

dreams of life and death

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I have now been photographing for over twenty years; during that time the way in which I photograph has shifted considerably. There has been a transition from exploring a larger world to a narrowing in on my own private world, a change from a seemingly objective position to an intensely subjective position. The manner in which I work has changed too. Instead of carrying my camera with me always, constantly seeking what I perceive to be revealing moments, capturing my stalked quarry neatly on film. I now carefully plan each photograph, first using sketches then polaroids as aids in transferring ideas and concepts from my interior world to the physical world.

The transition has been gradual. It began in the late 1970's when I first read Susan Sontag's book On Photography. The essays were alarming and unsettled all that I thought I knew about the medium of photography. Some of the things Sontag said, the voyeuristic aspects of photographing, the detachment in the act of photographing, the sheer numbers of photographs taken, the commodification of experience, rang very true and I recognized myself many times over in reading her collection of essays. I looked through the hundreds of images I was making for signs of my guilt and found them in the distanced moments recorded with the subjects unaware of my activity or even my presence. My attempted detachment and voyeurism was obvious to me. I began to find it very difficult to go out hunting subjects with my camera; my fascination, however, with the photographic image did not diminish.

In 1980 I moved to Saskatoon. It was in this community with its long-standing tradition of documentary photography that I began to more fully understand and investigate other possible approaches within the documentary mode. A growing familiarity with the work that was being carried out by such members

of The Photographers Gallery as Sandra Semchuk, Richard Holden and Don Hall, coupled with the impact of Sontag's writing, enabled me to enlarge my understanding of documentary photography.

I turned to my family, extended family and neighbourhood and began to photograph people that I knew in a very straightforward manner, still making the images with black and white materials. There was no hiding the camera, no furtive searches for the perfect moments, no sense of hunting. The images were for me much quieter images, less anxious in their making and in their meaning. At the same time however I experienced a discomfort in considering this as serious art making. This simple impulse to record, to rely on the transparency of the medium for its meaning did not seem for me to require enough participation on the part of the photographer. I wanted a more active presence in this process.

In 1988 I began a new body of work, moving away from the family and neighbourhood documentation and into a workplace. The place was a foundry in Sutherland which I had come into contact with on a commercial assignment. This place was like a forgotten piece of history, invisible in our post-industrial information age. It was the very simple impulse, to record and make reference to what I had noticed as disappeared from social thought, which led me into a re-examination of documentary photography in the body of work FOUNDRY.

To be undertaking a documentary photographic project of this nature in 1988 represented much difficulty. Documentary photography was in the throes of critical examination. I was not sure that I could successfully navigate this territory. I had many questions about my own role as a photographer, especially

in this somewhat foreign terrain of the industrial workplace. How could I, a woman, be going into this place, this all male environment, to make images of the men and their labour? Was I not better off continuing to make images in and around my own family and neighbourhood? My activity baffled many - and sometimes baffled me. I recalled my own experience of working in a die-cast factory. I was compelled by the fascination of the place coupled with the desire to seriously re-examine documentary photography for myself.

Documentary photography had been examined and re-examined much throughout the 1980s. Within the discourse surrounding art there are many ways that photographs have been used and considered and much ongoing discussion about this slippery thing, the photograph. In The Burden of Representation John Tagg examines the technological advancements in photographic industries and their relationships to consumer markets. The photographic image, according to Tagg, is a highly coded representation, coded to the particular authority it was serving. That authority ranges from discourses of cultural production to medical, judicial, scientific and sexual discourse. Tagg believes it was through these authoritative discourses (and more) that the photograph served up its meaning. 2

Abigail Solomon-Godeau explores notions surrounding the transparency of the documentary photograph and how the photographic image is received as truth or fact. Solomon -Godeau points out that photographic lens technology is built on single point monocular perspective (invented in the Renaissance). Renaissance paintings, like photographs, present a system of pictorial organization converging to a single vanishing point. This pictorial organization, though unlike natural vision which is binocular, unbounded and in constant motion and blurred at the

periphery, is so imbued in western consciousness that it appears to be entirely natural. The photograph seems to function as a mirror reflecting and confirming the existence of the subject/object. In Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions About Documentary Photography Abigail Solomon-Godeau questions this seemingly transparent, reflective, confirming function of the photograph by looking behind the image to its production and consumption. 3

Photographers Alan Sekula and Donigan Cumming have both been successful in finding ways to continue making documentary photographs in this increasingly problematic medium. Alan Sekula has found his approach which he termed "critical realism"; Donigan Cumming has found his way through by making realistic-looking staged photographs in his work Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography. I needed to find my way.

