Handout Study Guide: Session 8

**DOCUMENTATION: The Social Scene to 1945  *possible essay question**

*- What were the two factors that caused social reform photography to emerge in the late 19th century?

- Which 19th C. photographer’s images of China and its people, that we previously reviewed helped create a style and format for documentation that carried over to projects concerned with social inequities?

*- The directness of style associated with social documentation emerged around 1850, the consequence of expanded camera documentations on paper and glass of historic and modern structures, in which the photographers involved demonstrated which two qualities in their work? What did they realize about one of these qualities?

-Which photographer in the US was the link between older Victorian concepts and emerging Reform attitudes towards social problems, and whose subject was the tenement world, where the poverty-stricken half of New York’s population lived?

*-What was the name of the first and most influential publication in 1890, in book form, of photographs and personal reportage based on Jacob Riis’s investigations of social conditions in the Mulberry Bend slum in New York City? As a Police reporter, why did Jacob Riis start taking photographs? What did he hope to show in the photographs, and to change?

*- The social reform photographer repeatedly transformed a mundane record of what exists into a fervent plea for what might be, by establishing what type of an idealism that became a basic tenet of the social documentary concept?

-Who was the towering figure in portrait social documentation in Germany, from about 1910-1934, who made photographs of individuals and groups from all professions and classes, in a clear and direct manner, beautifully lit, and composed?

*- Reformist ideals and programs withered after 1915 in the US, explain why this affected the documentary movement in the visual arts, and why in the 1930’s, it was renewed again?

*-What was the FSA, and why was it created? Name at least three photographers working for the FSA? Which two photographs have become famous icons of the FSA project?

- Who was the photographer, inspired by the work of Atget, who photographed New York City, as a project entitled, “Changing New York” under the WPA, to document the urban experience during the Depression era?

-Who was the photographer motivated less by political ideology than by a sense of impending catastrophe, that produced an extensive documentation of Eastern European Jews in Poland on the eve of the Holocaust, images that captured people, places, and traditions that vanished?

- What was the name of the group formed in the mid 1930’s in the US ,by politically conscious photographers committed to the tradition of straight picture making, whose specific purpose was the promotion of documentary photography through a school, and the establishment of units organized to depict the less picturesque aspects of urban life, which they felt were being ignored by art photographers, and Pictorialists?

-*.In general, documentary style embraces two goals, what are they?

**Images to remember for identification:** Photographer, Title, Date, Process that could appear on quizzes or final exam.

Jacob Riis, Street Arabs-Night Boys in Sleeping Quarters-Newsboys, How the Other Half Lives 1890
Jacob Riis, “I scrubs”, The Children of the Poor, 1892
Lewis Hine, An Adolescent Spinner, NC 1908
Lewis Hine, Powerhouse Mechanic, 1925, Gelatin Silver print
Walker Evans, Washroom in the Dog run of Floyd Burrough’s home, Hale County, Alabama, 1936
Walker Evans, Bedroom in Floyd Burrough’s home, Hale County, Alabama, 1936
Arthur Rothstein, Dust Storm, Cimarron County Oklahoma, 1936, Gelatin Silver Print
Arthur Rothstein, Gee’s Bend, Alabama, 1937 (Artelia Bendolph) Gelatin Silver Print
Dorothea Lange, Women of the High Plains, Texas Panhandle, June 1938, silver print
Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, Nipomo, CA 1936, silver print
Dorothea Lange, The White Angel Breadline, San Francisco, 1933
Margaret Bourke-White, Bread line during the Louisville Flood, Kentucky 1937
August Sander, Young Peasants on their way to a dance, Westerwald, 1913-14
August Sander, Young Girl in Circus Caravan, 1932
Berenice Abbott, Zito’s Bakery, Bleeker Street, NY 1937
Berenice Abbott, Under the El at the Battery, 1936
As a social theme, mining became a subject of special appeal to artists, writers, and photographers in the late 19th C, owing to its difficulties and dangers and to the perception of the mineworker as one who mixed individualism and fearlessness. Lewis Hine’s compelling images on this subject around 1910, were part of the campaign against the unconstrained use of children in heavy industry being waged by the National Child Labor Committee.

