

Apartheid — a vigilant witness

A reflection on photography

by Paul Weinberg

I intended this book as a documentary to show what life is really like for Africans. The government will probably ban this book. If I were them I would distribute thousands of copies for whites to show their children if they were concerned with eventual survival. (Ernest Cole from *A House of Bondage*, the first published book of photographs by a black South African).

Apartheid is violence. Violence is used to subjugate and to deny basic democratic rights to black people. But no matter how the policy of Apartheid has been applied over the years, both black and white activists have actively opposed it. It is in the struggle for justice that the gulf between artists, writers, photographers and the people has been narrowed. (Omar Badsha, editor of *The Cordoned Heart*).

These two comments are from two generations of documentary photography. They are in short the pre-1980's and the post-1980's. They share the common thread of all documentary photography to record the truth, but are different in one important way. Ernest Cole, formerly Kede, who changed his name to be granted 'coloured' status in pursuit of exposing apartheid before he fled the country, worked as an individual; Omar Badsha, who represents the more recent period, is a product of the collective movement of recent years.

A good starting point in the history of South African documentary photography is the 1950s. The influences of the picture magazines which had made their way

down to the southern tip of Africa combined with a decade of defiance and popular resistance. It was this combination which married culture and politics in a very vital way to produce **Drum** magazine. Through the influence of their first photographer, Jurgen Schadeberg, and later Bob Gosani, Peter Magubane and Alf Khumalo, these photographers gave life to the campaigns and people who made history. At the same time working from the inside and hardly known in his own country was Eli Weinberg, trade unionist and activist who recorded the political events of the time. Weinberg, who was involved in the ANC, was banned and under house arrest for most of his life. His book **A Portrait of a People** is banned in South Africa and his work has very seldom been seen. His contribution remains an indispensable chronology of the struggle against apartheid of that period. Photographs of the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, the Treason Trial as well as his portraits of the popular leaders of the time, including Mandela, Sisulu and others, provide an invaluable resource in our popular history.

Drum

It is only 30 years later that a number of books that reflect that period are available for our consumption and scrutiny. **The Fifties People** is the most recent of such publications. Edited by Schadeberg, it is a powerful document of the period. Schadeberg himself, a contemporary legend, is now being dusted off the ledge and finding his way back into South African life after a long time away. Working in the mould of **Drum** ('live fast, die young and have a good-looking corpse') the work is reflective of that period. Music superstars of the time pose next to reportage of political campaigns. The amalgam is in an incredible mix which even 30 years later makes many modern picture magazines look weak.

It is important to note a difference in style and content between the **Drum** photographers and Weinberg. Weinberg was the serious recorder who looked at political events and people while the **Drum** photographers reflected the culture as well. As Schadeberg said, reflecting on that period at a documentary conference recently, 'we also went out to have a good time then'. Weinberg concentrated on making a political statement of the time, while the **Drum** period is characterized by a broad look at black culture, up till then disregarded by the white-oriented media.

Around at the time but to emerge only in the 1960s as a full-time photographer was David Goldblatt. Magubane, Schadeberg and Goldblatt remain the pioneers of the early period whose influence on the photographic movement has been profound.

Magubane still works in the reportage school of 'if you're not close enough, you're not good enough'. 'People should know how the underdogs live - even if I wasn't dealing with the underdog, but with the rich; people should know how the rich live' (interview 1987). Banned in 1968, Magubane is best known for his 1976 photographs and book on Soweto, after which he spent 519 days in detention.

Goldblatt on the other hand is a more traditional documentary photographer, characterized by his use of the portrait. His style, although original, has touches of Walker Evans and Paul Strand with flashes of Cartier Bresson. 'I am concerned to look at the world which I live in, trying to probe it, understand it, and use the camera for doing this and the occasion for doing this . . . I am concerned with the choices people make for themselves' (interview 1987).

Schadeberg falls somewhere in between the 'on the beat' reportage photographer and the considered documentary photographer. He was strongly influenced by the picture magazine formula of photojournalism adapted to a South African situation. Having studied in Germany before his arrival in South Africa he played a crucial role, not only as a photographer, but in his ability to pass on photographic skills. Struan Robertson, a contemporary and himself a documentary photographer, for whom Ernest Cole worked for a time, wrote of Schadeberg's work: 'The centrality of his role as instructor cannot be understated. Not only did he play the crucial role of sparking off a complete tradition of black photographers involved in journalistic and documentary work, but he also influenced many white photographers as well.' (*The Wooden Spoon*, 1987, thesis on documentary photography).

