

Listening to photographers

(Exploring the politics of image making practices through participatory photography.) RASHMI MUNIKEMPANNA. 2011.

What I will be looking at through this presentation is some of the problems I find with photographic practice and some of the reasons why I don't make pictures anymore as well as look at images from participatory projects which I find offer a much more ethical and photographically interesting space for me to work from right now.

The underlying assumption I make in the title asks you to look at the photographer as someone who constructs a narrative for you to read. Photojournalistic images are not found, they are made by photographers whether photographers are conscious of it or not. The space of the photographer is undergoing rapid changes with the introduction of the digital, of mobile technology, new spaces for dissemination. It is this that might finally be able to rupture image making process as we know it.

IMAGE 1 - Sergeant Wallace, two Chamars, c. 1896 (Pinney: 1997:60)

These were the kind of images made by the British when they were in India as a way of surveillance, as identification, as classification, as part of governance and as study for those who were going to work in India. The photograph is credited to a Sergeant Wallace, presumably belonging to the military or police and the people in the photographs are identified by their caste, Chamars who would today be called the Dalits, based on the occupation of working with leather which is why this man with no slippers on has them in his hand. Susan Sontag in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, talks about this act of not naming as a way of reducing people to their representations which may be of occupation, ethnicity or class. If you recall any iconic image you will rarely know the name of the subject. It provides for a distancing, for a creation of elsewhere.

IMAGE 2 –

(<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2007415,00.html>)

Moving on to an image today this is by Jodi Beiber, a South African photographer of Bibi Aisha and winner of the world press photo award this year. This image is about domestic violence and has been used as propaganda for staying in Afghanistan. The image and the text asks you to read the American army as being on a feminist crusade, on a saving mission, as saviours. In an interview with the photographer on the Time website, you hear Beiber repeatedly talk about how beautiful Aisha is, which has a value in itself when seen as an interaction between two people although something seems to happen when this gets transferred to the image. I quote Beiber "I could have made a photograph with her looking or being portrayed more as the victim and I thought No this woman is beautiful."

(http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,294175100001_2007267,00.html)

It's difficult for me to see Aisha in this image, wanting to stage her as beautiful makes the violence so visible almost completely erasing her. This violence is then left to be appropriated by the discourses that eventually publish this image. This image also asks you to remember another image.

IMAGE 3 – (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2002/04/afghan-girl/index-text>)

This image is by Steve McCurry of Sharbat Gula whose name was discovered 17 years after she was photographed for the first time. Her identity was established using the FBI's iris scanning technology. I quote from the story that appeared with her re-discovery in National Geographic. "She stood for an entire group of refugees, not just Afghan refugees. She has helped us with our mission of educating people about other cultures and regions—and she's helping us again by drawing attention to the lives of Afghan women and girls in general." (2003)

Judith Butler in her book, *Frames of War* where she explores the question of what it means to be human, asks 'How do we understand the frame as itself part of the materiality of war and the efficacy of its violence?' (Butler, 2010: xiii) Looking at everyday representative practices, the camera reiterates the norms that govern gender, class, race etc, presenting us with knowledge that we already recognise. Participatory photographic work by enabling an agency over representation offers the possibilities of rupture/expansion of these norms to accommodate new knowledge, expanding the norms by which we come to recognize another as human.

So what is participatory photography?

"Participatory photography refers to projects where participants are supported to generate their own photographic work – a facilitator works with a group of people, often marginalised and/or disadvantaged, and teaches them to use a camera with the aim of supporting them to define, communicate and improve their situation." www.photovoice.org

Moving Lives was the first project I worked on with PhotoVoice who deliver participatory photography projects in collaboration with other charities, NGO's. The participants were newly arrived unaccompanied minors, seeking asylum primarily from Eritrea and Afghanistan. They give you a picture of what London looks like to someone who is here recently, negotiating a new city in a language that is not their own, having made an extremely difficult journey and in an extremely precarious space as they have no idea whether they get to stay or not. Their lives, their faces, their bodies are not just about being representative of the word 'refugee'

