

PHOTOGRAPHY AND EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS
reflections on documentary practice

"actuality is an invention to sell newspapers, only
newspapers, only personal interest is universal"

(Robert Frank)

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My territory work is the one of photography and documentary film. For me, photography is an activity where my feelings as a photographer and a perception of the feelings of the person in front of the camera converge. When I am with my eye in the viewfinder of the camera I constantly ask myself what is going on inside the life I am portraying; I assume myself as a documentarian because I cannot find a fairer word, it is clear to me that the mere fact of "documenting" is insufficient for me.

I feel that photographing is to have the need of understanding the human being and therefore myself, it is an activity in which we approach the world with a specific intention and return home with a different idea. Photographing is an act of revealing something to the photographer; each image is in itself a mystery. If we accept that looking is an intentional act, I understand that this looking is, first of all, a search for a meaning that, being hidden in life and coming to the surface in the form of an image, serves me to recognize myself in some particular dimension.

For me a photographic instant without humanity is an empty instant, looking is an act where I try to read reality trying to understand and apprehend it; I speak of a reality inhabited by human beings of course, not even the empty space where the human being once inhabited does interest me by itself, I photograph against time and against disappearance, I need people so I can see and feel due to images.

This approach is intuitive and not very rational, it is in the randomness of the visible where the hidden surface becomes evident to me. It would seem that this type of documentary filmmaking has an artistic character but I try to be careful not to get too much into the territory of "art", sometimes I feel that notion distant from mine. To make art is to see the world and reinterpret it, it is a discourse that built the idea that to make a photography is to lie; as the camera has a point of view, that makes us to see the world never as it is. Of course we don't see it as it is, but we see it. John Berger says "In itself, photography cannot lie but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather, the truth it can defend for itself is limited". The fact that it is limited does not make it less true, it is a portion of the historical world that the camera

records and says "this has been" (Roland Barthes - The Lucid Camera).

In my photographic practice I seek to find my truth. What I try to do is to dissect the world, to auscultate it, to turn it upside down, to find its hidden meaning. My territory is the exterior and although there are so many artistic projects today that carry the aura of "the public" I always feel that in the artistic discourse the artist's self, the aesthetics, the "proposal" or "the concept" takes precedence over the real thing itself. It is not a question of speaking here of a realistic aesthetic, it is a question of understanding a practice.

Susan Sontag says "The action of photographing has been interpreted in two entirely different ways: either as an act of lucid and precise knowledge, of conscious intelligence, or as a way of pre-intellectual, intuitive encounter". This second option frees me from the constraints of art. On the other hand, the concepts of "photojournalism" and "documentary" have become, in my opinion, too static ideas that admit little debate and that are sustained in the territories of the mass media. When facing this territory I seek a more leisurely, attenuated and less conditioned by facts, a type of gamble that is difficult for direct photography.

If the event does not condition me, I need dialogue and emotional closeness. Distance, a very important factor when recording photographically, is not for me a measurable physical fact, it is an inner feeling. I believe in emotional distance, the one that allows me to get closer.

The world as such is no longer the same when being photographed, so in the kind of photography that I do I establish a dialogue with the subject, his presence touches me and my presence generates something in his being. To be photographed means to be taken into account and this fact produces some effect in the life of the individual. Nothing remains the same. Photography is for me a means of communion, not a means of communication; it is the territory of exchange, not of the message.

To achieve this first I look at the world before I start shooting, when I enter a place my camera is always in my hand, I want that world to know that I have entered there to photograph, that I have not come to do something else; it is then when the first relationship is established, this will be closed weeks or months later when I give the individuals prints of their photographs, this is essential, it is a way of saying thank you and to hope that somehow my presence in their world and the way I saw them will become clear.

I photograph until I feel I have accomplished something, it usually takes me about two or three hours of being in the same place or with the same person. I photograph, think, understand and photograph again. Since I photograph on film I don't see the photos while I'm taking them, it's one of the great pleasures of photochemical: the doubt.

When I look at Diane Arbus's photographs of a "freak" world that crosses the human landscape of the United States in the sixties, I feel that I am in front of totally surreal images, but not surreal in the sense of imaginary, but in the sense of being able to discover a hidden and profound reality beneath the surface of the visible. Every time I lose my north I return to Arbus, or to Robert Frank or Bruce Davidson or Julio Mitchel (all of them New York photographers who make the city their working territory). Diane Arbus said "I believe that if one scrutinizes reality closely, if in some way we really get close to it, it becomes fantastic", that feeling moves me, the idea of discovering, of accepting chance and of embracing intuition as a photographic force. Faced with a random and unpredictable world, the mere necessity to make contact with it or to want to be momentarily part of a reference external to us, generates an intellectually ungraspable link which, for our peace of mind, we have called "look" or as Octavio Paz puts it: "The unreality of what is looked at gives reality to the gaze".

When the photographic act is over, the discovery becomes another, it is no longer a discovery of the world, but of oneself in front of that world. The world of digital photography with its intangibility has not given me much (actually it has only given me the scanning of the negative and printing from the computer, nothing else), maybe it is because everything new makes me suspicious or because it is too complicated technologically, photographing film gives me a certainty about the result and opens something very important for my work: the waiting time.

