Other Photographers – Nick Danziger – Danzigers Britain

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The description on the back reads: Nick Danziger began his journey in June 1994, as newspapers and magazines throughout the land commemorated the 50th anniversary of the D-Day landings and recalled the Allies' war aims (to "afford assurance that all men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want"). For the best part of a year, he lived among the homeless and unemployed in many of the ruined manufacturing and so-called "no-go" areas of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. With courage and sensitivity, he won the trust of the street children and shared the lives and heard the stories of hundreds of society's outsiders. A powerful and disturbing documentary (with 48 pages of his own photographs) of life in Britain for a forgotten section of society in the mid-1990s, and a tribute to the resilience of individuals faced with overwhelming odds.

Nick spent a year travelling from Brixton, to Leicester, Halifax, Newcastle, the Highlands, Glasgow, Blackpool, Barrow in Furness, Liverpool, Salford, Brighton, Suffolk, Cornwall, South Wales and Ireland. Nick sought out the deprived areas and those trying to make a change with those who felt they had no future and were living day to day. The same story and characters repeated everywhere he went, people wanting a release from the everyday. Gaining the trust of locals and often of children, he would take their photos and record their stories, although at times you felt the writing a little brief, wanting more description.

There are numerous images included in the book to illustrate the writing.
I was drawn to a page and a half obituary of the photographer Shirley Baker in the Sunday Times on October 11th, with the title of ‘Photographer who skilfully captured social upheaval in the sixties.

Shirley Baker is best known for her work detailing life in the north of England from the 1950s onwards, at a time when there were few women working in this field. During the 1950’s and onwards, slum clearances caused around one million homes to be demolished, so Shirley started documenting the streets of Salford where she lived, recording the stories of the streets that were soon to be demolished and replaced by tower blocks.

In an interview in the Guardian in 2012, she said: ‘People were turfed out of their homes. Some squatted in old buildings, trying to hang on to the life they knew. They didn’t have much and things were decided for them. A lot of people had dropped through the net and didn’t even know they were entitled to benefits. Some needed help but no one had even heard of a psychiatrist.

I would go out on to the streets capturing this upheaval, photographing people I came across. There was so much destruction: a street would be half pulled down and the remnants set on fire while people were still living in the area. As soon as any houses were cleared, children would move in and break all the windows, starting the demolition process themselves.’

This seemed very reminiscent of reading Nick Danziger’s book, Danziger’s Britain, of which he reported exactly the same happening decades after Baker recorded it.
Shirley Baker – A young traveller girl stands amid the rubble of a cleared area of dilapidated terraced housing in Manchester. 1968 [ONLINE] Available at: http://i.guim.co.uk/static/w-700/h–/q-95/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2014/10/7/1412703691559/bf771c5-492b-4be2-9c5f-5d7b9b4db0a-1020×704.jpeg. [Accessed 09 November 2014].

She names Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank as influences and there is great composition in her images. From those I’ve seen online she seemed to concentrate at the time on the women and children, perhaps thats because they were mostly at home and the men were working?

Shirley Baker – An elderly lady peers down the street from her perch inside a doorway in a row of terraced houses in Manchester. Two girls play football further down the street, close to a parked Morris Minor. [ONLINE] Available at: http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/77922000/jpg/_77922168_10910878-4522-4af9-bf77-11e68ba165e1.jpg. [Accessed 09 November 2014].

The obituary mentioned there would be an exhibition of her work in April 2015 at the photographers Gallery in Soho.

Bibliography/References


Research Point – Socially committed B&W photographers

Do your own research into the work of the socially committed B&W photographers discussed so far, both British (Exit Group, Chris Killip, Nick Danziger, Bill Brandt) and American (Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine). Was this social documentary work their prime focus? How does it fit with other work done by these photographers?

Exit Group – (Nicholas Battye/Chris Steele-Perkins/Paul Trevor)

Three politically and socially motivated photographers, who believed that inner-city poverty was endemic and that poverty, injustice and discrimination was leading to serious social disorder. As well as photographs they took oral records of peoples experiences of living in poverty in the 1970’s. All shot in London, with Trevor concentrating on Liverpool, Battye in Birmingham and Steele-Perkins in Newcastle, Middlesborough and Belfast.