<http://www.photovoice.org/projects/uk/moving-lives-2009>

These images are made on simple digital point and shoot cameras. As such aesthetics and the importance of aesthetics in the image making process has been relooked at. Photographic practices rely heavily on extremely expensive equipment with the need to update it regularly which means it's users then start

getting defined as belonging to a certain class, a certain gender. When we work on these projects there is no hierarchy of images as sometimes the stories that images with 'photographic mistakes' tell are extremely powerful and these always find themselves into the final edit and the editing process is a collaborative one. This is about focusing on voice through text in the form of captions as the determining factor for an edit. Images are anchored with text providing some sort of protection from being wrenched out of its context of creation.

The idea of the photographer as adventurer, as someone who is out there on the streets everyday, hunting for a shot is something that informs photojournalistic practice. The idea is you find a good photograph not make one. It follows on from Henri Cartier Bresson's concept of the decisive moment as one that happens when having composed your frame you wait for a subject to enter it to make what he calls a 'geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless' (photography speaks, pg148) The subject thus providing the needed visual interruption, addition to the image.

Like this IMAGE 4

(<http://stevemccurry.photoshelter.com/image/I0000fCJ.evCk34o>) by Steve Mccurry in a work called Monsoon.

Steve McCurry introducing this work, says: " Covering the monsoons meant total immersion, a concentration that bordered on masochism. Day after day in grit filled heat not even meant for mad-dogs or Englishmen. Day after day wallowing in filthy water up to my chest, or standing in the street in a torrential downpour.....I began to learn the art of patience."

(<http://www.stevemccurry.com/main.php>)

IMAGE 5. This is an image by Raghu Rai for Save The Children.

(<http://everyoneindia.blogspot.com/2010/07/indias-contrast.html>)

In an interview with Tehelka talking about his photography Raghu Rai says "Unless the supernatural comes and plays a part and reveals itself, the picture is only good and nice as information can be. It is like the difference between making love and having an intellectual orgasm."

(http://www.tehelka.com/story_main49.asp?filename=hub050311SEES.asp)

This is from a project called Waiting Glasgow (2010-2011), a PhotoVoice project in collaboration with Fairbridge Glasgow working with eleven young people affected by homelessness.

<http://www.photovoice.org/projects/uk/waiting-2010-2011>

There is still a courage, the much bandied about word in photojournalism, in this. It is not about going to a new place that is presumably difficult, filthy, waiting for a shot. It is about the courage to turn the camera on to your own life. It is about the difficulties of participation and image making when you inhabit precarious spaces. And most importantly it is about finding your way into visibility, into discourse with a voice, with agency.

People who figure in images of poverty or homelessness usually are sleeping men, women and children. This is tied to a very important part of the photographic process which is that of informed consent. Disrespecting this is one of the most violent aspects of the process image making. So what is informed consent? Your subject agrees to being represented the way you are representing them in spaces of dissemination that is accepted by them. Subjects have the choice to say No and they need to know they have the choice to say No. With this, as a photographer, before you have even framed the subject, you look at the subject as someone with rights, someone who cares, someone who does not want to be shamed into a generic representation. It forces you to find photographic methods that enable a much more shared process. Subscribing to this brings down the volume of clichéd images but when practiced without an awareness of how images reiterate norms or for that matter with hidden agendas then it risks being futile.

Photography is such a precarious space for people who are facing violence or are at the risk of violence. Informed consent helps a long way in addressing those concerns. This is a project initiated by the National Working Group for sexually exploited children and Young People and in association with various projects in England. This was with 28 young people.

