

CONVERSATION WITH DAVID GOLDBLATT IN JOHANNESBURG, 11/85

I'm on a retainer basis, in other words, I regard that as a freelance assignment as well. I am not on their staff. I act as the so-called director of photography and associate editor. That's my official title.

Our new book will be called Lifetimes: Under Apartheid. Alfred Knopf is publishing it. In 1986.

Yes, I'm a photographer, a free-lance photographer.

Born 1930 in Randfontein, which is a gold-mining town 25 miles to the west of Johannesburg. That's right. I grew up there, I spent a large chunk of my life there. Being a gold-mining town, in the early days, it had a lot of Cornish people there. Indeed it was very... there was a good mixture of people. The gold mines were very mixed. But then in the 30's and 40's when I grew up, there was an increasingly large number of Afrikaaners who were coming in from the platteland, from the country areas to work on the gold mines and in the factories. So I suppose there was about 60% Afrikaaners and 40% English, in terms of the white population. And probably, if you take the population of black mine workers, who were migrants, plus the black people of the town, they probably outnumbered the whites by about 4 to 1, something like that. But as with all South African Towns, the black population was severely separate and separated from the white, and the white population consisted roughly I suppose of about 60% Afrikaaner and 40% English-speaking and of that 40% English speaking you have yet another subdivision into the Jewish community and so on. And while there was a fair amount of mixing, it was also pretty sharply segregated among the whites themselves. There wasn't much English-Afrikaaners mixing, and as between the Jewish community and the rest of the white community, there was some mixing, as I say, I mean my parents played bridge with very broad spectrum of people. But they were perhaps an exception in the town, they weren't very cloistered in their approach.

I went to a convent, the local convent, in my primary school years and that was mainly English speaking. There was a fair number of Afrikaaners. And then my mother tried to send me off to a boarding school in high school and I refused to cooperate and she eventually brought me back to go to the same school that my two older brothers had gone to, a high school in Krugersdorp which is a nearby town. We used to travel by train every day to school. And school was quite a relaxed sort of thing. My brothers had been to the same school and it was quite a good school.

Harris: Quite obviously there was totally segregated in regards to blacks.

Oh, absolutely. Today, there are many schools where you have black children in the so-called white schools. There are many white so-called schools that have black children now. Not the case then. It was severely segregated.

That was the way things were done. [I think that from a very early age, I was outraged or grew up with a sense of outrage at much that was done. But clearly, I accepted, if you like, a given order. Certainly when I was at school, I didn't question that there were only white kids in my school. But then it must be said also that at that time, the possibilities of black children and white children mixing in the same school were much more difficult to contemplate. I think cultural differences were very much greater then. I'm not talking now of the political problems that you might have had in attempting such a thing. There were very much wider cultural differences then than there are now. I think that the process of economic growth and urbanization has enormously accelerated the pace at which various groups in this country have tended towards a common kind of culture, even though it's still very separate.] And certainly it has given various people very many more things in common so that it's not so difficult to contemplate that kind of a shared society. But let me say this: if at that time it had been suggested that we should have shared schools, I could see my father who was a largely self-educated man, yes I could see him saying, "Yes, that's a very good thing," and supporting it and therefore sending me to a school like that.]

Harris: I was just about to ask you was that sense of outrage something that you got from your parents, your friends, or was that something of your own...

[No, I think I picked up values particularly from my father, my father was a liberal man for his time. He had some blockages, if you like in his thinking, but that was to be expected, he'd grown up and educated himself very largely, without the benefits of any great world-wide experience, in a small town in a very restrictive community. And I think from an early age he gave me a sense of outrage at racism. I think it was in his blood, to disapprove of that kind of thing. Even in his language, he didn't like to use the common terms of derogation that people in this country use. So I think that I've picked up a lot of that from him probably. I think that my parents made it possible for me perhaps to be a little different from kids in the neighborhood.]

Harris: When you say that, it sounds like you had a sense that you were different.

Yes, I think I was. Hard quite to put my finger on why and in what respects, but certainly I knew that I was somewhat different. I wouldn't like to exaggerate, it wasn't a great difference, but I think I was probably regarded as being a little bit way out by my contemporaries. I certainly don't want to exaggerate, but there were differences. It was perhaps to some extent because I didn't mix into the, I wasn't much of a mixer. I tended to be a loner. I can't recall, all the things that went into the mix.

Harris: But you went to high school and got out and was it just assumed you'd go into your father's business.

No, in the last year or two of high school, I became very aware of photography, particularly in the last year, and I became an avid

Early
C.H. Hood
Political
David

W.H. H
Parents
liberal
Hickman
David

reader of "Look", "Life" and "Picture Post" and got enormously excited over what I saw. And at that time, there was really no...that I can't exaggerate..It's impossible to exaggerate how little was felt or known of that photography here. It was simply unknown. There were commercial photographers, there were a few newspaper photographers, and there were the salon photographers, the camera clubbers, but bugger--all else.