The stylistic similarities between images such as Annan’s inner city slum photos in Scotland, to Atget or Marville’s descriptive images of streets of Paris, to Titzenthaler’s social scene of Germany, suggests that in addition to a particular approach to the pictorial structure and disposition of light by the photographer, that social documentation made to realize specific social goals, requires text and context to make its message understood.

Because social images were meant to persuade, photographers wanted to communicate that their subjects were capable of human emotions and that they were being kept from fully realizing their human qualities by their difficult surroundings. As a result, photos used in social reform campaigns not only provided truthful evidence but embodied a commitment to humanistic ideals.

Before the 1930’s, Pictorialists thought art shouldn’t be functional or serve a specific purpose, as a consequence they were blind to the fact that genuine feeling and innovative vision from photographers could instill photographic images made for a social purpose with imagination and meaning. There was also a lack of recognition from those who used documentary works as they disregarded the individual photographer, often reproducing images without credit, or permission. Many documentary photographers remained unknown unless their work was used in a specific context which got large exposure. The outstanding work done by the FSA and Abbott for Changing New York project, helped transform this situation, and showed that divisions between art and document are difficult to maintain when dealing with images of realism. These photos as well as others made clear that no matter what its purpose, any photograph may transcend the mundane quality of its immediate subject, and change the subject into thought and feeling,—the essential goal of all visual art. There was also recognition that purposeful photographs enlarged our ways of seeing, and inspired compassion even after the specific problems they addressed had disappeared. So, the generation of photographers working post WW2, rejected the compartmentalization of photographic expression that had been the legacy of the Pictorialist movement. Instead these photographers, wanted their work, no matter its ultimate purpose, to possess the passion and immediacy found in the best social documentation images.

Important Quotes: Be able to identify to whom these quotes are attributed.

—Beaumont Newhall, American photography historian, noted that while the social documentary photographer is neither a mere recorder nor an “artist for arts sake, his reports are often brilliant technically and highly artistic”,-that is documentary images involve imagination and art in that they imbue fact with feeling.

—Lewis Hine explained the goals of social documentation when he declared, “that light was required to illuminate the dark areas of social existence, but where to shine the light and how to frame the subject in the camera are the creative decisions that have become the measure of the effectiveness of this style to both inform and move the viewer.”

—“If I could tell the story in words, then I wouldn’t have to lug a camera”, Lewis W. Hine

—“The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera”, Dorothea Lange

“Whether he is an artist or not, the photographer is a joyous sensualist, for the simple reason that the eye traffics in feelings, not in thoughts.” Walker Evans

General concepts to remember:

—Social documentary images focus mainly on people and social conditions, images in the documentary style combine clear pictorial organization with an often passionate commitment to humanistic values-to ideals of dignity, the right to decent living and work conditions, and to truthfulness.

—Early on, a crucial aspect of social documentation involved the context in which the work is seen. Images were presented as groups, rather than individually as part of campaigns to improve social conditions. They were generally not shown in salons devoted to artistic images. They were also not sold individually under any existing categories. They reached viewers as lantern slides, or illustrations in pamphlets/periodicals, usually accompanied by lectures or texts. The development of social documentary photography is so closely tied to advances in printing technology and the growth of the popular press that the flowering of the movement would be unthinkable without the ability of the halftone process printing plate to print photos.

—Early Social documentary shares its relationship with printing advances with early photo-reportage or journalism, and even social themes, but the images of the latter usually were not aimed at social change.

—Before photos of workers were taken as evidence for social change, descriptive “factual-document”, photos appeared of workers and natives, out of interest in the exotic, interest in social customs in danger of extinction, romantic nostalgia for handwork, and folk manners of provincial life.

—From 1850’s on, alongside the serious but idealized treatment of the European peasantry by Barbizon painters, realistic portrayals of less bucolic kinds of work associated with advancing industrialization began to appear in graphic art and literature. Such themes signaled the mounting concern among middle class for the social and ethical consequences of these advances, and this concern helped prepare for the role of the documentary photo in campaigns for social change.

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