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Professor Sholette

Imaging Resistance

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**Photography as Activism: Images for Social Change.** Bogre, M. Waltham, MA: Focal Press, 2012. \$40.95

Well memed over the internet, the dumpster fire that has been this year has had activists feverishly seeking comrades in a time that we are held from clinging to each other due to social distancing and increased military-style policing. This book helps a revolutionary to rationalize the less glamorous research work that is necessary to hit the streets better informed, and ready to engage in future good trouble. This is especially relevant during a time when George-Floyd inspired mass movements are visibly waning. Michelle Bogre is the Associate Professor of Photography at the Parsons School of Design, a documentary photographer, a writer, and an intellectual property lawyer. Her 2012 book *Photography as Activism: Images for Social Change* is counted as one of my revolutionary reads of 2020. Bogre outlines a wealth of information about photography activism and issues that span the globe. She is both professional and personal. She gives readers an historical overview that brings us up to present day, as well as insight into the psyches of activist documentarians. In this review I intend to outline Bogre's compilation of professional activist photographers while leaning into my own bias as an artist and Black Lives Matter protestor.

Putting a good amount of thought into image creation and activism myself, it would be impossible to objectively describe what she has compiled in the pages of this reference book. If we were to compare BLM marchers and the activist photographers in Bogre's book, a stark difference appears. The activist photographers in this book have made picture-taking for justice their life's work. Marchers may dabble in citizen journalism with their cell phones and even invest in body cams to document marches in their cities and local neighborhoods, however this book makes clear that those who carry cameras professionally in the field of documentary photography are worthy of our analysis as revolutionaries. With similar motivations for change, activist photographers illustrate issues that are often far from the doorsteps or daily access of ordinary citizens. While BLM marchers may weaponize their peaceful protest via Facebook, Twitter, and local papers, activist photographers weaponize stills, film, and photo books that lead to massive fund raising, Robert Capa Gold Medal level accolades, policy change, indictments, and foundation establishment. Comrades motivated to take to the streets take note. These photographers have a strong moral urge to push the arc of justice coupled with organized strategies that would behoove anyone interested in challenging the status quo to investigate. Bogre takes readers on a journey of their struggles, triumphs, and work yet to be done.

As we venture into this review, like any good educator and activist, a little housekeeping is in order. For the reader it would be useful to have a shared definition of Documentary Photography (as stated by Bogre);

“Documentary Photography begins with the idea of documentation, onto which we layer the notion that a documentary image is not constructed, though it may be slightly staged or directed. It can be poetic, it bears a degree of witness, and provides some evidence. It seeks truth and touches on reality. It involves storytelling, it is often intensely personal, and the photographer’s intent is the substrate upon which the image is constructed.”

Bogre’s work is legitimized by her background as a photographer and academic. This reference tool contains an organized and concise historical analysis. She explores philosophical inquiries about the use of photography for social change for advocates and educators alike. A useful concept I picked up from an activist workshop is the idea of being an “accomplice” for those in need of advocacy. Bogre stated she uses the word “activist” and “advocate” interchangeably. I challenge the reader to also think of the words “ally” and “accomplice” in a similar way. This book explores to what extent photography should be used as activism and how. It both prompts and inspires our own social engagement with other people for whom we should be allies. Though published in 2012, this book poses important questions for any contemporary advocate to consider. This guide is as useful as a reader makes it and so must be coupled with the initiative to apply it to our activism, profession, or personal education as an engaged accomplice. Reading this work passively would be as useful as someone who turns a roll of film to a magazine and considers their job done. Much like the sentiment shared by Stephen Shames, “Photos are a starting point, not a final destination.” Bogre affirms this sentiment time and time again through the dozens of photographers given voice in her work. Contrary to previous ideas of documentarians being objective witnesses, this work encourages getting hands dirty, following up, and allowing emotion to drive what will elicit reaction and action. The latter chapters of Bogre’s book takes the oversimplified idea that emotion and intervention have no place in objective documentation and turns that concept on its head.

Bogre’s foundation in early photography addresses important questions of why, for whom, and to what purpose people create documentary photography. We are placed in a timeline that begins with royal patrons and early newspapers encouraging semi-propagandic images that served to document subjects and conflicts, while not being too offensive to a public still new to the consumption of the photographic image. Later, photographers break with their predecessors and discover the power of a camera to expose humanity in all its grit. They assembled teams of workers to maneuver glass plate negatives and wagons full of developing chemicals. Readers proceed to the early examples of human emotion that drove early activist like Hine, Riis, and the Farm Security Administration’s (FSA) work, whether they adopted the title of “activist” or not. Classic questions of staging or intervention are addressed early in the book and are followed up with later questions of funding and maneuvering an increasingly image-saturated world. Once the technology of cameras hit the modern era, Bogre steadily advances to present day, where one can compile unlimited digital files on a computer hard drive and disseminate images globally within the time it takes to upload a file. This perspective emphasizes the privilege of modern

photographers to create and share work quickly and allows readers to think about activist photography from an understanding of the legacy in which it was born. The chapters that follow summarize individuals' accomplishments in relation to their career and contribution to the field, as well as interviews with contemporary photographers. Both formats divulge deeply personal sentiments of photographers allowing anger to fuel their persistence to witness horrible things or the paradoxical struggle to detach for self-preservation while being present and empathetic to the people their cameras are capturing.

