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# Art, Not Art: An Exploration of the Narrative Properties of Photography in Regards to Social Change

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## Abstract

This research looks at photography as a mode of social activism in light of the "document versus art" debate. As opposed to examining which type of photography is "better," this paper explores how photojournalists versus pictorialists communicate. While documentary photography, often labeled photojournalism, seems to purport reality, there are many ways images can be manipulated. And although fine art photography appears to convey tropes in a visually evocative manner, it is not fully organic because even the most abstract photos contain pieces of external reality. Instead, each category crosses over to the other side using attributes of the other. As such, we find that perhaps there is a fundamental problem with the debate; that it describes what Edward Steichen labels a "false dichotomy." Rather, photography as a whole is a medium separate (because of its inclusiveness) from both documents and art. Using this new categorization of photography (thus its communicative properties) we can explore how to use photography as an instrument for change in a globalized yet polarized world.

## 1. Introduction

If aliens visited Earth from Outer Space, they very well might think that the general population of human beings has a sour and often violent distaste for its fellow constituents. From extremist groups in every religion to power-hungry politicians and leaders in every country to patriotic countrymen and -women wishing for outsiders to leave, these zealots have perpetuated terrorism and the war on terror, both of which hold in their grip the lives of millions. On the United States home front, "The New Jim Crow," by Michelle Alexander, describes the regenerated age of prohibitive racism against African Americans (and other minorities, though Alexander primarily discusses blacks) suggesting that the white powers that be, in this instance the NSA, funded the so- called "War on Drugs" in order to have just cause to incarcerate African Americans.[1] This is one of many examples of the potential for blatant racism which can and does infect the minds of many Americans and people from other countries. It seems like this violent disrespect (both mental and physical) of human life is a new phenomenon, but of course, as history and reading between the lines of it can tell us, this is certainly not the case. Politicians, world leaders, social activists and academics have spent countless hours, years, and decades debating solutions to these varying degrees of crimes against humanity, but seemingly to no avail as many forms of oppression continues to run rampant.

### 1.1 The FSA Photography Project

In examining social activism and solutions to societal problems (particularly in the United States), it is impossible to overlook the powerful body of work which the Farm Security Administration photographers produced introducing the nation to issues such as extreme poverty and drought during the Great Depression. The program, "conceived as a means of illustrating the necessity and effectiveness of New Deal agricultural programs, evolved into a complex and

varied visual record of the United States from 1935 to 1943."[2] The images juxtapose the sentiments of the time — hope and despair, plenty and scarcity, well-being and suffering — in the hundreds of beautiful black and white photographs taken and printed through the duration of the program. As Arthur Rothstein, Roy Stryker's first hire, said, "The FSA photographers were the pioneers of contemporary realistic photography and their work reflected the troubled years during which they operated."[3] While the Great Depression was certainly a dark time in American history, some good did come out of it as it seemingly instigated the rise of photography's prominence into the social eye, particularly as a tool for social activism.

## 1.2 Historical Background of the "Art Versus Document" Debate

After this period, capitalizing on the growing prominence of photography within society, photographers took to the streets to simply capture images of the people around them, still hanging on to the last vestiges of the "pure" documentary style. Garry Winogrand was one such photographer, one of the greatest of the early street photography movement, known for his deceptively casual images of American life in the streets of New York and elsewhere. The current fad of Instagramming owes a great deal to Winogrand's style documenting "life, change, and all the rest."[4] Yet as the newness of the medium wore off around the 1970s, photographers began printing their work large scale for the wall and the medium slowly inched its way into the art realm. During this period, notable revolutionary "fine art" photographers like Hiroshi Sugimoto (who captured images of drive-in movie screens exposed during an entire film commenting on the transience of time and life[5]) and Cindy Sherman (who dressed up as numerous characters such as 50's housewives and film characters commenting on the roles of women and artists among other issues[6]) dominated the photography world. Yet, perhaps because of photography's early roots as a reporting tool, photography as an all-encompassing medium of technicians using light to create images has continually struggled to fully align itself with canonical genres such as painting and sculpture. Through this debate on whether photography could and should reach the same level of notability as the canonical genres was born the controversy of document versus art photography. Documentary photography, often known as photojournalism, purports to be a "true narrative" synonymous with nonfiction in its strict depiction of factual reality while artistic photography acts as a "truth narrative" synonymous with fiction in its use or creation of a contrived scene to illustrate a deeper idea. Because of photography's potential for social commentary, this debate is important in determining which style of photography more powerfully and truthfully illustrates a narrative.

