

Influences from the History of Photography

Alexandra Sapp
December 7th, 2016
History of Photography
Ruth Eisenberg

Throughout this course I have been exposed to an array of photographers and artists that have used multiple techniques and mediums to display their images. These multimedia practices have evolved into photographic movements that have influenced all artists alike. *In the American Grain*, Robert Frank suggests the idea to quit seeking explanations in photographs, but to rather view images with open eyes and an open mind.¹ Frank believed travel jolted his imagination and provided him with new methods of thinking. He discovered this while traveling throughout Peru with local natives guiding his path and expanding his experience. Throughout his experience, Frank photographed a ‘moment’ by allowing himself to invade a certain space or even ideas. Does this ‘moment’ break the barriers between art and life? My answer would be yes because a ‘moment’ is a frame of reality that can be documented through a camera lens which can be argued to be a tool of art. Furthermore, The reading discusses how important travel is for the creative mind. In order to learn and become inspired, one must be exposed to new experiences, people, and cultures. The only way to experience diverse atmospheres is to travel to new and unknown locations. Many would agree that this concept is a hard and uncomfortable task to fulfill, yet the end result is worth the discovery. This concept inspires me to push myself out of my comfort zone and expand my photographic techniques like many of the artist and movements I discuss below.

The technical process of autochrome was one of the first ways of making colored photographic images in the early nineteen hundreds. First, an image was captured in black and white then was reconstructed by adding filters that were dusted with transparent grains and color dye. After being exposed, the image resulted in a colored photograph. Autochrome gave images a

¹Westerbeck and Meyerwitz. *The Decisive Photographer and Against the Grain in The Bystander: The History of Street Photography*, London 1994. 351-364.

realistic feel that provided detail within a subject.² Although the result was fascinating, the process was quite long and expensive compared to black and white photography. However, I find color, light and shadows to be three very important aspects within my work. Although this color editing



Figure 2: Léon Gimpel. *La Belle Époque*. Autochrome. 1904.

process is not as commonly used in today's age of digital technology I still find it very inspiring to my work due to the beautiful and textured tones it creates.

I would be interested in experimenting

with different filters that correlate with the autochrome style. I

use lots of contrasted and saturated colors in my current work so it would be interesting to work with softer tones in my images.

Frances Benjamin Jonhston shot a great range of subjects throughout her career during the first half of the twentieth century. Her self portrait as "New Woman" from 1896 is very empowering for the female figure and inspires me to be a strong and independent creator like her. One of Johnston's first major photographic endeavors was to document the First Families of the White House from the late 1880s to the early 1900s. She continued to expand her career by documenting the social progress throughout America which provided



Figure 1: William Longley and Charles Martin, *She Bids You Hail and Farewell to Italy*. National Geographic: Young Women of Tripoli in Holiday Dresses. Autochrome. 1925.



Figure 3: Frances Benjamin Johnston. "New Woman." Gelatin Silver Print. 1896.

² Marien, Mary Warner. *Photography: A Cultural History*. Upper River Saddle, NJ: Pearson Education, 2015. 166, 183.



Figure 4: Frances Benjamin Johnston, *Students Repairing Staircase*, Gelatin Silver Print. Hampton Album, 1899.

viewers with impactful images that created collective movements.³ Johnston's most famous work were her documentations of the Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes in the early 1900s. The main goal for this project was to display minorities with civilized behavior to the public eye. She was later funded six times by Carnegie to document of the aging architecture of the South.⁴ Many of her garden

and architecture images were processed as autochrome. Johnston's technique is simple, yet complex in many ways. She simply documented the life she surrounded herself with, yet it was not an easy task to accomplish. I want to obtain Johnston's wide range of subject matter and certain angles she captured to create a narrative for each of my subjects. I document what I see and attempt to develop a story out of the focused subject. I believe Johnston mastered this technique of storytelling and created a historic imprint for creative women in the photojournalist and documentary field.

By looking down the path towards photojournalism, I find photographers like Malcolm Browne to be one of the most inspiring figures in my mind. Browne is known for capturing extremely graphic and decisive moment images such as the *Burning Monk* from 1963. This photograph depicts a buddhist monk named Thich Quang Duc burning himself to death within a large and crowded area. The image depicts self-immolation as an act of protest to fight all forms of oppression. Browne received a crazed amount of recognition and fame for the acclaimed

³Marien, 187.