And when I left school, I very much wanted to become a magazine photographer and I actually wrote to Kurt Hutton who was one of the leading magazine photographers in England at the time, on Picture Post, asking him how he thought I could do this. He wrote back a very kind letter, very warm, telling me just to get on a boat and come get a job in a darkroom on a magazine. It didn't matter what I did, just get a job, tea-boy, darkroom assistant, anything, just come. And I didn't have the guts, quite simply. I didn't have that kind of guts. I couldn't project myself into that ... into seeing how I could be there. I was scared. And so I went around Joberg to various photographers, asking if they could teach me something about magazine photography. This was 1949.

And then, I met the kind of blank wall, they didn't know what I was talking about. There were a couple who had some experience in this. And then there was one guy in particular who said yes, he could teach me. He was a German Jew who'd come here as a refugee and who claimed that he'd worked on magazines in Germany and that he was still working for agencies overseas. And he showed me some of his work and I went to work with him.

I found very quickly that my job consisted mostly of doing just two things--working in the darkroom, principally printing thousands of postcards, and then secondly going with him on weekends to weddings. And my job at the weddings was to carry a number of cameras around my neck, looking very professional. I had to bustle around, and I had to keep a sharp eye out for anybody who had a good camera. Any guest with a good camera, I had to mark and my job was to ensure that the guest didn't get a good picture. My job was to ensure that my boss was the only person to come away from the wedding with a good picture. I was hated!! I had to bump people or stand up in front of them or pop up in front of them. It was really a horrible thing..and I'd never been in...I'd been in very few fights in my life, but in those three months I worked for Nusbaum I was in fights all the time. Every weekend. Anyway, after three months of this, I really became very discouraged and I gave it up. And I discovered the ten pounds a month he had been paying me, my father was in fact paying him. So I went to work for my father which I didn't really want to do.

My grandfather had come to Randfontein in 1892, along with many other Jews from Eastern Europe, when there were a series of pogroms. And he'd opened a trading store in Randfontein. And my father had come out as a young boy, and when my grandfather died in 1910 I think, my father was about 14, and he took over the trading store. He had to run it. And he had developed over the years, a very, very personal kind of men's outfitting store. Mining people, who came out to Randfontein (we had a very big gold mine, the biggest in

the world at the time) mining people who came out there and were stationed there used to come to Eli Goldblatt's and shop. And then forever afterwards, no matter where they went in the country, they would phone Eli up for their clothes. And he knew, you know. You would phone him up from some remote mine in Eastern Transvaal and say "Eli, I need a new sports jacket and some pajamas" and he'd know what your size was, what kind of sports jacket you liked and he'd know whether you liked silk pajamas or wooly pajamas, fleecy pajamas and he'd send you off a parcel and you knew it was right. So it was a very personal sort of business. And he really hoped that one of us, there were three brothers, would go into the business, and in fact my oldest brother, Nick, who now lives in London, was supposed to go into the business, when he finished matric in 1936. And my father was going to send him to England to learn the trade as it were by working for a while in Simpson's factories in England. Simpson was a famous clothing manufacturer. And then he said to Nick, "No, I think in view of what's happening in Germany now, you should go to the University and get yourself a profession. The same thing might happen here.

There was a lot of anti-semitism in South Africa. The Afrikaaner national movement was becoming quite powerful and there were extreme elements in it. He suggested to Nick that he go to the university, which he did, so Nick didn't go into the business. My middle brother, Dan, was chronically ill-- he had a rheumatic heart -- and when the war came he ran away to sea and became a merchant navy radio operator. Then when he got back from the war, he certainly didn't want to go into business. And Nick by then was an established engineer, so it was left to me. And I went into the business in 1951 or 1952 and then I stayed there for 12 years. I left the business in 1963. All that time I lived in Randfontein. But During the fifties, I then became a part-time student at the Wits University did a B-Com, a commercial degree. And it was then the only part-time course available, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I actually took a flat in town and moved into town and commute to business every day. And then I got married in 1954/55 and we lived in Johannesburg for a time and then we moved to Randfontein. Yeah.

Harris: Were you photographing during this period?

In the early years, after I'd gone into the business, I was still very anxious to become a photographer and to photograph, and in 1952 I think it was, I was very conscious of what was happening, you know in 1948 the Nationalist Party came to power. And this fundamentally changed everything in this country. I saw myself as being a kind of crusader if you like with a camera. In a sense that I thought that I should try to photograph some of the things that happened to tell the rest of the world. And so in 1952 I photographed a little scene on Johannesburg Station where the first apartheid signs had gone up. And sent these to the Post in England. They rejected them. They didn't use them. Not long after that when political things started cooking here, they sent me a cable just to send them pictures. They wanted photographs. Of course to me this was a tremendous thing and I went off and did a couple of stories for them. Photographed the beginnings of the defiance Campaign and the activities of Anglican Priest, Trevor Huddleston, now the head of the anti-apartheid movement in London.

And generally tried to photograph some of the things that seemed to be important. Nothing of that stuff was published and I gradually came to realize that if I was to photograph here the things that were important to me, I would have to first of all become more adept at the craft.

I had no knowledge of the craft at the time, I merely stumbled along. And I think gradually also I changed my approach to the subject matter itself and my role as photographer. I didn't see myself any longer so much as an exposé of what was happening so much as a cataloguer of what was happening. Cataloging is not perhaps the right word, but ... I began to realize that it wasn't within my capabilities possibly but it certainly wasn't within my powers at the time to publish major essays on what was happening. Those dreams were far too grandiose and Drum magazine was beginning to do very exciting things. I realized that I wasn't in that kind of photography, photojournalism of that kind. It was not what I wanted to do.

