

# Documentary Photography: The Conscience of Society

Michael Jones

Antonin Kratochvil, a documentary photographer who fled Communist Czechoslovakia as a teenager, has photographed everything from Afghanistan's war with the Soviets, to the liberation of his homeland by the Velvet Revolution, to groups of starving prisoners held captive in Venezuela's jails.

What does he look like?

“In the movies the photographer is often a romantic action figure – James Bond with a Nikon,” writes former *Mother Jones* executive editor Kerry Tremain, in *Witness in Our Time*. “But there was no gold or glory to be gained from those prison photographs. Instead, they made me ask: Why would you spend your savings to go to a hellhole near Caracas where the guards and the prison gangs, both armed, would just as soon kill you and trade your camera for food?”

Hellholes, war zones, barrios, ghettos, poverty-stricken villages, areas of environmental destruction – all are typical canvasses for documentary photographers. What are they searching for in these dangerous places?

“Documentary photographers often see things that do not officially exist. Indignities. Cruelties. People pinned to a wall with fire hoses because they want to vote,” Tremain writes. Or as Civil Rights movement photographer Eugene Richards put it, “You attempt to tell the truth. You try to find the tools, the metaphors, the shapes, the shadows to translate the event or personality as truthfully as possible.”

The belief in the honesty of the camera image is what shapes the documentary purpose. Technically speaking, documentary photography provides a record of situations, both social and political, that convey information – about a people, a culture, an environment or the natural world.

Social documentary photography can also be about feelings, says Adam Weintraub, a professional photographer (Web site: [www.adamm.com](http://www.adamm.com)) and Vice-President of the Blue Earth Alliance, a non-profit organization based in Seattle that supports photographic projects that educate the public about threatened cultures, endangered environments, and social concerns. (See sidebar for more information on the Blue Earth Alliance.)

“Photography that makes a difference conveys a feeling rather than provides an answer,” says Weintraub. “A strong image is what changes perspective... as an image becomes more and more prevalent in the world, its stock goes up.”

According to Weintraub, the dedication to making an image and having an impact is what drives the most successful documentary photographers. The hard part for documentary photographers, says Weintraub, is getting the attention for the issue that their photographs cover. “Most photographers aren’t in it to make \$200,000 a year – they are in it for the issue.”

Linda Panetta, a professional documentary photographer who runs the Web site [www.opticalrealities.org](http://www.opticalrealities.org), focuses her work on the cultural, environmental and human rights issues that often culminate in conflict areas. Panetta has taken pictures in conflict regions including El Salvador, Haiti, Colombia, Iraq and Afghanistan, and echoes Weintraub’s thoughts that a successful image changes perspective and motivates people to action.

“I try to shoot every shot with the intention that this one image will in fact speak a thousand words, that it will have the potential to move others to act,” says Panetta. “Perhaps this action is as simple as becoming more compassionate towards the needs and desires of others, to be more open to different cultures and lifestyles. Maybe the act will be more radical, like joining a march for peace, participating in an act of civil resistance, phoning or visiting a member of Congress about a related issues; or as humanitarian as viewing others without prejudice, or preconceptions – to love all others as we would love a member of our family.”

Panetta says that this may be expecting a lot from a photograph, but it’s the obligation that documentary photographers feel every time they look into the camera. “I feel just such an obligation to the person looking into the lens of my camera – into the depths of my soul. Whether it’s the mother’s look of desperation as she holds her dying child in her arms, or the silent yet pervading cries that come from a child dying of cancer; perhaps it’s the wife mourning the loss of her husband killed by U.S. bombs; the Afghan farmer who stepped on a land mine and has lifted his pant leg to show me his prosthetic... they have, for a split second, allowed me to capture a glimpse of their life–

## **INSIGHT Focus:**

# **The Blue Earth Alliance**

Founded in 1996, the Blue Earth Alliance holds at its core a belief that “photographers are the eyes and conscience of society.” In more than 10 years, Blue Earth has sponsored more than 40 projects, on topics ranging from global warming to world health to the aftermath of war.

The Blue Earth Alliance accepts proposals for consideration twice a year – January 21 and June 1 – and looks for projects that provide an impact and have a sustainable educational influence, often times leading to the publication of books, lecture circuits, traveling exhibits and more.

The Blue Earth Alliance staff and board provide a mentoring relationship with artists. Artists also benefit from its 501c3 tax exempt status, as when the Blue Earth Alliance sponsors a project, that project can solicit funds in cooperation with a Blue Earth Alliance coordinator. Each project photographer is assigned a coordinator on the Blue Earth Alliance Board with whom the photographer may discuss the project.

Blue Earth provides two hours of consultation with a grant writer, a list of potential foundations, and a 50-page book covering the organization, funding, shooting and publishing of photographic projects. All funding requests are on behalf of, and subject to the approval of, the Blue Earth Alliance. Blue Earth Alliance receives a small percentage of each grant to help cover its operating expenses. The balance of the funds is distributed to the project as the work progresses.

Current exhibits sponsored by the Blue Earth Alliance include:

- “Aftermath: Bosnia’s Long Road to Peace,” by Sara Terry
- “Beyond the Cliché: The Positive Influences of the Cuban Revolution,” by Anna Mia Davidson
- “The Perilous Path: Cross Border Migrant Journeys in the New Global Economy,” by Jon Lowenstein
- “Yellowstone to Yukon: North America’s Wild Heart,” by Florian Schultz

For many more exhibits sponsored by the Blue Earth Alliance, visit their Web site at [www.blueearth.org/projects](http://www.blueearth.org/projects).

The bulk of Blue Earth Alliance’s funding comes from individuals. For more information on how you can support the Blue Earth Alliance, or for more information on the guidelines and history of Blue Earth, visit [www.blueearth.org](http://www.blueearth.org).

their beauty, suffering, joy, sorrow and hope – and to share it with others,” says Panetta.

Forces beyond the darkroom – most notably the digital revolution, says Weintraub – have changed and continue to change documentary photography. But though manipulation techniques exist to allow photographers to create unreal worlds and false situations, the pursuit of the truth – to capture what the eye sees and tell a story with it, and engage the viewer – still lies at the core of social change photography.

It follows the mantra of Dorothea Lange, one of the most prominent documentary photographers in American history, who said “the camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.” Perhaps that rule is what determines the most successful documentary images, and the best documentary photographers.

And for consumers of documentary photography?

“The most important thing is to participate at any level,” says Weintraub. “You don’t have to spend (money) to make a difference...just participate. Don’t sit around and admire an image, understand what the image means.”