Since each photographer is given no more than a few pages, the author provides glimpses of projects and works that broke a story to the world or pioneered a funding source or policy change. Photographers' careers and achievements are added one after another to show how a global community of activists has developed over the past few decades. As a reader trapped inside COVID times, the internet is your main window to the world. Chapter after chapter of this book concludes with resources just waiting to send you down a rabbit hole of accomplice activities. This community asks, what will you contribute? As an activist, I appreciate the prompt for witnesses to take up an advocacy role. The book aims to foster an admiration for accomplices in the struggle and does extra homework to get the reader to act. As Torgovnik notes in his interview, "You have to make it easy to get involved." Bogre knows this work requires making viewer engagement, action, and response as easy as possible. Will you image search some of the most compelling stories to see more? Will you look up a foundation started by one of the most provocative activists to donate to? Do you have a personal perspective to contribute to these existing dialogues? I am certain that Bogre and her colleagues would be pleased if this publication turns bystanders who read documentary photography books into activists that help galvanize social change and take concrete action around contemporary issues.

This book can be used as a call to action. Some weaknesses in this compilation are perhaps more a reflection of the field of documentary photography and the time of the book's publication. The cross section of photographers included are predominantly male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and cisgender. There are few women given mention and none of the photographers or agencies were overtly engaged with LGBT identity or issues (save for one project). Many of the photographers came from various other places of privilege such as class and documentation status allowing photographers the ability to move freely internationally to pursue their projects. When mentioned, Bogre did objectively note the ways in which women like Mary Ellen Mark broke ground by pioneering nonprofit funding for projects. However, she also criticized female photographers like Lang for romanticizing her role as an ally to disgruntled subjects like Florence Thompson. There was reasonable representation of international projects and photographers; however, many of them framed people as "subjects" within a victim narrative. Some of the language used by the photographers and Bogre would not hold up very well by today's standards of sensitivity toward the marginalized groups discussed. Perhaps in the later editions of this book corrections or caveats are included. Today activists and academics alike have a responsibility to model best practices around language and framing of justice issues. It is not difficult to offer up to date language for folk as well as simple shifts in mindset, such as adjusting frameworks from a victim narrative, to a survivor narrative. Instead of highlighting

groups such as youth, queer, indigenous, or female photographers creating work around their own issues. The book exclusively highlights professional photographers, leaving out those who have not yet made it their career. Still, these lesser known photographers may have taken socially impactful photos. This may have not been her aim as the book is likely intended for both professional and citizen audiences. Despite these shortcomings, the book is a worthwhile read. Like any field, especially those that evolve quickly and over short periods of time, blind spots and inequity in representation is inevitable and should not disprove the value of the work done in its time.

The most evident strength of this book is that it acts as a springboard for active professionals engaging in practices that aim to create effective change with seemingly insurmountable social ills. Common themes of documentarian work such as military conflicts, domestic violence, poverty, etc. are highlighted in the way we are accustomed to and are then served with a healthy dose of pragmatic examples of what someone has done about it. Each chapter's endnotes include resources about foundations that have been started, money that has been raised, and policy work that has been done in direct response to photographer advocacy. The author's willingness to bend the definition and strategy of documentary as a field makes her unique. Her more recent publication; *Documentary Photography Reimagined* invites our attention to cross over into the fine art world, with artists like Bayetè Ross Smith who has one foot in the documentarian field and the other in the fine art world. Smith explores themes of the BLM movement in ways citizen journalists and traditional documentary photographers do not. The foreseeable benefit of genre bending is that Bogre and a hybrid cohort of professionals provide more avenues in which to discuss and challenge the status quo. Both books hold space for conversation amongst an army of photographers and academics to consider how photography and art parallel and intersect, all to engage the public in social action. Whether a photograph ought to be weaponized or not, Bogre and the community she aligns herself with wrestle these philosophical quandaries regardless of those who do not wish to taint their careers or reputation with the possibility of appearing "too involved" or too far outside traditional documentation. Many of the photographers in this professional circle are very involved and admit their bias towards justice. They are willing to evolve the practice of documentary photography if it means gaining a desired response for their cause and the growth of their field.

Bogre, both in effective layout and provoking research, achieves her goal to "examine the complexity of activist photography, philosophically, historically, and as it is currently practiced." The encouragement for readers to take up arms as comrades in the common struggle of justice cannot be missed upon completing this read. The book is concluded with a thorough resource list which outlines publications, events, and photo projects she and her colleagues have thoughtfully compiled. Anyone with an inclination towards change is equipped with a wealth of resources to pursue avenues for their own advocacy work. If you are an activist, photographer, educator, or concerned citizen you will be left with a comprehensive compilation of organizations and photographers who are currently working on broad collection of justice issues to become involved in.

**Region:** Global

**Theme:** Documentary photography and advocacy.

**Keywords:** Documentary, Photography, Activist, Advocate.