In re-examining documentary photography there was one aspect in particular that I felt it very necessary to address: the transparency of the medium which was looked at by both Solomon -Godeau and Tagg. It is this supposed transparency which not only allows the photograph to be received as an authoritative text but also serves to collapse the presence of the photographer. With the presence of the maker erased, the photograph can then be perceived to have a direct relationship to fact and a claim to truth. This becomes evident when one considers how the "factuality" of a painting is perceived as compared to the "factuality" of a photograph. Imagine paintings or drawings used in newspaper journalism; the evidence of the hand of the producer has the effect of softening the impact of the image, of loosening the relationship of subject to fact. The recognized presence of the producer implies an interpretation rather than the unmediated reflection the photographic image implies.

In the work, FOUNDRY, I was searching for a way to make my own presence and the act of photographing more visible. I decided that it was necessary to make my concerns within the medium visually apparent. To do this I emphasized the film edge by exaggerating the frame thereby making a direct and overt reference to the medium. I also purposely manipulated my exposure, in both the exposing of the film and in the printing of the images. Rather than make photographs which clearly described the labour activity of the people working, I wanted to make photographs which gave a sense of my own impression of the place, labour and the people involved. By employing these strategies I hoped to make apparent that I was offering an interpretation rather than a seemingly unmediated reflection of the place. The other-worldly look of the foundry images gave me the impetus to push further.

After having begun the foundry work I also began another body of work "...the great effect of the imagination on the world". These photographs are of highly idiosyncratic domestic environments, of front and back yards and the people who constructed them. They are a kind of folk architecture, an architecture "without authority", and by that I mean without an external legitimizing authority. What was being constructed seemed to be prompted by a mix of memory and imagination.

In considering this folk architecture I had to discover how I might get at the subject. A straightforward documentation with descriptive text was one consideration, but I worried about the image serving only as an explanation or supporting material for the text.

Again I wanted to describe these places in such a way that it was visually

apparent that I was considering this activity and the resulting environments from a very particular position. I had begun to consider the imagination, the interior world which we carry around with us, as having become materialized by the people making the constructions and environments. I decided to photograph at night using movie lights to bring out a hyper-reality and at the same time a more fictionalized image.

The constructed panoramic format made up of 16x20 panels refers to my desire to make obvious that I am adding my own construction to their constructions. One of ways this is signalled in the work is through an obvious mismatching from one panel to next; the subjects sometimes show movement, the lighting has glaring reflections. With these elements apparent it becomes hard to consume the image as an unmediated representation.

For me this work is the beginning of the most dramatic change my work has taken. For me it makes clear the shift from detached observer and recorder to engaged participant, mixing the world of my imagination with the worlds of other's imaginations and making images which in their overtly visible construction, implicate and involve me in the process.

The work I am currently engaged in brings everything closer. The work is autobiographical. For the first time I am using text & images. There are similarities between this work and "...the great effect..." in that most of the images are taken at night. In the work "dreams of life and death" some images are made using movie lights, some with street light and some at mid-day. The images of water, a tree, a field, a power pole, a phone booth, the back of a house and a graveyard are fragmented, similar in their construction to work in "...the

great effect...". Again I am using this constructed panorama format to allude to, in this case, the construction of past events. The accompanying text recalls fragments of memory of intense or unsettled experiences drawn from my own past. The text and the images are meant to play off one another, to create a sense of unease, to represent the difficulties of creating a coherent, cohesive world for ourselves. Unlike my earlier work which is more about the certainties of and persistence of identity linked to place and occupation, this new work attempts to address the precariousness of our construction of identity.

Footnotes

1. Sontag, Susan. On Photography. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977. p. 3 - 207
2. Tagg, John. The Burden of Representation. London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1988. p. 150
3. Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions on Documentary Photography". Photography at the Dock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1990. p. 180-181

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