Harris: Are you saying you lost your indignity at what was going on?

No, not at all. I simply began to realize that I was, first of all, I was a men's outfitter, and any photography I did had to be done in my spare time. Secondly, I got to realize that publication of the photographs was very difficult. But I wasn't even that sure that I wanted to publish the photographs. It didn't matter to me. Because I began to realize that the things I was seeing were very difficult to make clear and explicit to outsiders without a great deal of explanation and spelling out of things, which to me wasn't very interesting. I'm short circuiting a very long process, but I gradually, almost I suppose, imperceptibly, started taking photographs that for a very long time I didn't show to anybody. Nobody at all. I didn't have anybody to talk to because I didn't know any other photographers. It didn't matter to me that I showed them to nobody, because I couldn't see how I could communicate these things to other people, they were very private things.

I certainly didn't lose my sense of outrage at what was happening here, not at all. On the contrary. But it was also a time of trying to come to grips with what was coming to be an increasingly regimented society and trying to find a way of dealing with it, if you like, photographically. One saw photographs from outside, I didn't see that many, but I saw things from outside, and somehow they didn't entirely ... it certainly didn't help to try and--emulate. If that's the word--that kind of thing because the things that one was aware of here, one's awarenesses, were of a different kind. Related to different things, very often. And so I suppose during that period I was, I was really stretching my wings in a way - trying different things and most of the work failed. It was worthless. I also then, I think in the late 50s, became engrossed in the Ansel Adams basic photo series, which gave me, I didn't religiously work right through it, but I read right through it and got a fair grasp of it and did some of the exercises as it were, the tests and so on, which began to give me a better command of the craft, which was very important to me because I then was able to take photographs with greater predictability.

Then in the early 60s, having now perhaps learned to control the medium better, I started taking pictures again more seriously. In the meantime, I'm sorry, I'm really not a very good storyteller, but in the meantime I had become very, very engrossed in pure economics at university. These two things sort of stretched me between them - photography and pure economics - and I knew that I couldn't do both because I tend to be obsessional and I knew that if I wanted to engross myself in one it would have to be at the expense of the other. And my father in the meantime had become very ill and I had to stay on in the business to run it and he died in 1961, I think it was. And after he died, I sold the business and decided to become a photographer rather than an economist. At that time I had been taking some photographs which I had submitted to an English magazine called Town, which was the avante-garde magazine of the time. It was a kind of English "Esquire". But perhaps more way out. It was really quite adventurous in photography and graphic design and in writing, illustration and so on.

And I sent them some photographs and the assistant editor was a South African girl, I didn't know that, and she was at the time doing a story on the Anglo-American corporation and they commissioned me to do some pictures which I did and she then came back here to get married and to live here again. We became friends and she was offered the editorship of a South African magazine called "The Tattler". I had in the meantime become a professional and she commissioned me to do really quite a lot of work and we became close associates. She taught me a great deal. I really learned a lot from her--Sally Engman. Because this was not, you know, she gave me in quite a short period of time really a quite wide range of assignments that enabled me, or forced me really, to learn how to control the .. how to take pictures professionally. She demanded--she was very demanding. She wouldn't let me get away with anything, and I did all sorts of things, you know--from fashion to portraits to furniture, all kind of things. Quite quickly realizing the things that I didn't want to get involved in...because although I think I was reasonably competent at some of them, I realized that they didn't interest meand also the publication in the magazine led to other assignments and so in a way that was an opening into professional photography.

Sorry, I'm just talking. I'm not even.... Then, we're now into the 60s and I didn't have that many professional assignments and so I spent a lot of time doing things that I wanted to do myself. I had come away from the shop with a bit of money, so we weren't starving, but we didn't have very much. So I started photographing the gold mines that were dying because I had grown up among these places and I could see a lot of change taking place and I wanted to photograph something of it. And I also started photographing Afrikaaner people. Around about that time, 1964 or 65, I met Joe Lellyveld of New York Times, and we did a couple of jobs together. They commissioned me to do a couple of magazine pieces for the New York Times Magazine. These were published in the Times and gave me the opportunity, if you like, of doing a fair amount of photography around the Afrikaaners, which is where I wanted to be anyway.

Harris: Can you talk a little bit about that ...why. Why do you

Documentary
US
News
DAVID

think that why--you started out thinking that you wanted to photograph the things that really were..

I wanted to photograph Afrikaaners for a number of reasons. I had grown up among Afrikaaner people, as I told you, and my experiences quite frankly, in the early years were very unpleasant ones on the whole. Not all of them, but on the whole. I experienced some rabid anti-semitism at their hands, I also witnessed some gross acts of racism directed against black people. And I had come to be very fond of some of the black people that I knew, for instance the woman who virtually brought me up. My nursemaid had children who I helped to bring up--they were kids you heard me talking to the other day on the phone.