Steele-Perkins said: We made contact with community organizations in search of contacts, we also did a lot of walking around deprived districts, talking to people in the street, knocking on doors. There was a different relationship that people had to photography then, compared to now. People welcomed us into their homes, litres of tea were drunk. We slept on floors, frien’s sofas, cheap B&Bs.

They worked in black and white, processing their own films to save money, sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation. The results were published in a book – Survival Programmes in 1982.

Chris Killip

During the mid 1970’s, Killip’s studied the communities that bore the brunt of industrial decline in the North East, documenting the political and social changes in working class communities around Britain as major industries closed down in the 70’s and 80’s. Killip worked closely with these communities over a number of years, and his images of their residents document the harsh conditions they lived under.


The work focuses on unemployment and the hardship that followed. Killip would work closely with the people that he photographed spending time living with the people creating the thoughtful black and white images. His images highlight the despair, helplessness and waiting of poverty.

Neil Danziger

I was aware of Nick Danziger from his images of Tony Blair during the lead up to the Iraq war, including the mirror image which I saw at the National Portrait.
With a grant from the Churchill fellowship, he travelled the silk route from Turkey to China, producing a book, Danziger's travels and following it with another, Danziger's Adventures for which he travelled from the riches of Miami to a Kurdish massacre in Turkey, before returning to Kabul and orphaned children. He crossed the line between professional and personal by setting up and arranging funding for a separate, properly run home for the youngsters and in 1996 adopted the last three children left in the home.

He followed these books up with Danziger's Britain, a social and political commentary on the state of Britain. Shot in black and white, the photographs show the powerful – judges, generals, aristocrats – and the vulnerable: the unemployed, the sick, terrorised pensioners trapped in bad neighbourhoods.

Not all gloom though. We are told that the two shirtless boys playing in the spray of an opened fire hydrant in Glasgow was the result of a little local anarchy during the hot summer. Repeatedly during this hot summer’s day the local firemen capped the fire hydrant, but once the fire engine had disappeared around the corner the children broke the cap to play in the geyser of water.

I ended up getting a little sidetracked as I bought Danziger's Britain to read as well as his other two travelogs.

Bill Brandt

In exercise 10 we've already looked at part of Brandt's social documentary with his book, The English at Home. He used his family members as models in some of his images and to gain access to the subjects he wanted to shoot. The Depression had been devastating to many, yet the rich were still living their lives as though things were the same as they had been in the 20s and so Brandt used his connections to document the differences he found in London society at the time. Using his access he took images of the home owners and guests and also the servants emphasising the social contrasts and in the book printed the contrasting images on opposing pages.
One of Brandt’s images from the book of a couple arguing was staged using Brand’s brother and sister-in-law with the lighting from large lights set up by Brandt.

Inspired by the Jarro marchers, he travelled to the north of England to photograph the coal-miners during the industrial depression, where the effects of the Depression and the closure of ship-building yards had resulted in 80% unemployment. He recorded images of families retrieving small lumps of coal from spoil heaps, a coal searcher pushing a bicycle home loaded with the days findings (reminiscent to those of Chris Killip 50 years later) and the harshness of the miners domestic life, miners having their evening meals or washing in tin baths.

During WW2, he was employed by the Home Office to document the hardships faced by the British people during the bombing raids for propaganda purposes. He produced images of Londoners taking shelter in Underground stations and of the deserted streets during the blackouts.

After the war, Brandt thought everyone around him was taking the same sort of documentary images so turned his attention to landscapes and nudes.

Jacob Riis

When young, Riis emigrated from his home in Denmark to the US to find work as a carpenter, where after numerous jobs and hardships became police reporter for the New York Tribune working in the impoverished and crime ridden slums. Through his own experiences in the poorhouses, and witnessing the conditions of the poor in the city slums, he decided to make a difference for them by taking photographs using the newly invented flash powder for light, believing that charitable citizens would help the poor when they saw for themselves the conditions.

Riis published a book, How the Other Half Lives in 1890, describing the system of tenement housing that had failed, due to greed and neglect from wealthier people, linking the high crime rate, drunkenness and reckless behaviour of the poor to their lack of a proper home. It inspired Roosevelt when as President of the Board of Commissioners of the New York City Police Department, to close the worst of the lodging houses and spurred city officials to reform and enforce the city’s housing policies.