All three are still very active in photography. Schadeberg is currently working in film and still on 1950s material. Goldblatt, who works primarily for **Leadership** magazine, has devoted his recent energies to a portrait on the night riders of KwaNdebele and structures in and around Johannesburg. Magubane has his hands full as a staffer for **Time**.

Magubane and Goldblatt, and more recently Schadeberg, through their own photographic works have provided an invaluable reference for our documentary history. Goldblatt's work provides a sociological journey through South Africa - from the mine lifestyle to an in-depth look at the Afrikaans-speaking community. In **Boksburg** he looks at his own background while **Life Times under Apartheid**, with Nadine Gordimer, is his attempt to make an overt political statement. Magubane's affinity with his subject matter allows for a more spontaneous and organic political statement, in particular on Soweto - its poverty, its spirit and its resistance of 1976.

Afrapix

In contrast to the pre-1980s period, the post-1980s period is characterized by a collective approach to documentary photography. Its early roots can be traced to the cultural magazine **Staffrider** which was born after 1976, in response to the cultural renaissance that emerged then. The magazine gave rise to and stimulated voices up to then unheard, of poets, writers, artists and photographers. Most of the photographers at the time were working in isolation from each other. The new generation comprised Omar Badsha, Judas Ngwenya, Jimmy Matthews, Biddy Partridge, Mxolise Moyo, Lesley Lawson, and Paul Weinberg. They ranged dramatically in opinion and skill but expressed a deep interest in sharing ideas and skills. All, in their own way, had been documenting the horrors of apartheid resettlement, squatter life, migrant labour, poverty. Some of these photographers met informally in Johannesburg one day and the end result was the formation of Afrapix. From the start Afrapix had two very clear objectives - to be an agency and a picture library and to stimulate documentary photography.

The library that grew out of this meeting became an important resource for the alternative press and socially concerned groups. But the meeting point was fundamental to the seeds of a new kind of approach. In very simple terms this was that, collectively we can say much more than we can individually. Two years later came the formation of the Black Society of Photographers established in Johannesburg which had a short but important influence on later events.

In June 1982, the Culture and Resistance Festival organized by the Botswana Museum set the tone for the collective photographic movement. It hosted the first

collective exhibition to come from South Africa, bringing twenty photographers together for a first joint photographic statement. Participants learnt a new language - artists were not above the struggle for change but part of it. All people who worked in culture shared a common identity - the word cultural worker was heard for the first time.

There were black photographers who did participate but, by and large, it was met with a black boycott, emanating from the Black Society of Photographers whose line was no participation with white photographers. What is significant about this exhibition, which characterizes the documentary genre from this point on, is the range of skill and vision. Experienced photographers like David Goldblatt exhibited side by side with young and inexperienced photographers showing their work for the first time. Goldblatt has been the bridge between the generations.

From 1982, collective exhibitions became an annual event. Under the auspices of **Staffrider** they continued until 1987. In a special magazine highlighting the first exhibition called **South Africa Through the Lens** some of the thinking behind the exhibitions was reflected editorially:

'The camera doesn't lie. This is a myth about photography in South Africa in the Eighties that we will not swallow. In our country the camera lies all the time - on our TV screens, in our newspapers and on our billboards that proliferate our townships. Photography can't be divorced from the political, social and the economic issues that surround us daily. As photographers we are inextricably caught up in those processes - we are not objective instruments but play a part in the way we choose to make those statements. [The photographers in this collection] show a South Africa in conflict, in suffering, in happiness and in resistance. They examine the present and beckon the viewer to an alternative future. . . . Social Documentary Photography is not, in our view, neutral. In South Africa the neutral option does not exist - you stand with the oppressors or against them. The question we pose is how do photographers hit back with their cameras?'

A criteria was thus provided for an aesthetic, although this took a number of years to articulate itself in form and content. More importantly, a process had been begun whereby, year after year, more and more photographers were drawn into the collective exhibitions.