My early experiences of Afrikaaners were not altogether happy ones. And then, of course, the Nationalist Government and the whole program of Afrikaaner nationalism and its hugely, its grotesquely racist ideology was in full spate--it was like a giant flood, you can't imagine what it was like. And so, my awareness of these things was quite acute. And yet at the same time, while working at the shop, I had come to know quite a lot of Afrikaaner people in another way. I had come to enjoy the language, which I had never done before, at school I hated Afrikaans. But I'd come to enjoy the language in the shop because we don't, sometimes with very simple people in many ways, railway workers and small farmers and that sort of thing, and they were very, there was something very warm about them, the language was very earthy and direct and idiomatic, rich in metaphor. And so I was I think struck by some of the contradictions. On the one hand, my fear of them and my hate and disgust at what was happening politically, and yet my awareness that at the same time I was actually coming to like these people that I met. And yet these were the very people who were perpetrating these things. So I wanted to probe these fears and, and what I recognized to be loves in a way.

So I set out, not very methodically and in rather a haphazard way to photograph Afrikaaner people. And that went on from about 1961-1969. And the mining essay as well took a few of those years, and during that time, I showed Nadine Gordimer, who I didn't know but whose work I had long admired, I showed her some of the pictures I had done and she became interested in it and we worked on that together. And we published a piece in Anglo-American's magazine Optima. And subsequently, put that all into a book On the Mines. That was published I think in 1973, and Some Afrikaaners Photographed were published in 1975. I don't know how interesting it will be, but I'll tell you about it.

In 1967 I guess, somewhere around there, Sam Haskins who became very well-known as a photographer of nudes and so on, saw the work that I'd been doing on the Afrikaaners and he offered to layout a book for me--to design a book. He was a very talented, is a very talented designer, in addition to a talented photographer. He went over to Europe. When he emigrated he took with him a great pile of my contacts and rough prints. He put together a dummy which he sent back to me and which I then printed up as a book. I took this to England in 1968 and met with quite a warm reception from one publisher in

particular and they said that if I could get another publisher in another area interested so that they could do a simultaneous publication they would be interested in publishing. So I went across to New York. I was given a list of names of publishers to go and see, and I went to see publishers in New York.

The reception was more or less universally the same: interesting stuff but really no gimmick, there is nothing here that we can sell. They were not interested in it. One of them said to me, "We've got our southerners, we don't need your Afrikaaners." I met a guy who's now actually publishing the book the I'm doing with Nadine. He said, these are nice but "You ain't got a gimmick." I think he's mixed up now with Knopf, I'm not sure. Anyway...so I came back to South Africa, obviously very discouraged and put the book away thinking that it was a sort of lost cause. And then Barney Simon, whose play we went to see the other night, looked at what I had done and he really gave me a kick in the pants. He somehow stirred seeds of discontent in me because he questioned whether what I had done was me or Haskins? He didn't question that the photographs were mine, but the book was Haskins' book because it was laid out in the very, very individual style that was peculiar to Sam Haskins - very bold, contrasty treatment, pictures butted up against each other and severely cropping pictures, to fit graphic layouts-- you know the lines in one picture intersect with the lines of another so that one picture comments on the other and that sort of thing. I'm sure you're familiar with it. I still have the dummy, I can show it to you later.

So Barney threw a spanner in the works and I began to look very seriously at everything I had done and question it. And realized that in fact, I had been going up a blind alley--or not my alley. What Sam had done for me was invaluable to me. He had showed me for the first time how one could use pictures. I'd never thought of it before, I'd never given any thought on how pictures could work together. How they relate and interrelate and correlate and that sort of thing. And what he had done was to give me my pictures, if you like, in his image, but in doing that he had shown me very clearly how you can work with pictures. And by looking at that, I realized how I didn't want to work with pictures and how I did want to work with pictures, which was a much more classical and severe formula or approach. So, I completely recast the thing and I did a new dummy. Going right over to the other extreme--one picture to a spread and not attempting to play one picture against the other, and that sort of thing. But I now had a much better grasp of how these things happened, what the dynamics of photographic layout were. And that dummy I then showed around and more or less met with the response here: that it was not a popular subject and no South African publisher was going to put his hard earned bread into that. And really, what did I want to go out doing these rather poor class Afrikaaners, if I was going to do something on Afrikaaners, at least look at the rich ones. So again, I put it away, thinking that that was a lost cause.

And then a friend of mine, Murray Crawford who had become a friend through the Tattler, that magazine I'd worked for, came to me one day and said, "Look, I've made a lot of money." He's a very clever man and he can't help making money. "I've made a lot of money and I

really want to see your book published and I propose that I publish it. If it all goes down the drain, it's not going to make any difference to me. If I get the money back that'll be very nice." And so we did that. He published it. Because otherwise, it wouldn't have been published. And it was a total disaster commercially. It has become much sought after, and I get calls every week asking when I'm going to publish another edition and that sort of thing. But at the time, which was mid-70s, Afrikaaners found it a very painful book to look at.

I think probably their feelings were those that might be ascribed to Jews who had only recently moved out of the ghettos. It was a background that they would prefer not to acknowledge. It has since become a subject of nostalgia and horror to speak of your ghetto forefathers and associations if you are a Jew. But when the Jew came out of the ghettos into England or America or South Africa he preferred to forget the ghetto. I think much the same goes with the Afrikaaners. They would have preferred not to have been reminded of the poorer class Afrikaaners who were mainly my subjects. Not entirely, but mainly. And furthermore, the book was not very kind politically to the Afrikaaner establishment. It wasn't a popular book, but I never intended it to be. The editor of the Sunday Times actually refused to allow his reviewer to see the review copy, never mind review it. He wouldn't allow the reviewer to see the review copy. He's still there the editor of the Sunday Times.