In this contest of which type of photography is "better," photojournalists argue that theirs is a higher calling conveying visual truth to the masses and that fine art photographers take too many liberties by creating "unrealistic" images.[7] On the flip side, fine art photographers argue that there is often limited skill necessary to take photojournalistic shots, as a reporter need only click the shutter, and that photojournalists pay little attention to composition in the pursuit of the action-packed image, whereas their own work takes great skill, time, and creativity. The problem with this debate is the misdirection of the question: "which is better?" As a whole, both sides have given us great photographs (and likewise, photographers) with powerful images illustrating the narrative of humanity, if in sometimes radically different ways. Both require enormous talent and knowledge of technique and subject matter to make or take a beautiful photo. The history of photography "is full of attempts to specify the best course for making pictures. Two of the most prominent schools of thought being the so-called pictorialist (artistic) and purist (documentary) approaches."[8] Yet, since their differences primarily lie in how literally they convey truth – as photojournalism typically provides straightforward "factual" images while fine art gives more nuanced abstract photos – a more reasonable question may be "which type of photography is more reliable in visually telling a narrative?" To answer this more acutely-defined question, it may be prudent to first examine the categorization of photos; whether "documentary" and "fine art" are valid monikers for the two types of photography. We must decide whether we can categorize photographs as documents or works of art, if they are, in fact, mutually exclusive. By defining "documents" and "works of art" we can see the parameters for each category. Then, by exploring the methods of creating, executing, and sharing an image (both "photojournalistic" and therefore supposedly "a document" and "artistic" and thus apparently "a work of art") we may see how and if they fit within the parameters of their titular categories. We can then examine whether only "photojournalistic" style photos function as documents and "artistic" photos are works of art, whether there is crossover between the styles so that photographs in general can be documents or art, or whether that crossover prohibits photographs from being documents or art which are in themselves two very distinct categories. This exploration should shed light on the narrative and communicative properties of photography in order to understand the medium's potential use for social activism.

## 2. Examination

### 2.1 Are Photographs Documents?

At first glance, it is easy to say that a photograph is a document. After all, photos are often used as irrefutable evidence in court to either convict or exonerate the accused of a crime. If photos may be used as legal evidence, then surely they must be documents as they evince actions. Indeed, the physical, tangible photograph visually conveys a record of action fixed on paper so that a viewer may return to it again and again and see the same image, while a lawyer may ask someone on the stand a question multiple times and get different answers, suggesting that a photograph may, in fact, be more a reliable source of information. On a more lighthearted note, photos can capture memories of fun activities with friends, joyous wedding days, heart-warming time spent with family. Even simple studio portraits of children document their characteristics so that parents may look back at the images and fondly remember when their children were younger and less volatile. All of these types of photos seem to be documents as they freeze moments in time to later recall for evidence of the past.

#### *2.1.1 definition of "document"*

But, what is a document? The current Merriam-Webster definition defines a document as "something (as a photograph or a recording) that serves as evidence or proof."[9] Seemingly, that answers our question with very little fanfare as textualists would argue that this explicit inclusion of the word "photograph" in a dictionary definition should guide our understanding. However, it is just as, if not more, important to delve into the function a document serves in order to truly answer the question. Beginning in the late 19th century, an increasing number of publications began circulating the country and world and as such the publishing world needed more management in the way of "efficient and reliable techniques for collecting, preserving, organizing, representing, selecting, reproducing, and disseminating documents."[10] This describes the prescribed method of documentation which calls for "reliability of collecting, preserving, and disseminating documents."[11] The International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (an agency of the League of Nations) in collaboration with Union Francaise des Organismes de Documentation describes a document as "any source of information, in material form, capable of being used for reference or study or as an authority. Examples are manuscripts, printed matter, illustrations, and diagrams."[12] Putting the two together, a document is a "reliable source of information capable of being used for reference or as an authority." "Reliability" is the key to this exploration of whether we can categorize photographs as documents. At each stage of the photographic process, a human has a hand in creating an image and it is the potential for manipulation, both of the physical photo and its narrative context, which puts photography's categorization as a document in jeopardy.