⁴Wade, John. *America's First Famous Woman Photographer*. Photo Technique Magazine. 2013. <http://phototechmag.com/americas-first-famous-woman-photographer/>

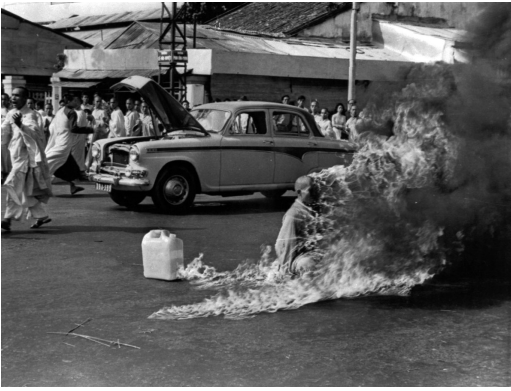


Figure 5: Malcolm Browne, *Burning Monk*. 35 mm Black and White film. 1963.

image because he capture reality in a horrifying way many viewers had never seen before.⁵ Browne chose to be a witness instead of a participant. I this found to be an interesting and truthful concept for documentary photography because in order to capture reality a photojournalist must observe and not take action. Photojournalist are documenting events that could be

extremely significant to history.⁶ The reason I am so intrigued with photojournalism is because it would make me anticipate the unknown. It takes a certain type of person to risk their own lives in order to capture an image for the world to see and know. I want to travel and understand the lifestyles of other cultures and the struggles they go through to reach their goals. I would use video and photographic still images as my medium of choice. I want to make a difference in the world through visual storytelling and I believe photojournalism would allow me to accomplish this goal.



Figure 6: Malcolm Browne. 35 mm Black and White film. 1963.

How to Make a Refugee by Phil Collins is an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that displays raw footage of the reality of a fleeing refugee family during the Kosovo War from 1998 to 1999. There were no edits or filters, but rather continuous footage that displayed the real time documentation of these people.⁷ The video does reveal how much time it takes to pose each

⁵Ferrari, Michelle and Tobin, James. *Reporting America at War*, MALCOLM W. BROWNE: *The Buddhist Protests of 1963*. Hyperion, 2003. <http://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/browne/protests.html>

⁶Marien, 367-371.

⁷ Phil Collins, *How to Save a Refugee*. (1998-1999). <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/phil-collins>.



Figure 7: Phil Collins, *How to Save a Refugee*. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Video Installation, 1998.

family member in a documentary style of photography. It also displays manipulation of the emotional and political responses and leaves many unanswered questions for viewers to contemplate with. What makes a refugee? Where was this family fleeing to? Were they safe in the place this video took place? What was the purpose of documenting these refugees?

The camera exploits and advocates the relationship between the depicting, the filmmaker, and the depicted, the refugees. The film's main depiction is how sitters and creators address one another. I believe Collins leaves the question open more self opinion. The overall atmosphere of the film gives a melancholy mood to me personally, yet the highlights and small pops of color within the living room translate as hope for these refugees. This inspires me to consider different forms of editing and setting styles of certain subject matters in video and photography.

Helen Levitt's series of color film on the street culture of New York City in the 1970s are successful in capturing the characteristics and personalities of everyday people roaming the streets. Her use of complimentary colors are stunning because they help advance the narrative each image is portraying.⁸ Her documentary work was based on strangers she met on the street, yet



Figure 8: Phil Collins, *How to Save a Refugee*. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Video Installation, 1998.



Figure 9: Helen Levitt. New York. Chromogenic color print. 1974.

⁸ Helen Levitt, *COLOR*. (1971-1981). <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/11/helen-levitt-color.html>



Figure 10: Helen Levitt. New York. Chromogenic color print. 1971.

her images capture the personal traits of these subjects as though she knows them and they are posing for her.⁹

Nevertheless, I appreciate her work because of how simple she makes documentary look, however by my own personal experience I have found it to be extremely difficult to interact

and approach strangers in order to document them. During

Levitt's career, many artists alike brought vibrance to their own images through different methods of editing.