<http://www.photovoice.org/projects/uk/having-our-say>

I quote from the PhotoVoice website: “Opportunities for these young people to communicate their experiences to a wider audience, and to challenge the assumptions made about them remain relatively rare. They often continue to be spoken for by professionals, stereotyped or simply ignored. The photos here are those that participants chose to represent themselves and they remind us that young lives are vibrant, diverse, complicated and sometimes unfairly hard. These images also resist traditional views of young people as victims, risky, or difficult to engage and instead share their talents, commitment and concerns to a wider world.” <http://www.photovoice.org/projects/uk/having-our-say>

IMAGE – (<http://www.photovoice.org/projects/international/images-of-foul-play-2010>)

These images are from a workshop I facilitated in Delhi around the issue of manual scavenging. Although there was a deliberate attempt made to not make images the way they are usually made we still ended up with some images that reiterate how the camera looks at poverty. The images are still anchored a bit in the captions and I think a change in methodology might be appropriate when working in contexts that have seen a certain kind of image of suffering, of being, produced. I have shown you a selection of images that I think work but there are images produced that resonate with images we are familiar with and as professional photographers if we find it difficult, it is terribly unfair to expect participants to make every single image a radically different one.

Most of the participatory images are supported by captions. They are a way of bringing the photographer into the picture, of bringing an understanding at

times of the spaces they are in, sometimes just the pure fun of photography. The captions enable an anchoring and an extending of the meaning of the image. They ask you to read an image in a certain way or look at it as was intended to be looked at.

There have been various attempts by artists/photographers to work with the medium to enable the creation of imagery that engages without using shock or suffering as motifs. I would like to look at the work of Shahidul Alam, who runs Drik, a picture agency in Bangladesh with the aim of encouraging majority world photographers.

IMAGE – (<http://www.shahidulnews.com/crossfire/>)

I quote an introduction to the work “Crossfire” is an exhibition of photographs where Bangladesh’s leading photographer Shahidul Alam, takes an allegorical look at the phenomenon. The constructed images use elements of real case studies to evoke stories that the government has denied.’ These are images that point to the deaths by crossfire (extra-judicial killings) by the Rapid Action Battalion set up in 2004 to combat corruption. I quote him “The intention of this exhibit, was therefore not to present documentary evidence. There was plenty of that around and it had failed. The show attempts to reach out at an emotional level. I aim to get under the skin. To walk those cold streets. To hear the cries, see terror in the eyes. To sit quietly with the family besides a cold corpse. But every photograph is based on in-depth research. On actual case studies. On verifiable facts. A fragment of the story has been used to suggest the whole. A quiet metaphor for the screaming truth.” These images are exhibited with a google map with details of where such extra-judicial killings have taken place. This points to the fact that photography needs to move from being just evidentiary, as proof that such a thing exists to a more analytical way of understanding how what you come to see before your eyes exists. Images like these show me a way of starting to talk about what we go through as inhabitants of a certain space without having to subject someone who has experienced violence to the photographic gaze.

While being a facilitator I am constantly amazed at how people negotiate structures of oppression finding spaces, however tiny a gesture it might be, for resistance. Photography, informed by new narratives, counter-narratives can be a part of that resistance. Political change does not come from being thankful for receiving aid, it comes from demanding that your rights are respected as a human being.

There is empowerment, a sense of ownership, a sorting out, a figuring out that happens in turning the camera on to yourself, your life, the issues that you face and the resistance you offer. The camera can go into the most intimate of spaces. And this opening up that participants do is so precious. For me this is what keeps me going as a facilitator. With engaging through participatory work I am constantly broken down and put back together again. The people I have worked with have been extremely generous, to have let me into their lives, to have listened to me, to have rubbed me at times and most importantly to have

shared some very painful things that images bring up. I have seen them look at images of how they are viewed and vehemently break it all apart bit by bit. And then there is the joy, the joy of seeing images you have taken, sharing them with each other, understanding them, critiquing them and the collective gasps and laughter with which some images are received.

Through this presentation I have looked at how photographic images might change when the subject becomes the photographer. In today's world it is important to be responsible for the images you make, as it is no longer just about images. It is about real lives that end in horrific acts of violence. Collateral damage has also come to occupy a space in the development, economic growth discourse. A whole population of people are seen as dispensable, their lives as not being important enough in the big picture. And maybe the resistance could start at naming, at hearing voices, at how we frame others and thus frame ourselves.

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