#### *2.1.2 framing an image*

First, a photograph begins as an idea as the photographer looks through the lens to frame a scene. The photographer may sit and wait for hours — as a landscape photographer might when waiting for the right light or a wildlife photographer would when waiting for an elusive animal. Henri Cartier-Bresson, the original street photographer, refers to this phenomenon as waiting for the "decisive moment" which the photographer deems to be the most important, the most memorable, the most descriptive; the moment the photographer should click the shutter.[13] He explains in his same-titled book, *The Decisive Moment*, that to him "photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."[14] Years later, another well-known street photographer (later notable for his nine-month-long project photographing the wake of the destruction of the Twin Towers) following in Bresson's footprints, Joel Meyerowitz "bobbed and weaved through the throngs of people" on Fifth Avenue in New York City, "searching for the serendipitous moment that becomes a great photograph."[15] He often looked for "the way someone makes a gesture on the street or the way couples react to each other or the simultaneity of two things happening at the same time and the relationship between them. It was the wonder of human nature and this incredible capacity for things to keep showing themselves to [him] that made him feel alive."[16] By looking for these moments, choosing what subject matter to frame, deciding exactly the moment to click the shutter, a photographer manipulates the scene to convey his own idea, in a sense creating his own story. Yet, photojournalism, the photographic style most closely associated with "documents" and "documentation" is supposed to provide citizens with "honest" and "reliable" images visually recording actions.[17] John Long, a long-time photojournalist and contributor to *New Photographer Magazine* says that photojournalists are "not in the business of providing truth to our readers and viewers; that is the business of

preachers. Journalists are in the business of providing accurate, fair, and (hopefully) complete information to our readers and viewers so they can make informed choices for our society. A free society demands access to accurate information. It is the only way our system of government can survive."[18] However, how can photos be accurate in conveying information and telling a story when the photographer has such a great capacity to manipulate the image – even subconsciously?

Figure 1. Etheridge, Adrian, photographer. "Fly on the Wall // Turned Upside-down." Photograph. Asheville, NC, 2015. *Self-Manipulation*. Silver Gelatin Print, 8"x10."

Figure 1 For this image the photographer turned the camera upside down showing that by choosing when and how to photograph a scene, a photographer can manipulate it.

### *2.1.3 post production*

From frame to film — or the SD card in this predominately digital age — the process of creating a photograph does not simply stop after a photographer clicks the shutter. Digitally altered, or "Photoshopped" images are the most obvious places to find manipulation in the interval between taking and sharing an image, often called "post-processing" or the "making" of a photograph. Post-processing techniques run the gamut from simply brightening or darkening a photo, which is acceptable within the photojournalistic profession as long as the change does not impact the meaning of the image, only brings it to the same conditions as the photographer saw the scene,[19] to wholly changing the scene. Swedish-born photographer and retouch artist, Erik Johansson, is one such creator who makes surreal composite images (realistic-looking collages) by impeccably piecing together his own photographs. These "photorealistic" images include a road which the photographer himself seems to be carrying by the end in the same way he might carry a sheet, and a giant pair of scissors rending a house and yard in half[20]. These are exaggerated examples, but they undeniably show that photographs can be manipulated so that a scene appears different than it truly looked at the time the photographer pressed the shutter button. This is perhaps not a big deal in images not used in the press, but it is a very important issue in the dissemination of news. Art photographer Johansson describes his enjoyment of the creative process as "easier to create than finding a place because you don't have to compromise with ideas in your head.[21] Unfortunately, a journalist may also alter his images to fit the ideas in his head, a huge problem since viewers typically believe photojournalistic and news photos to be factual. For example, controversial figure and former Sacramento Bee veteran staff photographer, Bryan Patrick, was fired in 2012 for digitally altering a news photo by combining two images to create a more dynamic scene.[22] In a story headlined "To Our Readers," the Bee explained the reason behind the firing of one of their photographers: "The photograph showed a snowy egret trying to steal a frog from a great egret. In the original photograph, the frog was not as visible, so Patrick merged in a different image of the great egret."[23] This violation of the paper's (and National Press Photographers Association's) journalistic standards raised the question of reliability in news images because of the ease with which photographers can manipulate their captures. Of course, photo manipulation began long before the introduction of digital technology. One such embroiling controversy surrounded the reelection of Franklin D. Roosevelt, questioned because of his Farm Security Administration's (FSA) project of photographic "documentation" of problems such as