Another very important milestone soon after the Culture and Resistance Festival was the Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development, set in motion in 1983. Unlike the Farm Security Project, its budget was conceived along amateur lines. In a very thorough way it put photo essays to record the poverty that underlies apartheid – resettlement, migrant labour, farm labour, squatter life, etc. However, in a significant break with the past, it also documented organization and resistance as a way out of the plight of poverty. This conceptualization is significant in the consciousness of the documentary movement at the time. An important process had been internalized which came out of a lot of questioning by photographers who photographed poverty. What is the solution to poverty and how does one portray it? It is also important to note the symbiotic relationship that documentary photography had by this stage with the democratic organizations in this country. The new generation had begun to articulate itself through work and ideas. Photography, they asserted, needed to go further – to take sides.

A number of photographers began to document the growth of the progressive movement, the labour movement, and present a comprehensive picture that had not been seen since 1976. It should be noted that, in these early days and even with the formation of the UDF, the presence of the international press was small. It was only when South Africa became a 'story' that interest was shown. And it was only when it became a 'violent story' that concerted interest was shown. It is for these reasons that the indigenous documentary movement has a depth to it that international photographers lack.

However, many of the photographers who did work for the international press came from the new generation and their impact has been remarkable. Professor Neville Dubow, Professor of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, has suggested that the period of unrest of the past few years has provided powerful images that have helped to articulate the kind of violence South Africans experience. He cites two kinds of violence – structural violence and responses to this violence. Structural violence is the apartheid system itself and the responses range from militancy to victims of this violence. He has also noted the adapting religious rituals that reflect a violent society.

The Hidden Camera

It has been exhibitions that have provided the catalyst for a collective approach. In December 1987, Amsterdam hosted the biggest ever anti-apartheid festival. Under the title, **The Hidden Camera**, it attempted to draw parallels with the way camera was used as a form of resistance against the Nazi occupation of Holland. The exhibition drew a response from 32 South African photographers. It brought together the most coherent work from those photographers who had been on the frontline, as well as essays on different themes and communities.

The collective exhibition has had a profound effect on the traditional conceptions of documentary photography. It encouraged up-and-coming young photographers and provided them with an outlet. It stimulated the 'travelling exhibition' and a form that goes beyond the 'gallery'. The gallery is often a community hall, a church hall, a public meeting, a foyer, a union conference and so on. When COSATU held their 2nd congress it was accompanied not only by a wealth of cultural events but an extensive historical exhibition of the labour movement as well.

The travelling exhibition often coincides with significant cultural and political events, such as August 9 (Women's Day), or the History Workshop's Popular History Open Day. This new type of gallery is reflective of an attempt by the new generation to deal with inherent contradictions of photography. 'Critical culture' becomes a product for the 'converted' and the middle class, while the new gallery has begun to provide an alternative outlet to a popular constituency. One of the products of the collective exhibitions has been the development of an alternative and accessible archive, a resource that has helped the stimulus of popular and alternative forms of communication - posters, calendars and the alternative press.

The documentary photographer who goes out to record, research and make a statement is soon faced with the issue of taking sides. It is for this reason that the South African photographer has a clear role to play. The clarity of this role has provided an organizational base for photographers to come together to address inherent problems. One of the most pressing areas in need of attention is that of photographic education. 'Each one teach one', once a popular slogan for a now banned organization, is slowly spreading into the photographic fraternity. While it

should be recognized that community photography is in its infancy, increasingly there are workshops being offered by more experienced photographers to facilitate this process. Their focus is on community groups and the trade union movement. Workshops are run by the Centre for Documentary Photography, Dynamic Images, the Brotherhood, Vakalisa, and Afrapix. These organizations comprise the existing photographic collectives. These collectives exist for commercial, ideological, education or a combination of reasons.

Looking at the community photography movement, it should be noted that there are very few black women photographers. There are a number of white women photographers who in the last ten years have made a significant contribution to the documentary genre. This is clearly an area that needs urgent attention as highlighted by Nisa Malinga, COSATU's cultural organizer in the Durban area. Making the point in general she observed that women joined in organized culture reluctantly. The problem lay in the double-shift issue, which saw women at full pace at the workplace and then working at home. This left very little time for cultural activity.

