

Where Documentary Is (Newport School of Art and *How We Are*)

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Tate Britain's latest show *How We Are: Photographing Britain* will have escaped the attention of few this summer. Although the title suggests something a little more anthropological, the exhibition is an exploration of how the medium of photography has been applied in Britain. It follows a chronological order, and curators Val Williams and Susan Bright have identified six different epochs of the medium's evolution, which includes works from William Henry Fox Talbot's studies of textures and delicate forms from *The Pencil of Nature* to Alistair Thain's enormous and impossibly detailed portraits of Royal Marine recruits that reveal every bead of sweat and in-growing hair. The inclusion of vernacular and often anonymously authored works alongside some of the big names in photography, installed with equal status, provides a neutral territory with which to scrutinize their contribution to the history of photography: David Bailey's celebrated *Box of Pin-Ups* is presented with the same reverence, in a glass display case, as a copy of a *Country Life* publication of picturesque images of the Lake District that would struggle to be given away at a car-boot sale. This democratizes curatorial approach reflects some of the current social issues surrounding photography, whereby news images are taken by eye-witnesses on mobile phones, clever and affordable compact cameras allow anyone to make technically accomplished pictures, and the internet has made disseminating and even manipulating images part of our daily lives. This last aspect has been incorporated into the show by encouraging viewers to upload their own images onto the image-sharing website Flickr, which has been described as the seventh gallery.

As the exhibition continues it turns into a short survey of contemporary British documentary photography. Perhaps this highlights the complex relationship between documentary photography and the gallery that has evolved in the last twenty to thirty years.

One institution that has played an important role in this development is the Newport School of Art based in South Wales. Photography has been

studied at Newport since 1972, when Magnum photographer David Hurn, and Keith Arnatt who has a retrospective at the Photographers' Gallery this summer, established the course. Since then, Newport has developed an international reputation as centre of excellence for teaching documentary photography. It has produced graduates who have continued to make substantial contributions in photography, including Grace Lau, Jonathan Olley and Citybank prize nominee Simon Norfolk, all of whom are contributors to the *How We Are* exhibition.

Dr. Ian Walker is programme leader on the MFA Documentary Photography, which he developed with Professor Paul Seawright in 1997. As well as exhibiting photographic projects internationally, is an expert on surrealism and photography. Clive Landen is a senior lecturer whose documentary landscape work has been exhibited internationally and his project *Familiar British Wildlife* is included in *How We Are*. Paul Reas is also a senior lecturer and his piece *I Can Help* is included in the exhibition as an important example of "new colour documentary" in British photography.

Jesse Alexander

Clive Landen

Paul Reas

Ian Walker

JA As you haven't actually seen the show yet, what do you (IW) think about the idea of making a survey exhibition like this one?

IW If you think about the Tate doing a show about British painting or sculpture from 1840 to 2007... they just wouldn't do it. That they believe they can do a show like that suggests something about the way those institutions still think about photography. The show is being presented as being comprehensive, but it really ought to have been presented as being a personal choice. That's what it is and that should be made more explicit.

PR It is stated in the catalogue that it is not intended to be a survey.

IW Well I'm reading that from the marketing material, which I suppose is addressing a different audience.

PR Undoubtedly the Tate are still thinking about photography and its relationship with time, which – for me, anyway – is one of the least exciting outcomes of the photographic process. There still seems to be an institutional inability to think about how the photographic image can communicate quite complex ideas, that are not necessarily related to time.

IW I do know many of the works in the show and it seems to me that much of it is work that you need to see a certain amount of in order to get a sense of the whole body of work, rather than two or three pictures per person/project. It seems a bit of a backwards step for Tate Britain compared to for example, the *Cruel and Tender* show [at Tate Modern], where each photographer got a room in which the viewer got a sense of the whole body of work.

PR I wonder if that highlights different agendas between Tate Modern and Tate Britain, in that TB sees itself doing the big “museum” shows, whereas TM is more of a loose canon and can be a bit more adventurous?

IW The Tate Liverpool show [*Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now* (2006)] was interesting because they included a mix of painting, film and sets of photographs which cut across the medium.