the 1935 draught in North Dakota.[24] The most blatantly edited image was a photo captioned "Cattle Invade a State Capitol. A herd driven from the drought area contentedly grazes on the Capitol grounds at Bismarck, N. D." which depicted a herd of cattle supposedly grazing in a parking lot. The photo turned out to be an overlay of an image of the cattle and one of the parking lot, a double exposure created by printing one piece of film over the other.[25] Because this image was widely distributed and used to advocate for the aid of those suffering from the drought, this troubling manipulation of a photo shows the problem in calling a photograph a "document;" because an image is never a fully reliable source. In both the analog and digital worlds, the ability for a photographer to "make" their ideal photo by changing not only its basic lightness and contrast characteristics but its actual subject matter further puts the idea of a photograph as a reliable document in question.

Figure 2. Etheridge, Adrian, photographer. "Multiple Personalities // Composite." Photograph. Asheville, NC, 2015. *Self-Manipulation*. Digital Print, 8"x10."

Figure 2 This photo is a composite image of the photographer editing another image of herself, showing various forms of manipulation in post-processing.

### *2.1.4 image sharing*

The final process, the sharing or dissemination of an image, is perhaps the least criticized but often the most manipulable. By sharing an image, the photographer (or user, if the person sharing the photo was a photographer's client) takes it out of context presenting it, along with its subject matter, atmosphere, and idea, in a new way. The decision to share one image over another because" either in visual quality or the story it tells it is "better at conveying the message a photographer is looking to share, is in itself a form of manipulation. For instance, "The immensely gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s (among them Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee) would take dozens of pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until they had gotten just the right look on film - the precise expression on their subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry."[26] Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Mother" image could have taken hours to finally get "right." In doing so, she would have taken many exposures of the scene until she finally captured the one she thought best illustrated the desperation yet underlying strength of the woman to best support the FSA's purpose asking for aid for these poor people. On a more modern note, the internet — and particularly social media — have opened the gates for a flood of "snapshots" of people's "reality," with users posting images from the most day-to-day scene eating breakfast to momentous wedding photos. As photography critic Susan Sontag says, "It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photos are taken."[27] Indeed, we seem to have a sense of urgency in documenting everything, that, "If we didn't get the picture, it would be like we were never there."[28] Now, wedding photos are "as much a rite of passage as the vows."[29] This wealth of imagery seemingly gives the world a voyeuristic glimpse into others' lives. However, it also leaves immense room for inter-

pretation. Photos in themselves are a "reductive form of reality," the photographer's decisive moment frozen in time and edited to her liking, human choices which leave photos mere interpretations of the photographer's perceived reality.[30] So, sharing these manipulated images purporting them as documents so that viewers take them as such skews the viewers' perception of the photographer and the subject matter. For example, a bride may post a beautiful wedding photo on Facebook of the couple happily posing together, choosing to tell the world that the married couple is happy. In real life, the couple may argue all the time and be on the brink of divorce, yet by only sharing this image and not those other tidbits of information, the world is none the wiser and therefore has a skewed perception of the couple's story. Advertising is another area in which photos are greatly distorted through their perception. Legally, a newspaper can use an image it ran in a previous story for later advertising. So, theoretically, an editor could take an image of a smiling woman — happy for no reason remotely connected to reading the paper — to run an ad for the paper, subtly saying that the woman is happy because she bought that particular newspaper. Because "photos work by being perceived," and photos are intrinsically actions or ideas taken out of context, the viewer's relationship to a photo is one of manipulated perception, again calling into question the reliability of a photo to serve as an authoritative document.[31]

Figure 3. Etheridge, Adrian, photographer. "Like Me! // Presentation in Public Sphere." Photograph. Asheville, NC, 2015. *Self-Manipulation*. Digital Archive Print, 8"x10."

