



Studies in Visual Communication

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Spring 1977*

Article 6

1977

Penn: Worlds in a Small Room

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Recommended Citation

Ruby, J. (1977). Penn: Worlds in a Small Room. 4 (1), 62-63. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol4/iss1/6>

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Penn: Worlds in a Small Room

about themselves and their own past. One paper in the book which purports to offer evidence on this problem is Edmund Carpenter's "The Tribal Terror of Self-Awareness." Unfortunately, his evidence is not supported by specific or systematic observations and his initial assumption, that New Guinea highlanders have never looked at themselves, seems rather untenable. It should be pointed out with reference to this paper and to most others that the use of photographic illustrations is generally careless and not accompanied by sufficient explanation. For example, referring to the use of a Polaroid camera by New Guinea highlanders in a remote village, Carpenter shows a picture of a man holding a Nikor-mat. Later, he refers to this same photograph while discussing "would-be camera owners" in a not-so-remote village. In neither case does the illustration add to an understanding of the topic of his paper. Only de Brigard's use of photographs is exemplary, but in her case there simply are not enough. (Her paper is a precis of her forthcoming illustrated volume *Anthropological Cinema*, which should be much improved on this count.) Carpenter's paper, then, would not be likely to direct students toward constructive research questions. A paper by Balikci, on the other hand, provides a good base for further research. He cites examples of the few studies which have systematically explored the way people tend to respond to pictures of themselves and of exotic peoples. He adds his own observations of the way Netsilik Eskimos responded to his own films which are dramatic reconstructions of their past traditions:

As for the Netsilik Eskimo films they are at the present time being definitely disfavored in the Canadian North. Young Eskimos today point to their girls wearing mini-skirts and their shiny motorcycles and say: "We don't like these Eskimos in the film; they are savages, we are civilized people." Attitudes are radically different in Alaska where acculturation has gone far enough to make the Netsilik Eskimo films highly appreciated as an invaluable record of the people's own history [p. 199].

This observation suggests that the realities of this problem are more complex than either Mead or Sorenson suggest.

To conclude this discussion of the book as a theoretical statement, it can be said of the two assumptions set forth as underpinnings for studies in visual anthropology that one is not supported by its own exponents and the other is not sufficiently examined within the volume. Little remains to legitimize visual anthropology as a sub-discipline of anthropology.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the book has been wrongly titled. For students and professionals it would have been more appropriately titled *Directions in Visual Anthropology*. The use of the term "principles" might lead these readers to expect that the ideas expressed in the papers they happen to read are generally accepted and represent a unified approach or purpose; that is to say, the title is misleading. As a theoretical statement, the book should have been titled *Problems in Visual Anthropology*. But, this is more than just an error in titling. In this case, the problem is in the attempt to define the scope of a prospective discipline too narrowly. Had the book been conceived and organized with an eye to problems instead of principles, its value as a theoretical statement would have been made more apparent by pointing out those basic issues which require further debate.

Notes

¹ For more on this point I would refer the reader to Jay Ruby's review of *Principles of Visual Anthropology*.

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Irving Penn is a fashion photographer of some note who, while on assignment for *Vogue* magazine, compiled a series of images of exotic peoples. *Worlds in a Small Room* represents a sample of these photographs organized into 10 sections—some on the basis of exotic locale and culture, e.g., Dahomey, and some because they were exotic to the experience of the photographer, e.g., the Hell's Angels of San Francisco.

Penn's stated intentions which inform this work are balanced between an aesthetic conviction that natural north light "is a light of such penetrating clarity that even a simple object lying by chance in such a light takes on an inner glow, almost a voluptuousness" (p. 7) and an ethnographic—like concern to make records of "the disappearing aborigines in the remote parts of the earth" (p. 8).

Unlike most anthropological picture takers, Penn decided to accomplish his goals by employing a studio rather than natural contexts. "I had come to enjoy and feel secure in the artificial circumstances of the studio and had even developed a taste for pictures that were somewhat contrived. I had accepted for myself a stylization that I felt was more valid than a simulated naturalism" (p. 8).

Penn's decision to move his subjects into the controllable environment of the studio is more reminiscent of the methods employed by the archaeologist photographing an artifact or the early photometric pictures of the human form created by physical anthropologists than the typical "snapshots" taken by ethnographers in the field. I don't think that a good argument can be made to reject Penn's deliberate stylizations in favor of the naive realism of the anthropological field snapshots on the basis of the latter being inherently more scientific or anthropological than the former. On the contrary, Penn's photographs are clearly related to the late 19th century tradition of the photographic portraits of native Americans by Edward Curtis and Clark Vroman. Like Penn, these photographers were motivated by a compulsion to photograph the disappearing cultures of the world before their demise. While Penn is not a trained anthropologist he comes out of an intellectual and romantic tradition that produced gigantic museum collections, volumes of writings, miles of movie footage, and countless photographs reflecting—the need to save "it" before "it" went away. Salvage ethnography, the anthropological variant

of this western passion, dominated much of American anthropology in the first half of the 20th century and is still used as a major justification for scientific film work (Sorenson 1975). I would argue that since there are no well articulated traditions in anthropological photography and moreover since it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish, on a formal level, a photograph taken for anthropological reasons from a photograph taken for other reasons (Ruby 1973), and since almost any photograph of an exotic person taken by anyone for any reason will be regarded by both lay and professional audiences as somehow being anthropological or at least ethnographic, it seems reasonable to examine Penn's work as if it were ethnography.

On a formal level, *Worlds in a Small Room* contains many of the elements found in most ethnographies—a statement of theory, a description of method, and a text which describes—albeit in a somewhat sketchy manner, the culture of the “key informants” in the photographs. As popular ethnography the book is adequate. It is on a humanistic level that I find this book troublesome. Penn makes the assumption that the studio (in some cases he actually took a portable studio into the field—again reminiscent of Curtis) was a sort of neutral area where both subject and photographer were away from the protection of their normal environments. Stripped of their defenses these strangers would be free to communicate themselves “with dignity and a seriousness of concentration” (p. 9). There is a fundamental flaw in Penn's logic. While he was out of his culture in the sense that he did travel to these various locations, he always rented or constructed a studio to work in. The studio environment is one where Penn is clearly at home and totally in control. As wielder of the technology, Penn was literally calling the shots.

In fact, because Penn lacked familiarity with the language and culture of the people that he photographed, he had to pose them by physically manipulating their bodies into place.

“I posed the subjects by hand, moving and bending them. Their muscles were stiff and resistant and the effort it took on my part was considerable.” (p. 12). The results are hauntingly beautiful and frightening images of human statues: people totally at the mercy of a technology and an aesthetic which is not theirs and which makes them into beautiful objects for our contemplation (Kolodny 1975).

If Penn were less of a photographic artist, the moral dilemma would not be so apparent. I am moved by the beauty of an image which has been constructed because a photographer was able to find people who were sufficiently passive to allow themselves to become aesthetic objects. Science and particularly the social sciences have been soundly criticized for dehumanizing people and exploiting them as subjects and informants (both terms suggest a submissive role) in the name of science. It is revealing to see that photographic artists can be open to the same criticism. A photographic aesthetic based on the objectification of human beings is as ethically problematic as scientific methods which employ people as informants. If we question one it seems reasonable to subject the other to similar scrutiny.

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