

THE ZONE (2) RELEASING DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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To view the three contemporary documentary photography pieces that make up The Zone 2, please visit the Audiovisual Section of The Salon Volume 6 on the JWTC website.

Since the 1980's much has been said and critiqued regarding the notion of documentary—from Trinh-Minh-ha's famous essay "Documentary is (not) a name", to Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler and others whose writings and work defied the traditional canon and power of the real. Since then, the divide between an objective truth and the subjective artistic expressive has been crossed, and the range of experiments and forms of interaction with the real continues to grow. Taking this history of critique seriously, the photographic documentary has since been living in a border zone where concepts like documentary essay, art and journalism nourish, pollute and complicate each other. The frictions produced by this blurring of genres and definitions, continues to make some people uncomfortable and others highly selected (in the art markets).

From a theoretical standpoint, recent propositions are also participating in a shift from what can be termed a John Tagg (aka Foucauldian understanding of photography) to an Azoulay (Benjaminian) perspective that emphasizes the space of photography as that which contains multiple positions and politics, where the triad photographer, the photograph(ed) and viewer establish different

relationships with each other, but also with history, aesthetics, violence and power. To that one might add the so-called democratization of photography, a name given in many discussions to a market driven craze and popularization of cameras and devices that has exploded the realm of the photographic image. This reality has by now come in contact with the growth and possibilities of new practices, where what used to be mere sub-disciplines are now fields of their own (like experimental documentary, or new forms of visual/sensory anthropology) with academic programs and organizations producing novel and exciting work. Thus, from initial bipartisan positions that saw photography (just) as-power/violence or as a form for the (purely) subjective expressive, the current state of documentary photography has expanded the critical intellectual possibilities of the medium, refined by what present day conditions permit regarding experiments with technology, aesthetics, devices and even the movement of people.

With this apparent revival and reconfiguration of photography and its means of distribution, this second number of the Salon's section *The Zone* presents different projects in contemporary documentary photography that unsettle prevailing understandings within the western mainstream. Sharing interests in long term projects, the so-called Global south, and more generally what one could define as an intellectual approach to the possibilities of photography, the works showcased here engage critically with the traces of photojournalism, documentary topics and traditions, ethnography, and the role of a reflexive stance that goes beyond the individual. For this I have invited three photographers whose work demonstrates the possibilities of a critical photographic project. These individuals—two American

born and one Ecuadorian—have engaged the realities of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, India and Ecuador as journalists, ethnographers or cinematographers, producing stories that go beyond the mere representation of place. Their understanding of these countries—which have also been their homes—and an approach to photography that relies on subtle and thoughtful methods, results in poetic engagements with histories—and here I mean histories of representation as well as personal, professional, and even national histories. As such, they present different vantage points from where to consider (and in my view complicate) the contemporary relationships and frictions between ethnography, photojournalism, documentary, poetics and location.

Danny Hoffman is an American anthropologist and formerly Africa based photojournalist who has worked on issues of youth violence and war in West Africa, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone. His photographic work is part of an experimental approach to the interplay of text and image, and his essays are forms that create alternative spaces for the visual and lyrical articulated in a theoretical manner that then creates its own form of poetic criticality (see his essay "The Brookfields Hotel. Freetown, Sierra Leone"). In this case, and following his former engagement with places, structures, bodies, and notions of reoccupation and movement, the former building of *The Ministry of Defense* in Monrovia is presented in its existing raw state, down to the bone, and yet still occupied by traces, lived and relived, inhabited by bodies that have over the years given it its many lives up to its most likely disappearance. Yet, the images elide the attraction of the ruin for the ruin's sake. This is a result of an approach to poetics that he sees as being "... *informed instead*

by a less fixed, emergent poetics of envisioning the built environment [...] this is a poetics that shifts the emphasis away from either the formal composition of built forms or the realist depiction of everyday living within them. The visual argument is a more ambiguous and ambivalent one about the ways people can and cannot inhabit constructed space". This is apparent in the image of two men sitting in the walls of what seems to be the top floor looking into the black hole of an abandoned staircase. The subtle colours of the image, the absence of facial expressions, and even the vultures up above all create a poetic vantage point into the future as well as the past of all of them in this building. Hoffman's piece thus positions the photographic essay as a critical intellectual form of intervention in current debates (in this case) about postcolonial cities, complicating the roles of how we understand the relationships between architecture, photography (aesthetics) and revolution.

Candace Feit is a photographer with a philosophy background, who left New York to work as a photojournalist in West Africa and later in India. She now pursues in-depth personal projects, which are shaped by the many years based in her southern homes (Senegal, India, and most recently Johannesburg). What, in my view defines her projects, is the possibility of articulating intellectual positions on people and place through the poetics of beautifully framed and lit images. Her use of colour and careful composition attracts the viewer in order to compel one to further reflection on the issues and contexts of these situations beyond what is being portrayed or presented in the frame. There is a reason why she uses film; taking advantage of a slow-paced notion of photography. In the ongoing

project she presents for this number, **Reportage in Wonderland** she is working through the notion of the "exotic" in its own existence. Carefully using the power of colours and moments of situations in religious ceremonies of Hijras (transgendered) in India, she opens up the space of excess to its own complexity. The strong images of ceremonies thus open up the surplus inherent to the intricate complexity of representations of India, which she juxtaposes with elements of simplicity and banality. Think for example of the image of a woman lying on the ground after a trance, shot at floor level, an image that opens up our imagination to current events in the country. The politics of gender and religious exoticism are therefore dealt with through their own poetics, creating a space of frictions, an alternative to traditional roles of seeing and being.

Similarly, in *Never a River*, Francois "Coco" Laso takes the traditional ethnographic representation of his own country's (Ecuador) internal *other* to abstract the banality of this setting, to highlight the poetic imaginary of the everyday in the Amazonian rainforest. Photographing Shuar and Wampi communities in the rainforests of Ecuador and Peru, his approach has been to elide what can be seen as unique or exotic. Rather, as he states, he prefers to take the risk of a banal poetic or rather a poetics of the banal, a more photographic position if you may, to explore and present diversity. For this reason his approach is risky, because " [...] *without any doubt these images might not be showing much, except maybe, the blurry evidence of a particular subject, his existential condition, the moment of a common photograph. These are bodies that always flow with the river; that cannot be seen clearly or in their entirety. And so, the photographs remain*

as something like the memory of an impossibility, of an impossible visual encounter". These encounters then are what draw one into these black and white images, where the subtle presence of people amidst the density of the rainforest is made less ethnographic and maybe more photographic. Where a portrait of a woman in a black headscarf unsettles the iconic imagery of the Amazonian context, releasing the elements that have framed these communities in languages of otherness through a common language of imagination and poetics that photography makes possible.

To view the three contemporary documentary photography pieces follow the links below:

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE
Danny Hoffman

NEVER A RIVER. BLURRED EVIDENCE
Francois Laso Chenut

REPORTAGE IN WONDERLAND
Candace Feit