Figure 3 This photograph illustrates not only a venue for visual narcissism, but an arena in which a photo's meaning can be manipulated by sharing an image out of context.

### *2.1.5 photographs are not documents*

Sontag says, "Photos are valued because they give information, they make an inventory."[32] For this reason, people imbue photographs with a documentary sagacity believing the "reality" which a photo proposes. Yet, "In the way most people use photos, they carry about as much information as fiction" since they can easily be manipulated at each step of the process.[33] If the definition of a document is a "reliable source of information capable of being used for reference or as an authority" and photographs are manipulations of reality and not strict recordings of a historical narrative, even the most "objectively" snapped image cannot be a literal document.

## 2.2 Are Photographs Art?

So, then, are photographs categorically "art"? It is even easier to make a case for this argument, at least in examining the "best" and most famous photographs. After all, many of the most prestigious art museums and curators (arguably the best experts in this realm) have accepted photos into their exhibitions and permanent collections, if not with open arms. (The "art" photographers' first win on this battle front occurred when ten of Edward Steichen's "mere photos" got into the Salon des Beaux-Arts in 1902 when "it had only been paintings and sculptures before."[34]) This phenomenon is in large part thanks to legendary Alfred Steiglitz who, though not entirely paradigmatic in his artistic

approach, was at least revolutionary in his position on photography as art.[35] In his promotion of "artistic photography" and particularly in his own work, Stieglitz stayed true to the modernist idea that "a personality, like the outside world, is constantly changing, and may be interrupted but not halted by the intervention of the camera; the realization that truth in the modern world is relative and that photographs are as much an expression of the photographer's feelings for the subject as they are a reflection of the subject depicted."[36] This is the idea of art, after all, is it not? Art at its most basic principle encapsulates an idea such as the photographer's perceptions of the subject as well as the subject's and even society's own attitudes, a trope which may be better understood in the more abstract visual way of art than in prosaic words which are limited to a particular language.

And, like many or all artistic practices, photographing is as much about the experience as the end product, the journey as well as the destination. If an artist is an individual "of uncommon sensibility, one responsive to the nuances of mood, substance and situation he encountered in the world around him, one who penetrates surface appearances and values to the meanings that lie below and even beyond the subject itself" and who "has a developed sense of awareness, that things are not merely things, but become revelations of experience, thought, felt, and observed, and finally communicated as a personal discovery to anyone who cares to look appreciatively at the result" then are not photographers artists?[37] When using their images to convey a narrative of an experience — from a quiet conversation with a child to a photographer's high when capturing incredible expansive aerial imagery — it would seem so.[38] It is very difficult to argue that a beautiful photograph, either one that is well-composed, well-lit, well-personified, or all of the above, is not a work of art.

### *2.2.1 definition of "art"*

Yet, what precisely is art, by definition? This question is undeniably much more difficult to answer. By nature, art is does not stem from reason, thus placing parameters on it is not necessarily a logical action. But, precisely because it is unreasonable and therefore the opposite of a "document," we must explore possible meanings of art, defining the indefinable, in order to examine art's reliability in conveying the truth, answering this question of photography's categorization. Merriam-Webster's first definition of art describes "works created by artists: paintings, sculptures, etc., that are created to be beautiful or to express important ideas or feelings."[39] The medium of photography is not explicitly mentioned here, but that does not necessarily disqualify the medium from the categorization yet since only two media are mentioned. Delving further, perhaps "fine art" would be a better word as it encompasses the world which photographers for decades have been trying to enter, i.e. the high society art world. M-W defines "fine art" as "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects."[40] There are two coordinating parts to both descriptions; that art is organic (created by the artist), and that art flows from the imagination. The underlying and overarching purpose of art is, of course, to evoke an emotion, to illustrate a trope in an aesthetically arousing way, but it is the mechanics leading up to this goal which truly define the broad term.