CL There's no doubt that *How We Are* is a partial show, and I agree that there are certain names there that shouldn't be. At the opening, I mentioned this to Michael Hoppen when he asked for my thoughts and his response was along the lines of, “well this is Val Williams' show!” and he came to her defence quite forcefully. I'm aware that there were many disputes as to who would be included in the show and I guess that you have to question the role of the art market, in terms of who is promoted within the photographic world. You have to take that on board, and also when you think about photography in general.

IW Certainly as the show progresses, it becomes much more about photographers who show their work in galleries as opposed to editorial photography, for example.

CL There is no gallery work in the post war section [*The New Britain 1945-1969*] because there was very limited gallery space back then. Nowadays it seems, much of the photography that is seen, is promoted through the galleries. It seems to me that if you're a young photographer and your work doesn't fit well in a gallery space then you've got a fight on your hands.

PR It's interesting that within the show, you can see a shift in the way that photography has thought about itself in relation to the gallery, particularly the last two rooms [*The Urge to Document 1970-1990* and *Reflections on a Strange Country*] which is full of 12"x16" colour prints. Compared to work in the rest of the exhibition which consists mostly of vintage material, it's all about "wiz, bam!" big, glossy presentation. The ambition for that to happen has been percolating for a long time. Only recently has it been possible to think of yourself as someone who is working in documentary and have an ambition to see your work in an art market rather than an editorial context.

IW When Paul Seawright and I started the MA course ten years ago in 1997, one of our concerns was that a lot of the work in galleries was documentary, but it dare not call itself that. Somehow, documentary was something that seemed to sit elsewhere. Paul Seawright's work for example is documentary, and he found himself caught between those things: he was showing in galleries, yet his work came out of documentary traditions which one couldn't really talk about in the context of the gallery.

CL During my first ever conversation with PS he told me to bear in mind that his background was in what he called "fine art documentary". So he placed himself very much within a fine art context.

IW But now he has gone to Ulster University, he works with people who are saying "we aren't photographers: we are artists *using* photography."

PR People still have this problem when they think about photography; particularly photographers, when they try to define what they do. All that anxiety comes out of insecurity; you still don't feel that your practice has been completely embraced by the big institutions in particular. I've exchanged countless e-mails of varying degrees of anger about who is and isn't in the show, simply because these opportunities don't come around very often. Hopefully this show will start to break down some of these insecurities and anxieties and then we can all come out of the closet!

IW There is a weird situation at present, for example, the National Media Museum in Bradford is reducing its involvement with photography (and changed its name); the V&A Museum's photography space has been reduced to a corridor. I don't think things have moved forward in general and obviously the Tate are interested in particular things and not others. What's interesting is that you find people installing work in other sorts of locations: Dan Holdsworth's show [*At the Edge of Space*] was in the National Maritime Museum, and that was the appropriate place for the work. You can see much more interesting things going on within works when they're showed at these sorts of institutions rather than somewhere like the Tate.

PR There are lots of different survival strategies at play throughout British documentary; certainly we were all of a generation where one did other things to supplement and support ones practice: Some people taught, some worked in an editorial context. One did it partly through choice but mainly out of necessity to support the work that you really wanted to do. I think the "younger" generation haven't had to embrace that to the same extent, because there is now a market for what they do.

IW Do you really think people can make a living out of showing and selling documentary photographs?

PR I don't think a huge amount do, but some definitely can. I'm certain that it's at least the ambition for a lot of people who graduate, because there are precedents being set. How realistic it is, I'm not sure.

IW I think that's the fine art model. Even few painters and sculptors, for example, have been able to do that without needing to teach or get other jobs to support themselves.

CL You do these things out of necessity and I don't think there's any difference between when you graduated in the '70s and today. There's still the element of survival; the ethos is still the same except the opportunities are radically different. Certainly when I graduated in the '70s, the idea of security was very important, but I don't think the younger generation today are as concerned with that as we were.

JA What does Newport have to offer its students that is unique?