Harris: So that book came out, did you then turn your direction photographically to another subject or was that the same thing...

No, no. I find that when I'm done with a subject, done is not the right work, but when I've come to a point in the photography when it seems to me that I've covered what I was interested in, I tend not to want to go back to it or to go on with it. It

Harris: In a sense, your subject is South Africa, you do go on with it....

Yes, yes, but then I wouldn't today go back to photographing Afrikaaners, as a subject in itself. I might photograph some other aspect or some other, I mean I'd go to Boksburg where I'm not concerned about the Afrikaaners but simply with the whites. And, but I had finished with the photographing of the Afrikaaners, I had said what I wanted. As well as I could. And so I went on photographing other things. In the early 70s I got the editor of Optima magazine, the Anglo-American publication, to commission me to do a series of pictures on Soweto. He was a very sympathetic editor in the sense that I told him that I wanted to do these pictures for myself, that I wanted him to pay me. In other words, I was going to do them as though they were for myself but Anglo-American would pay me for them which he happily accepted. So I spent about six months in Soweto then. And I went on to do other various pieces--essays, which weren't published in book form. Some of them weren't published at all, some of them were published in magazines. But all of these were very either self-assigned in a sense that they were things that I wanted to do, or otherwise they were assigned, but on my terms. I regarded them

as personal endeavors.

I've always made, from very early on, since I became a professional photographer, a very sharp distinction between my personal work and my professional work. I find that the two don't mix. The reason simply being that when I'm working for a client, I direct all of my thought to the client's needs. My object is to get the strongest possible pictures to meet those needs. And those needs are seldom the same as mine. Sometimes I might look at the same subject as one that I would like to photograph, perhaps that I might actually be photographing, but I'm not photographing for my own personal use or satisfaction.

Harris: There's a whole movement now in South Africa...the photographers seem to be caught up in the daily events that are happening on the street. I'm sure that those sorts of events were happening in 67 and 70s. Did you ever get caught up in that day to day sort of trying to cover the news events, funerals, riots, things like that?

No, I didn't. I think that because I realized that I was really - very difficult to explain- from the time when in the early 50s or mid 50s I actually had attempted to photograph some of those things and realized that that's not where my real interest lay. [I was more concerned to somehow to photograph, to probe the fundamentals, to look for the fundamentals. To look for the values that underlay the attitudes that brought about these events. The events themselves have not interested me greatly as a photographer. Certainly as a citizen of this country very much, and as a photographically aware person, very much when I look at work that comes out of these events. And I'm full of admiration for the courage of some of the people who've been bringing photographs out of these riots and so on. Although I have from time to time photographed something of that kind here, it's only been for a specific purpose, because I wanted to go to one of these things and see it happening and sort of imbibe it. I haven't otherwise photographed the so-called news events.]

Harris: So much of the photography I've seen, so many of the photographers here, don't really separate their politics from their photography. The photography seems to be an extension of the politics growing out of the organizing or the other work they are doing. Is that also the case for you?

I differ from a lot of the photographers here in this respect. I made myself very unpopular at a conference for the arts that was held in Botswana a few years ago. I think I shocked everybody to the core when I stood up and said that I don't think we should regard cameras as guns. I think that if you're taken photographs, then your concern should be to photograph what is and if what is doesn't accord with what you would like it to be, that doesn't entitle you to change what is in order that it should accord with what you prefer it to be. In other words, I feel that photographers who are concerned with documenting, if that's the word, what is happening here, if they're concerned with that, then their concern is with what is, not with propoganda. Not with persuasion in a direct sense. Certainly their

values enter into what they do, they make value judgements, you make value judgements as you photograph, it's inevitable. But those value judgements, in my opinion, should not be of such a kind, that they, that your photographs are directed only to persuading, rather than to telling. In other words, I can only speak for myself, if I'm to photograph somebody who, it doesn't matter who it is, I would attempt not to judge that person. Rather, I would attempt to somehow, I don't know what the process is and how it happens, I would attempt somehow to pin down his values in such a way that he himself, or she, made them manifest. And then leave the picture almost open-ended, so that the viewer can perceive something of those values and make his or her own decision about how they like them.

Harris: You don't consider yourself an advocate as a photographer for any particular....

No, it doesn't mean that. I don't think it does mean that. It means simply that I'm very careful to... I think that I'm concerned first of all with the complexity of reality. That's one aspect of it, the many aspectedness of reality, it's seldom simple. And so when I photograph, I regard part of what I'm doing as being an attempt to contain the complexity of reality in a relatively simple statement. And then secondly, I think that I'm not... I don't think that my political doctrine, if you like, or my political view, is of such great moment or interest to the rest of the world that that should be the dominant motif in the photograph. Rather, I'm concerned to tell about what is and seek out those things that are, which to me seem most relevant to my beliefs. But I report on what is with as much respect for it's "isness" I can muster. I'm afraid that's not a very simple and easy thing to grasp -- I find difficulty in grasping it or trying to say it, but that's where I'm at.