The photographic immediacy of our hyper-connected times generate unnecessary stress for me. For me, it is in the pause, in the waiting and in the walk of life where images are built. Between the moment of the shot and the appearance of the image on the screen, days and even weeks can pass. I believe this passage from one feeling to another (from the look in the viewfinder to the look on the screen) is the place where the photographer is able to see himself.

Subjectivity is the engine of this second part of my work; my photography is an activity that is neither separated from my personal experience nor it is a process detached from my emotional experience. To look at the contact sheet is always a complex process, it needs time and good spirits, it is to see oneself in the mistakes and in the successes. Cartier Bresson speaks of the contact sheet as a kind of psychoanalyst's couch, I see it as a diary of work and life; it refers to the moment when I was, where I was and how I felt at that moment; it is a diary to which I return whenever I need to. In the reading of the diary my search is for humanity, all the time I need the presence of the human feeling. It sounds general but for me it is the possibility of accessing the intimate, the personal and the close. I repeat: an instant without humanity is an empty instant.

This search is driven by two main engines: emotion and fragility.

In its technical essence, photography consists of finding a place from where to shoot (camera position and distance) when to shoot (moment of the shot); in its content essence I feel it as the space of the emotional (any inner mobility that is evident: loneliness, despair, love, determination, etc.) and the fragile (weakness, uncertainty and the constant feeling of loneliness).

That is why a dramatic moment by itself: the punch, the scream or the brutality do not feed me, they stun me; I seek to see the before and after of an event, I look for a contained emotion in which to find a sense of humanness. Among my projects I have photographed intensely the world of classical music and the world of sports practice; in both cases I was never interested in the concrete fact: making music or practicing sports; my interest was always before and after the performance or competition, an interest in the previous urgency or in the final relief and exhaustion. Those have been my coordinates. Possibly this kind of systematic approach has also been strengthened by my cinematographic practice as a director of photography in fiction films, films where dramatic emotion takes precedence: the gesture, the text, the face and the light are for me the basis of film composition. Without emotion there is no cinema, so when Henri Cartier Bresson says: "for me, a photograph is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, on the one hand, of the meaning of a fact and, on the other hand, of a rigorous organization of the visually perceived forms that express that fact", I recognize in those words two ideas: for photography, the need to see human emotion, to capture it before it disappears (always relating it to a context) and for cinema, the obligation to recreate that emotion. In both fields I work under the parameters of the emotional. I feel my relationship of these ideas with cinema and photography as a way back and forth between the real and the image; in photography the journey is towards the real, in cinema it is from the real, a constant journey between two worlds that are constantly in need of each other.

Why has humanness become so important to me, more than the image itself or art itself? On the one hand I think that in the face of the photojournalistic maelstrom of visual intensities such as the World Press Photo Awards I always miss the presence of images of empathy, not images that only give a sense of relief; the power of the image of barbarism, famine, violence and spectacularized marginality are devices of emotional separation that hit us but do not touch us, they make us feel and say "this does not happen to me", it is a false and cushioning relief.

Empathy is something else, it is a contact, it is an understanding, it is to feel part of something beyond the walls of our room or the screen of the smartphone.

At the end of the road empathy is always a balm in the face of loneliness.

Maybe that's why I photograph, to feel less lonely in a world that is both hyper-connected and disconnected at the same time. It is a practice in which I have been involved for about twenty years now, and which has had both flourishing and dark periods. Now as I write this and as I review my work I find a certain notion that has been occurring in my photographic practice. At the beginning the main concern was the obligatory nature of finding a theme but over the years I realized that the theme is a non-rational decision and only occurs when we are able to see ourselves without fear and we find our constant deficiencies, the theme comes from there, from our own urgent need to get something out or find something.

The themes appear when we need them and they have already spent enough time inside us in a kind of slow cooking. Musicians and Sportsmen came to me in a calm and not drastic way. They took their time to give me clues of an inner need to get closer to those worlds. When the subject finally arrived and I started shooting photographs, the question that moved me afterwards was: what do I feel when I photograph; in the last few years that doubt has become a little clearer and I have found that I approach the world in search of a meaningful connection through intellect, emotion and intuition.

My work as a teacher has made the world of ideas and reflection part of me; that is why sometimes when I photograph a sense of analysis of the outside world appears and sometimes there are images that come after a search of understanding that world, this is the world of the intellect. Emotionality is another dimension and it is the most fertile for me, the photos that interest me the most today are taken when what happens in front of the camera generates a deep feeling, a human connection and a vital feeling. And finally, intuition, that primary and automatic feeling in front of life; it is the territory of reflexes and the alert body, it is when I sometimes photograph "without thinking", in an immediate and agile way.

My current work takes place in these three dimensions. When I photograph and walk in a particular space, these three dynamics overlap, contradict or reinforce each other. In the middle is me, my body and my camera. The rest, what comes, is photography.