PR I think what's unique about Newport is its history and its association with documentary photography over the years, which is longstanding and very important to the history of British photography. If you look at *How We Are* there are I think ten current or ex-members of staff or students contributing. I think that says a lot about how prolific Newport has been in producing people who have gone on to do interesting things in photography. Also, there is a rigour and a commitment demanded to being a photographer and producing a lot of work over a period of time, which I haven't seen at other institutions I've been involved with. I think that has come about from the founding philosophy of the people who established these courses, who were working photographers. That level of professionalism has underpinned everything that has been taught here, and also taught with a kind of realism and an expectation that people would leave equipped and prepared, but more importantly, enthused to work professionally. I think that has always been the case, still is, and is evident by the number of people who are in that particular show.

CL I think PR is being a little bit modest and I would say that one of the unique things about this programme since it started is the staff that have taught here. There has always been staff who were either exhibiting or publishing work. That's not to say that isn't the case with any other institution, but there has always been an engagement – from theory through to practice – with the outside world, which is brought back into the teaching. Maybe that isn't

unique, but it is a special attribute. What we expect from the students is no less than what we would expect from ourselves as practicing photographers, and so there is no hierarchy of criticism of work. The degree of criticism is delivered to the students at a very high level. That expectancy is overlaid upon the students right from that first contact that you have with them, and that is something special that this programme has always had.

PR It actually started as a TOPS course which was a government initiative to try to get young people off the dole cues; a kind of glamorized work experience over a year of intensive study. So originally it wasn't part of any academic institution. Although it was housed within the art school, it was actually funded by the government.

CL Those first few students didn't really have any experience of photography. They might have had a background in social services; architects wanting to add photography as another string to their bow; journalists who wanted to use photography... There were very few people who came as photographers.

IW There is still that emphasis on *what* you want to photograph. You don't just do it for the sake of taking photographs; you have an interest that you want to use photography to explore.

CL That criteria was part of the interview process, for example the ones from a social science background would be asked about what they are doing with it and how would they like to use photography within it. The photographic work that they undertook in those early days was located back into their areas of specialism. So there was a really good collaboration between the photography / art world and in the industrial activity that they were pursuing at the time.

IW In the 1980s we had to deal with the kind of criticism of documentary that started arriving: There was always a discussion about ethics, particularly photographing people and the photographer's responsibilities.

CL That was all part of the learning process; it wasn't just about making pictures. David Hurn published *On Being a Photographer*, which talked about how you move around the world as a photographer, your responsibilities and - as John Tagg says - "the burden upon you" (the burden of what you're looking at and how you deal with it and represent it). The relationship with society was pivotal to them to be able to work as a photographer. In a way, this was taught almost subliminally; talking around the table about, for example, why you might have chosen to photograph disability. A lot of us explored those sorts of subjects in the early '70s because, if I'm being honest, it was fashionable. But we were always questioning why we were doing it, and some of us developed it more and more as we became fascinated by the subject, which of course affected the work we did later on.

IW Even when I joined the course in the '80s, the bulk of people would be quite journalistic, but there would always be those three or four students that would find some other route through it and find some way of working off it quite bleakly and they often ended up on the second or third year of the fine art degree course.

PR It has to be said that those people had quite a hard time. It wasn't really supportive.

JA How does the Centre for Photographic Research operate here?

IW In an art institution it's always going to operate very differently to, for example science-based research groups that involve several people working on one project. Our research involves individuals making very different work alone, but the way different work comes together and generates a set of issues is important. The fact that we've had people like Joan Fontcuberta, Alfredo Jaar and Donovan Wylie as research fellows has really helped our profile. But we are I suppose, still working individually and it needs to be pulled together more.

CL The research centre shouldn't be the drive of your own activity, but it should be a space that you can come together and work in collaboration with

your colleagues or institutions outside of your own, whether it might be industrial or educational. The promise and the enthusiasm is there, but I think it's got a little way to go yet.

IW And I think we need to continue to develop more possibilities for PhD and research students. Everyone's been testing the water with this practice-led PhD, which has its problems, but I think it's very important that people should be able to get that sort of level of degree for making work.