Margaret: How did the other photographers respond to your statement.

With great shock. Paul Weinberg was shaken to his toes. His colleague at the time, Peter Mackenzie, who was a young photographer, in Afrapix was, oh he thought I was a sellout. I think many people there thought that this was the case. A few complimented me on my courage if you like, or my independence of view. But it was not a popular view to put. Because there we all were, talking about liberation and a struggle and how this related to the arts, and here I was saying that if you're concerned with liberation and the struggle, that does not mean that when you go out with your camera, you're carrying a gun for the struggle. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, since then, people like Paul have come to realize that what I said was actually valid. I think that Paul has got a very different attitude today. I do believe that he has come around to my view. I think that Omar in some senses has actually got my attitude. Because Omar's pictures are very complex, they're not simple and they're not blatant statements of a political ideology, not at all. And Paul Alberts was rather shocked when I told him what I said--he wasn't at the conference--yea, they were all outraged. But if I'm not mistaken, several of them have come around to at least understanding what I was saying and even subscribe to that sort of view now.

NO
Propaganda
Guns
David

Complexity
of Reality
Guns
David

You see, in the society now here, it's very difficult for your politics not to be somehow embedded in everything that you do, it pervades everything. From... really, there is no aspect of life here that isn't in some way touched by this. So obviously if you're a photographer of anything more than cans of peaches and so on--if you're concerned with reporting on what this world is about, then your politics do become very important and must obviously be an element that enters into how you approach your subject and what you do and what subject you seek out. But what they failed to realize, I think, at that conference certainly and many of them still, because they hadn't perhaps thought it through or been through the process of development or change that you have to go through, what they haven't realized is that your politics and your photography have a very complex interrelationship. It's not a simple one, it's not a matter of going out there and looking for the terrible scene that's going to expose apartheid, because that isn't necessarily the thing that's actually going to do the job best, first of all. It's quite a complex thing.

The question that arose at the Botswana conference was for me made very clear by two events. At that conference, after I'd spoken, one young chap stood up, a young black man who'd come out from Sweden, he was probably a chap who'd fled from South Africa in 1976 and gone over to Sweden. And he told us at the conference that he was at an exhibition in Sweden of Peter Magubane's work and some people had come up to him and said, "You shouldn't show this kind of thing. It shows black people in a negative way. You must see to it that you show black people in a positive way." And this young man stood up at the conference and said, "It's your duty as photographers in this country to go out and show people in a positive way." Now this to me was the propagandist view, you see and I argued that.

When I got back to Johannesburg, there was a phone call for me, a message to phone one of the ad agencies here and I did so. And for the third, fourth or fifth time, they were asking me would I please, would I please go out and do a set of photographs for a campaign for the South African information office. Because they want to show South Africa in a positive light overseas. And yet again I told them to fuck-off. And this to me made the whole thing so clear. Here were both sides, trying to use the photographer to give their view of the thing. And I would as much have anything to do with the ANC attempt to slant the thing as I would with South African Information one. And this incidentally is one of the reasons why I find it difficult to work with the agencies. Because, not that they're necessarily going to distort things or misuse them, but I have no control over where it goes. And to me it's important, you know, if it's going to be published, it should be published well.

Harris: We were talking about the call from the information agency... it reminded me of... almost every photographer has in some way mentioned the effect of the government, the system on them as photographers. Some of them have said it has weighed on them so much that it's made it difficult to photograph, given them a kind of inertia. They felt they'd get in trouble if they took the kind of

Politics
and
Photography!
David

pictures they wanted to take. Others have talked about it invigorated them in some way to be working against the state. Has this been a constant for you or changed over time?

We're talking specifically now of the presence of the government and its agencies, the security police, the system of censorship and that sort of thing, or are we talking of the more pervasive thing, that is the whole apartheid structure.

Harris: Primarily the first, but also the second.

I think that the restrictive aspects of working here are very important. The ubiquity of security police, restrictions on movement into black areas, for example. The need to get permits, that kind of thing... But more fundamental, underlying that and in my opinion much more restrictive, is the restriction that has been engendered by the apartheid system itself. [Apartheid has actually succeeded very well. It's done exactly what they wanted to, it has divided us, it's compartmentalized us to a much greater degree than we otherwise would have been. So that if you think in terms of photographing and exploring your society, you don't feel as open as you would if you lived in New York or London or Toronto. Where you'd probably feel, oh I'd love to go into the Italian district and do a story on Italians. Here that whole world is almost foreign and it's surrounded with all kinds of taboos and restrictions so your wish and need to go in there is dampened and blunted, perhaps. The tendency for young people to want to explore I think has been grossly blunted by the existence of the apartheid system. Young people here don't seem to have the curiosity they should have. It's what we were talking about before supper with Ingrid about the Joberg by night project. This should have brought in at least 10 or 20 entries--we haven't had one. And in my opinion, this has dogged photography in this country all along. Only now is it beginning to change because only in the last, quite a short time, have these so called documentary people emerged.]