### *2.2.2 mechanics of creating a photo*

At first glance, the idea that the artist creates the work seemingly includes photography. After all, it is the photographer who, in the end, takes the credit for the creation of the image. However, there is one important factor in the process which heavily impacts that creation of the final image: the camera. For critics of photography as art, this is the go-to argument.[41] In essence, while the photographer plays an enormous part in framing an image, choosing the right moment to shoot, even printing and sharing it, the mechanical tool itself does still accomplish a large portion of the creative task.[42] The trigger opens the lens aperture causing light to enter and bounce off of a series of mirrors hitting the film or digital sensor creating a light-sensitive image. The photographer can choose the settings at which the camera functions, but in the end the camera does still perform part of the job. Perhaps this is why many observers comment that a photographer must make great pictures because they have a great camera. Of course, other artists use tools just as often in their work; the painter her paintbrush, the sculptor her wheel or chisel (among many others), but these tools seemingly function as assistants while the camera itself plays a much greater part in the creation process.

Figure 4. Etheridge, Adrian, photographer. "Shrunken Photographer // Forced Perspective." Photograph. Asheville, NC, 2015. *Self-Manipulation*. Digital Archive Print, 8"x10."

Figure 4 This photo illustrates the power of the mechanical process of the camera itself, conflated to show that it is not simply a photographer's tool.

There is another reason that photographs are not "organically created" in the same manner that other works of art are, and this is perhaps a better argument. While the painter, sculptor, drawer, etc. takes observations of life and adds her own perceptions and creative aesthetic twists to create a work describing an idea, the photographer cannot help but capture a piece of " external reality." Even the most abstract of photographers, Man Ray, for instance, created abstract photographs by literally framing a piece of tangible, observable, authentic life. Both Man Ray's iconic image of the back of his lover, the exotic performer Kiki, stylized to look like a violin, and his famous "Rayographs" (akin to photograms created by placing objects on top of light-sensitive paper and exposing the paper to create silhouettes of the objects[43]) were created by capturing actual moments in time with actual subjects/objects. In this way, photographs — even those purporting to live within the fine art realm — cannot completely break ties with their supposedly "documentary" roots. Traditional forms of art draw organically from the artist's imagination, even in simply combining pieces of ideas or work from other artists such as contemporary painter Kehinde Wiley's reinvention of Renaissance artists' paintings using contemporary people in modern-day clothing and situations. But, photography cannot entirely do so.[44]

Of course, it is not uncommon for painters, draftsmen, and the like to create their work from photographs, potentially adding credibility to photos in the art world. Even the most prominent of historical artists like Vermeer, Caravaggio, and Jan van Eyck created their "photorealistic" works supposedly from early "photographs."[45] They did so in order to "free themselves from the bondage of human intervention" (such as the inability for people to remain completely still for hours) "and create a likeness identical to that of nature.[46]) Yet, in translating the photograph into a painting, a charcoal drawing, a pencil sketch, the artist puts his or her own (sometimes imperceptible) aesthetic touches into the work not creating an exact copy of the photo therefore further reducing the reality captured in the photograph. Indeed, by painting based on a photograph, which is a static moment perpetually frozen in time, and not on the observable, tangible moment at hand, the artist has already departed from the realm of captured reality.

Figure 5. Etheridge, Adrian, photographer. "Developing Ghosts // Slow Shutter." Photograph. Asheville, NC, 2015. *Self-Manipulation*. Digital Archive Print, 8"x10."

Figure 5 In order to create the illusion of ghosts in this image, the photographer set a 30 second shutter speed and moved to multiple locations, illustrating that even in creating surreal artistic image, the photographer still uses pieces of external reality.