Lewis Hine

As a teacher in New York, between 1904 and 1909 he encouraged his students to use photography and his classes travelled to Ellis Island photographing the thousands of immigrants who arrived each day. Hine realised that documentary photography could be employed as a tool for social change and reform, so left his teaching role and became a photographer for the National Child Labor Committee, documenting child labour.


It's often mentioned that Lewis Hine helped lay the foundation for the social documentary photographic tradition in America.

During WW1 he documented the American Red cross work in Europe and later during the great depression, photographed drought relief in the south of the US. He is also well known for documenting the building of the Empire state building

All these photographers used their images as a tool to highlight social issues. Most published books as the available medium of the time and they all used this as their primary focus at the time, although Brandt later moved to landscapes and nudes

Bibliography/References


The Exit Photography Group Collection | GRAIN. 2014. The Exit Photography Group Collection /
Heuvel looks at the place of documentary photography within the art world and immediately asks the question: “whether documentary can still perform its time honoured communicative role of militant eye-witness in the museum room and whether documentary images themselves can anyway still refer to a degree of reality or whether the boundary with fiction has been definitively been abolished”.

It’s interesting that this is discussed within an art context. Ask people about documentaries and they’ll immediately think about David Attenborough’s wildlife series, or other such TV programmes, and Heuval discusses the influence of ‘the media’ not only on the viewers but also on the image makers, pointing to an increased visual literacy. “Our world view is no longer determined by experiences that we ourselves have directly and personally undergone, our experiences of the world increasingly take place via the media.” This should probably also include the internet these days, an increasing source of imagery, especially through social media.

This visual literacy is expanded upon, how the ability to adequately distinguish and interpret actions, objects and symbols and how this is being used by image makers. My first thought here was in its use in advertising, sometimes not even showing or mentioning the product until the symbol at the end.

Heuvel then discusses the origin of documentary, the militant eye witness, dividing it between east and west. In the West the drive for social change with photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, in the east the use of photography in Germany and Russia to support the working class, “heroically showing the revolutionary struggles.”, moving to the divide in the sixties and seventies between gritty high contrast black and white for documentary and colour for advertising, diametrically opposed, technically perfect colour against black and white rawness, “images seized from life”.

The section finishes with the effect television had, with documentary being taken over by the new media available in everyone’s front rooms, docudrama’s, reality TV. Was this the reason documentary images began catching on in art? “Documentary images that had generally been made for a completely different context were treated as art by galleries and purchased by museums”.

Some interesting labelling of documentary, attempts to pigeon hole it, but ultimately crossing both art and factual.

Exercise 10 asks a second question. How did B&W become such a respected and trusted medium in documentary?

It would be easy to suggest that’s because it was all there was available. Kodachrome and Alfa colour weren’t available until the mid 30’s, black and white was an accepted medium, used daily in newspapers and periodicals. The course notes continue that Jacob Riis’s black and white photos of the slums of New York are widely considered to be the starting point in social documentary photography, so perhaps documentary became associated with black and white for these reasons or as a tradition. It certainly continued with the Farm Security Administration project.

In his book, the complete guide to Black and White photography by Michael Freeman, he mentions that Ian Jeffrey, writing in Photography a Concise History, wrote “during the 1930’s photography’s tasks were mainly social and reformist for which urgent black and white was an apt medium.” At the time it was easier to manufacture faster B&W film than colour.

Looking back at the medium of the 1940’s, black and white was dominant in newreels and newsprint of the time and there was a long history of Art using black and white as a medium.

Even Graham Clarke, in his book The Photograph, wrote: the traditional cannon of photography largely eskaews colour, so that we are faced with the paradox of photography’s realism being communicated in black and white. The most obvious aspect of this remains the traditional documentary image where the presence of colour actually lessens the sense of the photograph’s veracity as an image and witness. We equate black and white photographs with ‘realism’ and the authentic”.

Fashion and studio photography at the time, such as Horst P Horst MainBocher Corset used lighting in ways in which colour would have distracted and it is with this background that Bill Brandt produced his...
images with strong use of dark and light playing to B&W films strengths.


It wasn’t until the 1960’s that colour started to become a major influence, with photographers such as Eggleston, and the popularity of cheap colour films and cameras with amateur photographers in the 1980’s. It was around this time that newspapers switch to colour images with new printing technologies.

Bibliography/References


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