A few years ago, you could count the number of photographers working in that area on the fingers of one hand. At least now we can use two hands, four hands. And I think that that can be ascribed largely to a sense of fear and of dampening of the spirit. But on the other side, and you've mentioned both of these things and they're quite true, on the other side it must be said that there's something about the society that excites. I certainly have it, I have a sense of discovery here that I don't have in other places. If I could perhaps have it in the United States if I had perhaps been born there. And maybe even if I were to go and live there now because I find the States very exciting. But I don't find Europe exciting but I find this place exciting. There's a sense for me of discovery when I ride off on my bike or my motor bike in the morning. I sort of look forward to going around the corner because I want to see again what's there, even though I've traversed the route many times. And, I think that to some extent that is engendered by the system. I know that I'm contradicting what I've said but the system, by its nature, has made us the ... I don't know what the word is. But I sense this when I go overseas. Particularly when I go to England say, but I've felt this

in Canada and I can't say about the States. Perhaps its the sense of social injustice. I don't know what it is, but there's something here that tends to make people more - perhaps more ready to take risks of some kind - I don't know. I'm being very vague because I don't know. Can't put a finger on it. But I think that in some peculiar way the system does, perhaps because it lacks the adrenaline, I don't know...

Harris: Does guilt enter into this.....

Yes, I think that guilt does enter into it. Sure. I think that we whites are guilt-ridden to our very toenails. Guilt is probably a factor in the equation. I wouldn't like to say what the weight of it is, but it certainly is there.

Harris: You've said a little while ago, "so called" documentary people and you have talked about this in a roundabout way, but I'm curious as to your thoughts about the documentary tradition in this country, where it stands, where it seems to be going, its weaknesses and strengths. Often people have talked about the sense of isolation, that they didn't know about other work being done when in fact other work had been done right in this country but it just wasn't available.

[I think that the, let's call it documentary photographer for lack of the right word, I don't think that the right word has been found. I think that documentary photography here doesn't have a rich tradition. If you go back historically, there have not been that many photographers here who, I'm talking now since the invention of photography, who have been worked in this field. There have been a few and they have done good work, but we don't have people like Jackson and Brady and the Englishman John Thompson and people like this who went out and endured God knows what in order to get photographs. We've had really few of those. But there have been a few and their work, imperceptibly I imagine, has had a kind of effect. But not much, because if you were to ask a young photographer, I'm sure that if you were to ask mostly any of the people that you've met, who was Arthur Elliot for example, or the Barnett Brothers or Leon Levson they wouldn't know.]

Harris: Why is that? Has it been kept from them?

[I think it's because photography here has never enjoyed quite the strength that it's had particularly in the United States. So there hasn't been publication, and it's through publication that work becomes widely disseminated and then remains as part of the tradition.]

If a photographer worked in my town of Randfontein between 1910 and 1920, and his negatives disappeared when he died, and nothing was published, then that's gone. Never to be seen again. It's only through the preservation and publication of the material that will disseminate it.

For instance the work of Cole is very little known. You ask photographers here who Ernest Cole is and many of them don't even know. Eli Weinberg, the same. It's not widely known. But obviously if

EFFECT OF
Apartheid
on Doc photog
DAVID

System
excites
DAVID

History of
Doc photog
in SA
DAVID

History of
Doc photog
in SA
DAVID

it weren't banned, then it would have been more widely known.

I think that the fact of a very sparse tradition here needs to be taken account of. You growing up in the United States think of your relationship to the field that you were interested in, you have a very rich tradition that almost, I imagine, from childhood has been a part of your awareness, at least in some degree. There weren't many magazines here that were publishing work that was of any significance in this area. Drum was really the only one. And they did some extraordinary work, in the field of, on a very gut level, photojournalism. So you don't have that tradition either.

I mean, Look and Life published and engendered a great deal of work. Looking back at it now, a lot of it might not have been that great, but nonetheless, they made a huge contribution to the tradition of that kind of photography. So, for all sorts of reasons, the tradition here is very thin. Then, there wasn't much ... there wasn't and still isn't much scope for a person who wants to do that kind of photography. There are very few publications. If you want to do that and earn your bread at it, you've really got quite a job. And the consequence is that many people here who attempted to enter that field have become newspaper photographers because that's the easiest of that kind of area to enter. And I can say, with very little qualification, that most of them that went into the field and stayed on for any length of time as newspaper photographers were corrupted and lost. Because newspaper photography in this country has an appallingly low standard. That doesn't mean that there haven't been people who did very fine work on newspapers, and that fine work isn't published. I mean, a guy like Willie deClerk in Capetown I think is an extraordinarily good photographer and a very courageous man. Gideon Mendel is doing newspaper work basically. But a lot of photographers have been corrupted by the appallingly low standards that are demanded of them on the South African newspapers. And that's the most easily entered field for these documentary type photographers in this country. So where do they go, what do they do, how do they earn bread and do the sort of work that they want? The problem has been I think that many of them feel that they have to be working in that field and earning their money in that field. And that was the mistake that they made that they made because they're very soon found they couldn't and they couldn't and they became discouraged and dropped it.

They prostituted themselves. And many of them then started doing sort of crass commercial work and after a time they're caught, they're hooked on it.