### *2.2.3 photographs are not art*

The problem in classifying photography as "art" or "fine art" is that there is still an element of "document" in the work, that by inorganically capturing an observable moment in time, the photographer still "documents" the scene. Even the most imaginative of photographers cannot remove the key principle of capturing observable external reality (as subjectively captured as it may be) from the practice of creating a photograph thereby prohibiting it from being "art" in the literal sense.

## 2.3 Photography is a Continuum

So, how is it that a photo can serve as a document capturing a real narrative yet not be a document, illustrate the truth of idea or emotion like art yet not be art? Because photos are not exclusively either documentary or artistic. When writing for his photography journal, U.S. camera, Steichen ran into the same problem in discussing photos as his analysis of "photojournalistic" photos invariably strayed to a discussion of aesthetic qualities more commonly associated with "art" photography. What Steichen's dilemma reveals is "a false dichotomy at the heart of distinctions between the discourses of documentary and those of fine art."[47] Essentially, photographs are neither strict "documents" nor "art." Because of the crossover between the two styles — photojournalism's manipulability and artistic photography's use of external reality — the supposedly distinct types of photography are actually not as different as they purport to be. Rather, all photographs lie on a continuum between visually literal and visually abstract, depending on how accurately and reliably they convey their narrative. Depending on how strictly a photographer adheres to the perceived reality which she photographs, essentially how objectively she tries to capture an image, informs at which point along the continuum a photograph resides. In turn, a photo's location on the spectrum informs how the viewer interprets the narrative a photograph illustrates, as an image "truthfully" recording a moment in time for history's sake or as an image conveying a "truthful" message for a social agenda. Thus, because of photography's inclusion of both documentary and artistic practices (categories which in themselves do not coexist) into its own separate medium — artistic flare in a photojournalistic images or a documentary approach to artistic photos — the debate becomes invalid.

## 3. Conclusion

If the debate between categorization is nullified so that we accept photography as a distinct medium of its own using the tools of document and art in telling a story, then the question simply becomes "how do photographs function within society?" This is an incredibly important question to answer in the age of the "Visual Village" as New York Times Lens blog co-editor, James Estrin, coins the ensuing digital age.[48] While documents and art are limited in their ability to encompass the other's properties, often leaving documents devoid of interest and art devoid of fact, photographs can encompass both sides becoming an incredibly powerful tool in breaking language and cultural barriers to impact a huge number of people.

### 3.1 Photos Can be Manipulative Interpretations

For this reason, we as both photographers and viewers of photographs must be careful in how we take and interpret photos. "William K. Ivins has called the camera the most important invention since the printing press[49]" says Sontag. "For the evolution of sensibility, the invention of the camera is perhaps even more important. It is, of course, the uses to which photography is put in our culture, in the consumer society, that make photography so interesting and so potent."[50] Sontag's extensive discourse on photography points out that to photograph something is to appropriate it. "It means putting oneself in a certain relation to that world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power."[51] By photographing a person, a place, or a thing, the photographer imposes her own subjectivity on the scene, making it about her own experience of the area and not of those who reside within it. In photographing other people, and especially other cultures, a photographer violates them "by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they never can have (because they can't see themselves); it turns people into objects that can symbolically be possessed."[52] Because photos can visually tell an evocative story with varying degrees of manipulation, it is easy for photographers to impose their own interpretations of a scene into a pleasing image which viewers then interpret in their own way. One currently viral example of this phenomenon is "Humans of New York," a photography website which has now overflowed into social media, run by bonds trader-turned-photographer Brandon Stanton. Begun with the intent of creating an "exhaustive catalog" of New Yorkers, HONY posts typically consist of a photo accompanied by a short paragraph or sentence taken from Stanton's interview with his subject. Gawker writer Daniel D'Addario condemns Stanton saying "In the world of Humans of New York, however, humans are actually caricatures. The people Stanton photographs are reduced to whatever decontextualized sentence or three he chooses to use along with their photo."[53] D'Addario says that while Stanton may pretend to try to share the stories of those he encounters to provide a worldwide audience with a "glimpse into the lives of strangers," "It appears that Stanton sees people not as people but as vectors of how young, white New Yorkers see them. One hardly need to read the captions, which are drawn from conversations Stanton has with his subjects—the sentences he chooses are never surprising or enlightening. They're designed to confirm safe assumptions about the inner lives, or lack thereof, of everyone in New York."[54] D'Addario's argument is that because Stanton perceives his subjects in a certain way, he creates photographs which visually and thematically support his interpretation, purporting the images to be truthful representations. In this way, photographs can be taken and interpreted in a manner which, rather than celebrating others' stories, character, experiences, and cultures actually pigeonholes them. If photographs can function as oppressors of certain people, then photographers and viewers need to be very wary of the photos they take and perceive.