Photorealism was a popular medium of art during the 1960s and 1970s that consisted of painting, drawing and graphic design in order to create an image resulting in realistically close depictions of an actual photograph.¹⁰ It originated from Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism. Most images created through this genre were colorful and depicted landscapes of buildings and close ups of



Figure 12: John Baeder. *John's Diner with John's Chevelle*. Oil on canvas, 30x48 inches. 2007.

objects. A popular subject for artist to depict were diners and drive thru restaurants due to their colorful atmosphere and popularity at the time. John Baeder was a well known

artist that used this style of art to create images displaying travel and food. His work was displayed in many notable galleries



Figure 11: Tjalf Sparnaay, *Junk Food* Photorealism. Photorealism painting. 2012.

⁹ Marien, 354-355.

¹⁰ Marien, 377, 384.

and museums, such as, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. I find this style of image making beautiful due to the perfection it displays. I also finding it amazing how these artist created realistic images without using applications, such as Photoshop, Illustration, or InDesign. I would consider this practice within my work because I find it challenging and different from what I am doing right now.

Bruce Connor's mid-nineteenth century, multimedia art platform is one of the most inspirational subjects for my individual practice because it contains details in self identity and the documentation of a destructive reality.¹¹ In most of Connor's work, he creates a beautiful visual out of a horrifying event. How can something horrifying be beautiful? I personally find his short films to be the most inspiring because of his fast cut editing style. Most of the footage shown in each of Conner's films is not his own, but rather found footage from old newsreels. He possibly used appropriated film to change the original meaning into something new.

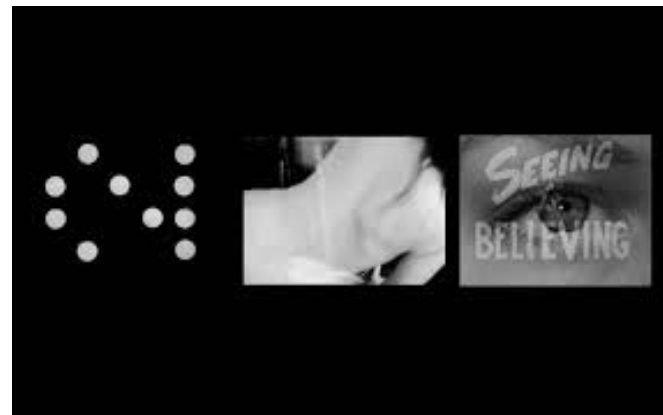


Figure 13:Bruce Conner, *Three Screen Ray*. Three-channel video installation, black and white film/sound, 5min. 23sec. 2006.

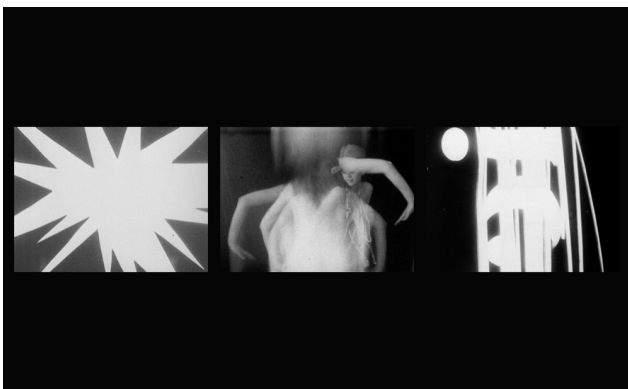


Figure 14:Bruce Conner, *Three Screen Ray*. Three-channel video installation, black and white film/sound, 5min. 23sec. 2006.

Nevertheless, I personally find “Three Scene Ray” (2006) the most intriguing film by Connor because it is literally projected on three separate screens and displays sexual content with random subjects and music by Ray Charles. Each fast-cut projection is chaotic in its own way, however it provides an individual narrative to its viewers and

¹¹ Bruce Conner, *It's All True*. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1614>.

allows all three screens to correlate together with the music. I am interested in using this technique in my own video editing practices because it will add a greater experience for my viewers.

This last photograph below is an image I took over Thanksgiving Break in Fort Lauderdale, Florida using my Hasselblad with medium format color film. I believe many of the artist I have observed this semester have helped me expand my style greatly and have led me to specific subject interests. I have become intrigued with color film by viewing Helen Levitt's work, while at the same time I have started to shoot more documentary work in still images as well as video. The most important lesson I have learned this semester was to discover through experience and observe without participating.



Figure 15: Untitled. Alexandra Sapp. 120 Medium Format Color Film. Fort Lauderdale, Florida. November 2016.