a humble issue, but I felt very privileged to be able to take those photographs. And nothing more can charge me than being there. At the time I was making those pictures, it didn't have any implications other than honoring a project on poverty. I mean it sound so banal, not banal, that's the wrong word. I don't know, it was like coming to the middle of the forest and thinking I have been given the privilege to be here. I don't know how to put it. I don't know how to explain that. It was very rich experience...in terms of the people mainly.... and I feel very sore that I have never been able to make them see what happened to it. I remember walking into the UCT and there was the whole thing and it was crazy. People were looking at these pictures, walking past them with such aI mean if I just know if I had been able to bring the people to the whole exhibition, their response would have been as warm as my response at being with them. And they didn't see it.

It all gets so big, and you just wonder about the people who when it was raining said, "Come in and have a cup of tea." And you photographed them and try to explain what you are doing and what do you say to them? And they are really very important. And I don't know, they don't seem to get anything out of it. They hopefully....in the long run something might feed back in, on a greater magnitude. It is difficult. For me that is a very real problem, a very very real problem.

You see, in a strange way, when I look at other people's work, the really great work that I look at, are people who, almost as if there is a I get quite unstuck here because I am emotionally very strung into this whole issue at the moment. Why am I taking pictures? Who am I taking these pictures for? The way in which one's pictures get so removed from one, having taken them, then being chosen, and you feel X, Y, Z, is happening to them and you feel completely out of

touch with your own inner feelings as to why you started doing it in the first place. It is almost as if you did pictures, for a whole set of motives, and then those motives are totally ignored as the pictures then move on their trip. And you no longer touch sides with them. You are like a bottle in the sea, just bobbing along and every now and again you stand up and say, "Excuse me, that was one of mine." But it doesn't connect. There is no more connection with what you were doing. I suppose for me it was difficult because I went back and said that there was a lot more work to be done.

If you are going to honor a project you can not do it as a "one of," when you go and take photographs, leave, and never go back again. Sort of like fashion that is only valuable for one season. I think we have just got to start putting more care into documentary photography. We have got to put more discernment, more care, more cerebral input, and to me emotionally, try and link more facets, and also try and be more generous among photographers. I think there is a tremendous break down in communication between photographers and if we started talking we would be growing. But we are dissipated, and we are dissipated by egos and motives that are INAUDIBLE. We've spoken vaguely about individuals who corner markets, or whatever. Paul's one.

And then you look and think, "Ok fine, I've got to be the best, and there is money there to be made," and you think then "who am I taking the pictures for?" Is it for me or documentary photography. But actually it is something else. I don't know what the title for that is but that is not for me, documentary photography. It is the same same as when you go into a hot spot, that doesn't mean you will produce a good picture. I think that is also what I have, that you can't just go in naively because that has been happening, that kind of thing. Those are the pictures that have been going for years. Another thing that I feel for myself, is that I, myself as a photographer, and as an individual, have got to start saying something in my pictures, not what I am seeing, but saying, "This is what I think about what I am seeing." Not just giving an information, this is an information picture, a runny nose down an alleyway. That was state one, now we must go on, and possible interpret that, and find another image to talk of that, what I feel and think about that child there, and not just the child. I think documentary for me has got to move in a different direction. I think it has got to start making more of a statement, not just describe. It has got to make people think.

It is like the exercise of watching people read newspapers. For the front page, they see "Four people killed in violence in....." But they actually don't move. Then they see "Oh look, Beauty Queen in America!" In other words, those pictures or whatever are not working. Maybe you have got to start interpreting, putting your feeling of how atrocious, or however you feel about it. But you have got to take another step now, and not just say, "there has been a fire here."

People have got to start letting go of their dogmas now. They have got to actually make room for other expression to come through now. They can't just, it is not good enough any more to just put a camera in somebody's hand and say, "Go, go and take pictures of what you see." Because there is a lot of that, and it is all done under the banner of

documentary, and I have seen too much bad documentary. It is bad work. It is not having an impact because it is bad. The people look at it and say, "OK." If the work is not having an impact, then I think we must all get together and stop being so autonomous and stop doing our own thing. We've got to plan with each other and stretch other.

It is a difficult issue because I am leaving, but I am hoping by not being here, to actually see whether I can find other people who are possibly where I am now.

I know that they are not in Capetown. I want to find a community where people are documentary photographers, but not in the very narrow way that I feel they are here, with a couple of pins controlling. You start feeling like a puppet. It's crazy.

I'm a people person. There are going to be people wherever I am going. Possibly it will be good for me not to be so emotionally linked in as I am here. Maybe that will be what will give me what I am looking for. Maybe I am in the hole because I have got myself into it and can't get out, because of my environment, all the other things. Maybe if I don't have those things, I can start creating my own vision. I think I am particularly cloudy. I don't think I am at all articulate on what I am saying.

I've been trying to talk to Omar for months. And you will bear me out on this when I said to him, "Omar I've got problems, I've got very very real problems behind a camera and won't you please talk to me?" And his stock phrase is, "Agh, never mind talking, just go and take pictures." Right?

Omar: No,.... INAUDIBLE... should have any problems. Now then, we must chat.

Berman: Laughs. Omar is one, I mean I even travel to Durban to talk with him. So now that I am leaving South Africa because people like you won't chat.

Omar: Well, then you can chat with all the great photographers overseas, and not have to argue with the lighties in South Africa. What problems have you got with the bloody camera? You expose better than I do, that's all.