I think that part of that resurgence or that search can be ascribed to there being ... well lets look at it - is there a better market for that kind of work today... I suppose there is firstly because of South Africa being very much in the world news, there is a much wider market for photographs from South Africa, these subjects. That's certainly the case. There's now a greater awareness of photography in this country, we have matured to that extent by imbibing traditions from elsewhere, even if we didn't have our own. So that many photographers are now interested in this field and are now prepared to work in this field for very low returns, simply for

Lack
of Doc
Tradition
in S.A.
DAVID

No way
to make
living at
Doc photos -

Problem
of news
photog
DAVID

the privilege of doing it. I think Paul Weinberg is a case in point. Here's a very talented young man who is prepared to limit his income earning capacity because he wants to work in that field.

I don't want to hold myself as a shining example, but I think I made that choice a long time ago. I realized that I wasn't interested in making money, and so I designed my life in such a way that I could work in the field that I wanted to and make a reasonable living and yet have the opportunity doing the kind of photographs I wanted to do. And I did that by making my operation very small - one man, no overhead to speak of, and flexible. I think that that kind of understanding of what the market's about has, if you like, penetrated to a lot of other people, and in one way or another, they're doing that kind of thing. The departure from that is the formation of Afrapix.

There have been other attempts at forming agencies in this country, but none has lasted very long. There are only two others that I can think of and they're both packed up. And Afrapix was really not in the real tradition of the photo agency as we've come to know it overseas - it was more of an attempt by a number of people working in this area to pool resources and certain other things so that they could survive, and put their photographs where they felt they'd be of the greatest value and relevance. So it was based on ideals.

So if you ask me where this photography is at today, I think that it's at a stage that it's never been... it's at a stage, shall we call it "early flowering," that hasn't been known before. I think that we have a number of people in the field today who show a lot of talent and determination and courage. And so I must say that I find it exciting and promising. On the other hand, it needs to be said that a lot of the work that is being done is not of a very good standard. I see this editorially, on Leadership. There is a very low level of professionalism in this country in photography. Particularly in this kind of photography. I think it's of a higher standard in commercial work because the ad agencies demand it. They don't get it and they don't use you. In this country I think that people working in this field have still got to learn that. This standards are very low, professionally speaking. Most of the photographers working in this country in this sort of thing wouldn't survive a day in New York or London. But that doesn't ... what I said just now about being encouraged and seeing it as full of promise ... I mean that.

Harris: What about the Carnegie Project

I think the Carnegie Project... I must say it turned out much better than I thought it would. When Omar told me that he was virtually going to put up every photograph that he had been presented with, I said to him "You're crazy." But when I looked at the exhibition, I must say that I found it quite moving and impressive. And I think that the importance of that exhibition was to bring together, for the first time really under one roof, a lot of this kind of work. The pity was that not many people saw it. Hopefully it will be seen by a much wider audience now. But it brought together a lot

"DAVID
Early Flowering
Doc photog
in S.A.
DARWIN!"

of that work under one roof and it brought quite a number of photographers into the ambit of deliberately working at something, who haven't been in that kind of venue before.

Harris: Is there a fear on the part of the Government of this newly flowering movement in this country? Is there an attempt now to thwart it in some way. Some photographers have told me that even in the universities here there is a fear of addressing social documentary type photography?

I think so. I would have said that there is fear certainly in government circles of the kind of thing that has been done in news photography and news footage. TV footage. I don't get a sense that they are afraid or have become more afraid of the more oblique kind of thing say that I do. The kind of thing that I do, I have from time to time come up against the, come to the attention of the security police. But if I'm not mistaken, they don't regard that as being a matter of great moment. I think that when one ventures into the area that I'm doing now, that might become much more directly interesting to them. And that's the kind of thing that has in fact happened. From time to time you go into you set out on an assignment or project that becomes either tangential or directly interesting to them. When that happens, they, in my case, have attempted to intimidate me. In other cases they've actively attempted to stop people. People like Peter Magubane have felt the full force of their violence. Perhaps my privileged skin has helped there.

[I'm sorry, I don't think there is a simple answer for that. I think that they watch, they know, they're very observant. They know the importance of the media and photography in particular. So it would be naive to think that they don't know what's happening and that they are ignorant of the weight of things. But I think that they have grown up to some extent. They don't see every anti-government statement and every photograph that sort of exposes or comments on the situation here as being a direct threat to their existence.]

Harris: Omar, sees a total crackdown on this kind of work? Do you agree?

I think he is certainly ... I'm very frightened for what the future holds here, at least for the immediate future. I think that if the rumors of a military coup here have got any substance and the military take over, a government in a more direct fashion, we are liable to find that there's a much more direct control on the kind of things that we do. Restrictions will be placed on our ability to photograph subjects that are far wider than we have at the moment. At the moment, South Africa is actually very free in what you can do. There are many countries where you don't have a state of emergency that are far less free. There is a surprising degree of freedom here - you know you can photograph a lot of things without restriction. And it has just in the last few months changed. I mean, you could go to a gathering of the national party and virtually walk right up to the president or prime minister and take his picture at point blank range. And not be stopped. There were very few restrictions. Prison and defense installations were really about the only totally forbidden

subject. And that's ... you'd find that at least in many countries. So, for the future, I think that it's quite possible that there are going to be far more severe restrictions placed on us and I think we're going to be far more wiley, if you like, in getting photographs that you want. Our approaches are going to have to become more oblique, at least I would think so.

STATC
US
Photog's
DAVID