### 3.2 Photographs Can be Instruments for Social Change

On the other hand, photography's visual dynamism, its power to break down language barriers (because photography does not need words to illustrate an idea) to reach a huge audience, can serve an important and helpful purpose when socially aware. "Photographers use their cameras as tools of exploration, passports to inner sanctums, instruments for change," writes National Geographic writer Robert Draper.[55] "Their images are proof that photography matters."[56]

Because photography is often as much about the experience as the end product, and because that experience often involves getting to know new people and places, photography has the capacity to be an irreplaceable tool for diplomacy and cultural awareness. The 2013 Photo Issue of *National Geographic* contains photo projects from India, Iraq, the US, China, Norway, North Korea, Ireland and The Congo, among many other countries. One such project is David Guttenfelder's coverage of North Korea, examining the tightly controlled society known for censorship.

Tim Sullivan, the writer accompanying Guttenfelder, says that although it is "easy to believe in the caricatures of North Koreans as Stalinist robots, the challenge is to find the far more elusive — and more prosaic — reality."[57] As photography is a way of aestheticizing the whole world, Guttenburg uses these intimate hidden moments of uncensored reality, often the "unimportant" moments, to erase the caricature of North Korea and instead return to them a sense of humanity (if still based on his perception.) And, returning to Humans of New York, last month, one of Stanton's photos of a young student thanking his principal for her dedication garnered such attention that he spent a week photographing and interviewing the principal as well as other students at the school. The principal's goal was to send the sixth grade class on a trip to Harvard in order to reinforce the idea to stay in school and continue on to higher education in order to improve the students' success in the future.[58] By sharing the visual stories of the students and principal — pictured as energetic, hardworking, and earnest — and asking his fan base to support their efforts, Stanton raised over one million dollars, enough to fund the field trip for ten years and create multiple scholarships for students to attend college. In this way, by sharing a student's story through photography, Stanton raised the awareness of the difficulty for students in Brownsville, Brooklyn in breaking out of the social "norm" of dropping out of school, potentially falling into poverty, and then perpetuating the cycle of crime, incarceration, and poverty.[59] When a photographer takes the time to know his subjects and treats them as humans telling their stories for their own sake rather than the photographer's personal gain (thus attempting to convey visual truth either in a literal documentary style or an abstract artistic manner), photography can show not only that we are all the same in our inherent humanness, but especially celebrate diversity and examine social issues in various cultures.

Photography is its own medium; part document, part art, part experience. Meyerowitz sums up the all-encompassing power of photography best when he discusses his experience photographing the destruction, clean-up, and rebuilding of the Twin Towers: "By 2001, I'd been making photographs for forty years. Inevitably, I'd grown familiar with the way I saw my work and the issues I thought seriously about, and many of my responses had become routine. But 9/11 had reawakened in me a profound need to give something back to my native city, and what I had to give a record of what all the other people around me were doing in response to the tragedy. Bearing witness week after week reminded me why I'd become a photographer to begin with - those first years when I'd burned with the desire to be out every day with my camera to see what the world had to offer. It was the same feeling of desire that drove me now, and it made me feel young again."[60] Meyerowitz's tragically beautiful images show not only the incredibly destructive power of hate, but illustrate how, in times of need, people of many walks of life can come together to recover and help each other, as New York City dwellers and emergency workings from all over the country did. This project, called "Aftermath," epitomizes photography's power for social change, bringing a city and country back together through Meyerowitz's creation of beautifully haunting images recording the photographers' personal experience capturing and navigating the destruction and rebuilding site.

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