

# PHOTOGRAPHY'S CHANGING FACE

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Over the past 10 years, capital investment has created severe extremes in photography. A nuclear arms budget has delivered space satellites capable of 24-hour global surveillance while Japanese and American high-technology based consumer industries have created a 'home and holiday' market. This leisure and recreation market ranges from Instant, Disc, 35mm Compact and 35mm SLR cameras to film and processing laboratories. It is worth over £500 million a year in Britain alone.

The 'market' has a big say in how we use cameras and photographs. There is a tendency for the camera to be depoliticised: it is used unquestioningly for celebrations, family events and annual holidays but it is rarely used at the place of work, nor is it used critically in the public and social domain. On the other side of things, with professional photographers and photographic agencies which serve the press, the market has had fairly direct control over the *context* in which photographic images have been understood. Context is the main force (some might say total) in determining the meaning of every photograph since a photograph in itself is a highly ambiguous record of appearances.

However, within and alongside the market over this last decade, there has been the shaping power on photography of Arts Council policy, the effects of the growth of cultural studies, the stranglehold of the mass media on communications, and the changing use of visual images by agitational social welfare and political groups (from Shelter to the left press) who have to compete with the saturation-level pervasiveness of profit-based advertising. To look at what has been happening recently in photography we have to take all of these forces into account, especially in any concern over socialist photographic practice.

The Arts Council has increased its financial provision for photography from £19,000 in 1973/4, £100,000 in 1976/77, to more than £250,000 this financial year. It has provided the following: aid to galleries, exhibition subsidies, awards to photographers with specific projects to complete,

major bursaries, publications (including their own British Image series), money for fellowships and photographers-in-residence, grants to magazines and publishing companies and grants to regional and national archives. The Scottish and Welsh Arts Councils have had a lot less and lack resources as a consequence. For example, £33,500 — almost the whole annual photography budget of the SAC — was given to the Scottish Photography Group who have yet to settle in their own building. Arts Council provision sounds generous and accommodating. All the major left work in photography receives a share (with the exception of Photography Workshop, more of which later) but they have had to struggle for it and 'censor' themselves at times.

*Cameras* has been the major force in

promoting and developing a left and feminist history, theory and practice in recent photography. Its community-integrated workshops and dark rooms have a firm cooperative and educational foundation; its gallery organises and displays local, national and international work favourable to the interests of many oppressed groups, and promotes image and text material which can circulate as travelling exhibitions for schools, galleries and workplaces; its magazine has been a channel for, and provocative guide to, practising photographers, academics, community action groups, students of media studies, alternative press agencies and all others who make up its wide readership. The other leading magazines covering historical, theoretical and practical issues and themes whilst providing exposure space for contemporary photographers are the radical *Ten 8* (Regional Arts funding, Birmingham based) and the 'very respectable' *Creative Camera* which prides itself on its expensive, high-quality Duotone and 4-colour printing. *Screen* and its recently incorporated relative *Screen Education* have had important space allocated to photographic



Brassai, 'The Last Bum of the Cour des Miracles', with his cat, 1932.

# Channel Five



COLONIZATION

Terry Dennett/Jo Spence, from *REMODELLING HISTORY*

practice, as has *Block*, all three being key sites on the Left for the display, analysis and debate of aesthetics and politics. All of these magazines have had financial assistance from the Arts Council or one of its English Regional Associates. Exhibition sites have sprung up along with *Camerawork* (the old Half Moon Gallery), from the up-market Photographer's Gallery (£150,000 subsidy in 1982/3) to the ICA, York and Southampton galleries, Glasgow's multi-purpose Third Eye Centre, Newcastle's Side Gallery (home of Amber Film and Photography Associates) and the Victoria and Albert's new photography gallery. This last venture can be read as the official stamp on photography as Art'.

Indeed, the price of Arts Council funding, that relatively meagre but valuable amount of aid to develop and expand photography, has been the enclosure of photography within the bounds of 'Fine Art'. Art in the market place has been valued for the cultivation of elitist aesthetic experience so when 'Art' subsumes photography there tends to be a social and political dis-utilisation of the camera and the photography. Of late, Art' and photography have almost become one.

We can date the loss of the photograph's leadership in reportage or as social and historical witness to the period when the television camera came to the fore of documentary and social reportage, war reportage and, to some extent, advertising. The transition date could be as late as the



70s and the latter years of the Vietnam war. Also, by the mid-70s American subjectivist photographers with a more self-centred world view, anti-social and alienated eye were supplanting the great humanist mode

of socially coherent, informative and sympathetic work. The Americans Bruce Davidson, Danny Lyon and Diane Arbus, for example, were turning the tide from the continents of Andre Kertesz, Brassai (Gyula Halasz), Robert Capa, David Seymour, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Werner Bischof and many others at work in mid-century. American hegemony struck photography as it did all spheres of activity in postwar Britain. Again, in the early 70s British conceptual artists and sculptors made Art' photography in their treatment of art as idea, art as the making process and preservation of images, art as activity-in-duration, art as remote earth sculpture displayed as photographs, and so on. The work of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton is fairly typical of this conceptual drive. When the artist of the 70s took the camera in hand we were subjected to an eccentric expressionist photographic language. This language spoke against the older 'humanitarian' photographers and those younger ones influenced by both cultural studies and discourse theory (a theory which sees *individuality* and *identity* as areas which are fought over by the state, by institutions, and by *representation* and *misrepresentation* in culture).



In recent practice, there are at least six important examples which have developed a specifically socialist photography. Each extends different traditions and activates different relations with class-based politics and 'Art'. They are the work of Victor Burgin (photo and text), John Berger and Jean Mohr (photo and text and photonarrative, images arranged in such a way as to tell a story), Peter Kennard and Ric Sissons (photomontage and text), Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn (photomontage and text), Nick Hedges and Jo Spence. The Workers' Photography Movement, which was very strong in the 30s, is kept alive today in the work of Photography Workshop, a group which challenges the marginalisation of photography as fine Art.

All of these share the desire to give back to the represented the power of the image. They also share a broad commitment to realism. Realism now must be defined in terms of socialist working methods, the analysis of class and sexuality, and the

photographer's level of participation in the building of the individual's social identity. Jo Spence, for example, is particularly attentive to how — at certain moments in history—dominant practices misrepresent the actual class location of women. Also, her work often tries to show the means by which it was made. Generally, all these photographers have to counter the influence of the mass media, use alternative ways of exhibiting work, develop collective methods of production, and work for campaigning groups such as health boards, CND and local councils.

Victor Burgin's work is produced out of a difficult convergence of Marxist, Freudian and feminist theory. With many of his photographs, where each image has its meaning anchored by a short text within the image, we are encouraged to question the dominant male construction of a sexually-based pleasure in looking. John Berger and Jean Mohr, writer and photographer in collaboration, are at work

on a cultural project which cuts across the class experience of the European peasantry, the exploitation of migrant workers and the function of imagination and memory. Their sequential arrangements of photo and text put montage and associative or poetic principles to good use in imagining the lived experience of those represented. Worldwide, the peasantry are a major social and political force: Berger and Mohr bring this home in unexpected ways which are not romantic or escapist. Kennard and Sissons, and Leeson and Dunn follow in the wake of John Heartfield's *AIZ* and *Picture Post* work. These photo-monteurs, as much Photography Workshop, let history govern their production. With all of these examples of photographic practice, it is heartening to think of the great range of subjects and the treatment of those subjects. If they are only preaching to the converted then there's a collective strength of imagination growing; if they are breaking new ground then it looks fertile.