

STAFFRIDER AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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From the very first issue of *Staffrider*, photography was included as a regular section alongside fiction, poetry and art. By providing this platform for documentary photography, *Staffrider* legitimised photography as an art form, and recognised it as being equal in expressive significance to prose, poetry and art.

The pages devoted to photography exposed the work of photographers to a wider audience than they could reach by any other means, and helped to popularise and demystify the photographic image. The concept of what a photograph could say was extended beyond the family snapshot, the newspaper or advertising image.

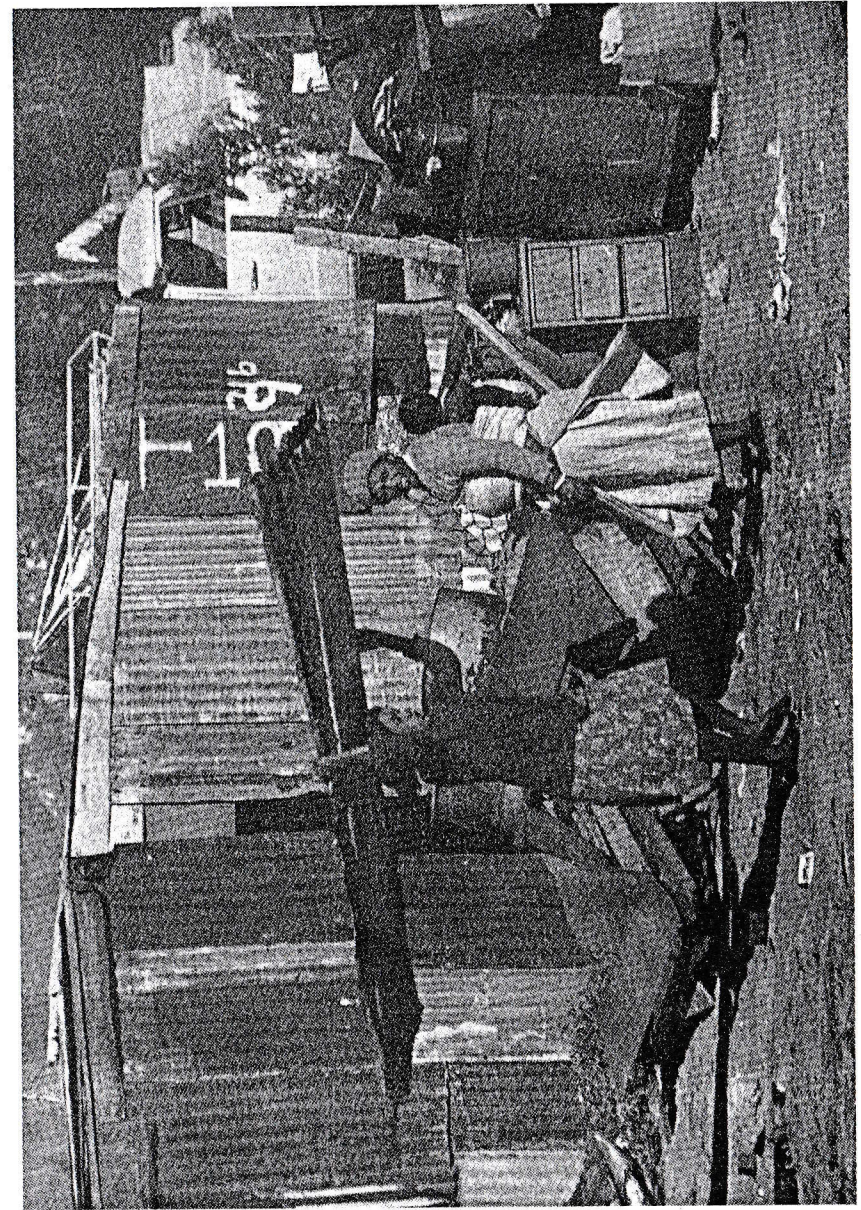
The positive role played by *Staffrider* was particularly important because in the seventies the practice of documentary photography was precarious and fragmentary. Documentary photography was struggling to establish itself in a culture that gave no encouragement to the making of such images. And for each individual photographer, there was the struggle to overcome the blind spots resulting from an internalised apartheid ideology. To see what had not hitherto been seen; to make visible what had been invisible; to find ways of articulating, through the medium of photography, a reality obscured by government propaganda and the mass media — this was the challenge to photographers.

Each image that appeared in *Staffrider* was a victory over these obstacles. Despite these difficulties, the documentary photographer was in a stronger position than the artist. There was a well-established tradition of documentary photography which he/she could draw on (this was mostly American), and locally there were a few pioneering photographers whose work in earlier years had paved the way. These precedents had clearly established the validity of social comment through photography. But, for the artists whose work appeared in *Staffrider*, there was the dilemma of trying to meet the demands of a formalist aesthetic while giving expression to a consciousness of social issues. While artists battled to resolve this problem, photography was able to move ahead, exploring and documenting injustices in society in a straightforward but telling way.

In 1983, a *Staffrider* special issue devoted entirely to photography was published. At the same time the first *Staffrider* exhibition of photography was held. (This large group exhibition became a regular annual event.) These two events

reflected the gathering momentum of the social documentary movement.

Staffrider's support for photography over the past ten years undoubtedly contributed to the growth of the social documentary movement — photographers whose work appeared in the earliest issues are still very active, and new photographers are appearing all the time to swell the ranks. In recent years, the movement has also gathered strength on an organisational level. Organisations such as Afrapix, The Centre for Documentary Photography and the Market Photo Gallery have facilitated the work of photographers. The recent formation of The Photo Workshop testifies to the continuing vitality of the movement.



Jimi Matthews *Twenty thousand gone*