


1998

The Social Landscape: A Photojournalism Professor's Project

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Repository Citation

Davey, G. J. (1998). The social landscape: A photojournalism professor's project. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 5(1), 8-10.
doi:10.1080/15551399809363372

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Volume 5, Number 1
Winter 1998

Visual Communication Quarterly



Ghandi Statue, New York City 1990

PHOTO BY GERALD DAVEY

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GERALD JOHN DAVEY

Social landscape photography focuses upon aspects of our everyday environment and follows broadly in the tradition of straight, documentary photography. Significant digital manipulation acceptable in fine art photography, advertising, and increasingly in editorial photography, is out of place here. The social landscape photograph attempts to capture and replicate the initial visual experience or insight of the photographer. Such manipulation would undermine, over time, the fundamental believability of the image. On the other hand, the serendipitous nature of the subject matter and the widely varying conditions under which social landscape photographs are produced benefit greatly from the precise contrast control and perspective corrections made easier by limited digital techniques.

Ultimately, social landscape attempts to bring into our awareness aspects of our lived world that seem worthy of common reflection and which often go unseen in our daily lives. It uses symbols freely to re-present our world to us in a new light. It plays with icons and images, thought provoking juxtapositions, striking contrasts and unexpected events. Typically, it points to the hidden, that which we learn to block out of our ordinary perception as we hurry through our daily lives. It calls us to reflect on our world and our lives.

Social landscape is also highly personal and unabashedly interpretive. It recognizes, as Robert Frank once wrote, that "...it is always the instantaneous reaction to oneself that produces a photograph." Thus, the truth that social landscape aims to present is a subjective truth, as perhaps all really important human truths are, but it is by

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The House Where Lincoln Died, Washington, D.C. 1995



Angel & Cross #4, Vinton, CA 1994

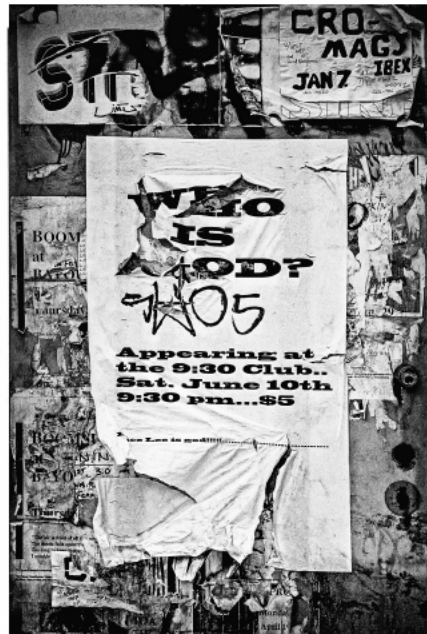
PHOTOS BY GERALD DAVEY



Hermes, Boston 1990



Looking, New York City 1990



Who is God?, Washington, D.C. 1995



Chicago 1997



Weenie World, N. CA 1995



Navy Pier, Chicago 1997

PHOTO BY GERALD DAVEY

no means an uncritically accepted one. From the moment of exposure to the finished print, the photograph continually challenges the photographer to refine and consider precisely the picture of the world he or she aims to present.

Social landscape photography aims to stay with us for awhile, a subject for contemplation and perhaps a little wonderment at the world we have wrought, the values we hold and the choices we make. The essence of the genre is to capture images that point—at times, subtly—to something larger than themselves, something abiding about our social world and so visually and personally comment upon it. At the same time, it unrelentingly presents us with the absolute particular that lies before the lens and its compelling reality.

A predominant sense of irony or an implicit contrast between social pretensions and social reality often pervades this genre. Some especially fine examples in American photography, in my judgment, were *occasional* pictures produced by such FSA photographers as Russell Lee, Dorothea Lange and Marion Post Wolcott. Russell Lee's image "Iron River, Michigan 1937," a picture of a barren, tree stump filled plot of land with a nicely centered sign advertising "Choice Farm Land For Sale," comes immediately to mind. The sign itself is small enough that the viewer has to look closely at the picture and only when you are drawn in, does the word "Choice" become clear. Somewhat less subtle, but perhaps more striking, are photographs such as Dorothea Lange's picture of migrants walking along a nicely paved highway with a billboard just ahead, advertising the relaxed pleasure of traveling by train. Walker Evans' well known 1935 image of an eroded, yet brilliantly white grave yard

cross against a compressed backdrop of houses and a steel mill in Bethlehem, PA, is another classic image in this genre as are his subway portraits published in *Many are Called*.

What distinguishes social landscape photography from documentary photography more broadly is the latter's emphasis on particular, addressable, social realities. Here, it is the subject or subjects before the lens and the story that the photograph tells about them that is meant to capture our attention and typically, move us to support some reformist action. Again looking at the FSA and many other documentary workers as well, there is an earnestness in the work, a directness that says "Look at this!" Social landscape's approach is typically less direct and its message more complex. It calls us to meditate upon what the picture has to say to us. Here, the particular vision of the photographer becomes an object, at times the primary object, of our attention. Its aim is to settle into the soul and transform the viewer, in some way, without controlling the outcome. T.S. Eliot once wrote: "Communication takes place before it is understood." Social landscape expects the wait. At its best, it attempts to create a new experience of discovery for the viewer and it recognizes, as Robert Doisneau once noted, "We must always remember that a picture is also made up of the person who looks at it. You offer the seed, and then the viewer grows it inside himself."

All images enhanced or updated by author

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