The collective approach of the 1980s has helped generate a process that has dynamically challenged the contradictions of photography as practised in the capitalist world. The collective approach has brought amateur and professional, teacher and student together in an exciting fusion of ideas and cultures. This has spurred on a development of non-racial vision and consciousness. Regional and local structures are helping to concretize this collective movement. The Photo Workshop based in Johannesburg and the Cape Cultural Congress are emergent fora for an indigenous non-racial culture through which it is hoped photographers will continue to document, teach and organize to express this new vision.

While there may be encouraging signs in the development of documentary photography, there has also been a concerted attack on the media for the past two years. It is important to see this development in the context of the other. Ever since the apartheid government has been in existence, there have been media restrictions. With increasing resistance to apartheid, there have been increasing restrictions placed on the camera. Much of the law protects those in uniform in defence of apartheid. By law, any photograph of a policeman or soldier or their operation is illegal.

The period of protracted unrest (1984-1986) brought to the fore an interesting contradiction that the lower levels of the apartheid government had to deal with. The police and army were caught between attacking the press and the people. The state was caught between showing off its reform to the outside world and its undisguised repression. It was in this gap that the camera played its most crucial role. This period has recorded some of the most dramatic images to emerge from South Africa. To suggest that photographers had it easy is misleading. Whenever they could, the police and army, having dealt with the people, then dealt with the press. It was a period of continuous arrest, confiscation, harassment and even at times assault.

Propaganda

It was in this period that world opinion was truly altered irrevocably to take sides against the South African government. The State of Emergency allowed the state to shift its attack to the press and the camera, which had inflicted a lot of punishment on the image of the country and needed to be sorted out.

The camera was and still is, except for the government's own propaganda purposes, seen as an instrument of insurrection. Louis le Grange, Minister of Law and Order in 1986, went further and accused the television crews of inciting violence. The subsequent media restrictions have refined the attack on the media to the point where a documentary on children made by the BBC can be the number one news item for three days.

Journalists and photographers who now criticize the government or merely cover anti-apartheid events are seen to be 'media terrorists' who are a part of the conspiracy theory that all that is opposition emanates from Moscow, even when it is on your front door. The gap that 'reform' politics allowed has gone and the gap between the press and anti-apartheid organizations, the people and the press is no more. We are all enemies and they are moving in on all of us. The latest press register that came with the last State of Emergency of June 1988 is an attempt to control every single journalist's copy, every photograph that gets published and all film and video footage that is taken. Breaches of these regulations are punished with a R20,000 fine or a ten-year jail sentence without the option of a fine.

Registration means, in effect, all media workers become licensed government agents. All those who refuse registration live dangerously or have to alter their careers. In a more insidious manner, the harassment caused to media workers, in particular small agencies, has become alarming. Chris Qwazi, a photographer who works for **Port Elizabeth News** (PEN), had all his negatives stolen in one of the 'strange burglaries' that took place in agencies recently. The 'burglars' penetrated sophisticated alarm systems only to steal files and documents and to leave the cash behind.

At a meeting to discuss this press registration and the gagging of the press, Sheena Duncan, human rights activist, appealed to the audience to 'stand up for the truth and respond creatively to apartheid'. What does this mean for the photographers who have built the tradition of documentary photography of which news is an integral part? How do they begin to 'respond creatively'? It is clear that the 'frontline' photography of the last few years will not be done by the professional. It will be the community photographer, the worker photographer who will record this history. A recent photograph that was published by **The Namibian**, an anti-apartheid newspaper based in Namibia, may illustrate this new era. The photograph showed an 'alleged Swapo guerilla' who was tied to a Caspir (a police vehicle) being paraded around a village in Ovamboland. What is far more important is that the photograph was taken with an instamatic camera by an Ovambo villager who, as quickly as he could, dispatched the film to the newspaper's head office in Windhoek.

The working photographer will continue exploring metaphors and symbols in an attempt to find creative responses. Recent work has indicated a shift into more in-depth community photography and more personal searches in the community of the photographer. Under such restrictions the camera seems likely to turn its energies to popular history and oral tradition, as has been the case in the struggles of Central America.

Many photographers will face the possibility of harassment, and of restrictions on or banning of their creative products. At the first ever documentary conference held in this country, its organizer, Omar Badsha was detained on the day it was to

open. It nevertheless went ahead with the feeling that the war on the media is very close to us. However, there is one war that the documentary tradition has shown, not only in our country but throughout the world, that apartheid will never win, and that is suppression of the truth.

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