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Ohrn: Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition

Karin Becker Ohrn. *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980. 277 pp. \$15.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Howard S. Becker
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As Allen Sekula (1975) has remarked, photography swings between the two aims of expression and information, or art and documentation, usually seen as mutually exclusive. As expressive art, the photograph works as a self-contained object, generating its own meanings, intended for contemplation and enjoyment on its own terms. As informative documentation, the photograph stands as evidence of how things are and have been, its meanings arising out of its relation to the world of reality. We judge its truth and its ability to help us understand that world. Photographic documents (many of which have, and have been seen to have, considerable artistic value) are made in the worlds of journalism and social science investigation, rather than in worlds of art.

Dorothea Lange spent most of her life making documentary photographs. She made her aims clear in a 1940 statement from which these fragments are excerpted:

Documentary photography records the social scene of our time . . . man in his relation to mankind . . . his customs at work, at war, at play, or his round of activities through twenty-four hours of the day, the cycle of the seasons, or the span of a life . . . his institutions . . . the manner in which they work . . . methods of work . . . a record of change. [p. 37]

She added some more personal and artistic considerations in her later years, but never gave up on these. She thought, too, that photography ought to do some good, help people improve things, help them understand so that they would want to and be able to improve things.

Her work met those goals to a surprising degree—surprising because they are hard goals to meet. Her photographs embodied a serious and deep social science understanding of the changes that took place in America from the thirties to the fifties, especially in agricultural America, from, for instance, the feudal organization of tenant farming to the capitalist impersonality of agribusiness. They were effective and integral parts of reports which seem actually to have affected what Congress, state legislatures, and bureaucracies did.

How can photographs embody a social science understanding of anything? It is easy to see that some do, but we have very little serious analysis of how, or, indeed, how we can make our photographs do so. Lange's life and work provide the ideal case for the exploration of what documentary photography is and how it can be effectively done. Karin Ohrn has written a thor-

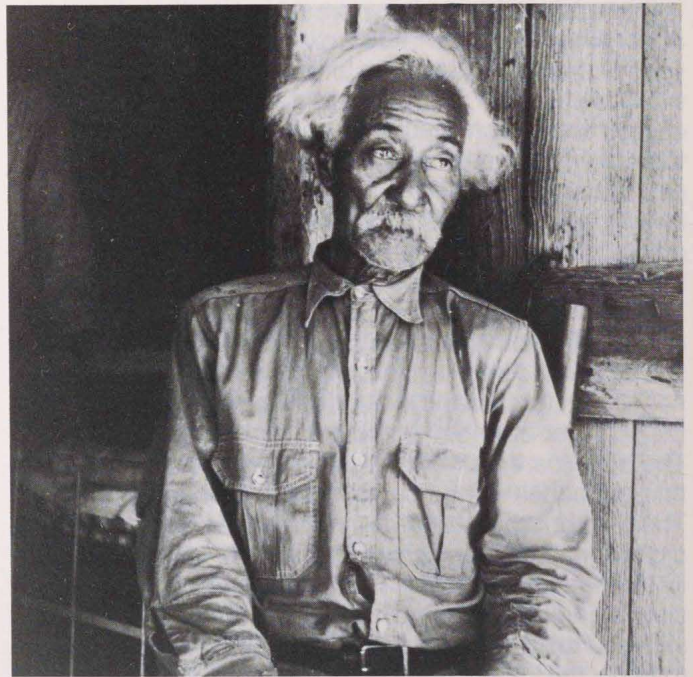


Figure 1 Bob Lemmon, a photograph by Dorothea Lange (Library of Congress, FSA Collection; plate 14, page 59 in Ohrn, published in 1980 by the Louisiana State University Press).

oughly researched, wonderfully perceptive account of this life, pointed mainly to the work, the conditions under which it was done, the ingredients that went into it, and the way the resulting images did the job. In this emphasis, it differs from the Meltzer (1978) biography, which is a much more conventional "life." Ohrn has interviewed many people who knew Lange's working methods well and makes effective use of the Lange Collection in the Oakland Museum (so that we see, for example, the contact sheets from which some of Lange's famous images were selected). I will not try to summarize all the author's results here but will simply comment on a few of the things that seemed especially interesting.

How do you learn to think so effectively in social science terms that your photographs actually come out of that understanding instead of having it forced on them afterward? The easy answer, in Lange's case, is that she worked with and then married a social scientist (Paul Taylor, a distinguished agricultural economist). That, of course, is a belittling and trivial answer. But it points to something important: a photographer has to learn to think like a social scientist to get those results, and this does not happen by taking a course in anthropology; the insights of social science must be applied, day in and day out, to the phenomena of social life, ideally in collaboration with someone who can help pinpoint their significance, until, eventually, the visually striking and scientifically significant fuse in one head. Marriage is only accidentally how that is achieved.

Lange's work makes clear that good results are less a matter of striking single images than of sustained series of images connected by as much text as necessary to make the analytic point clear. (Not that Lange failed to make striking images. The catalog of her posthumous retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art [Lange 1966] is full of them.) But this poses a serious problem. What format should be used to present sequential imagery and text? When Lange was doing her major work on agriculture, very few photographic books were being published. Even today, I wonder how much of a market there would be for a book that combined serious photographs with a sustained social science analysis, as the Lange-Taylor reports of the thirties seem to have attracted. (The nearest thing to those reports today may be the collaborations of John Berger and Jean Mohr, as in *A Seventh Man* [1975].) When Lange ceased working for the government, she lost the possibility of using that format and never really found another. Photographers attempting such extended statements since then have usually slighted the analysis Lange considered so crucial, providing, at most, simple date-and-place captions or short quotes from the people in the pictures, so that even full-length books like Frank's *The Americans* lack the analytic bite of a Lange image accompanied by one of her extended explanatory captions. Lange ended by treating her work as a file that could be dipped into for this or that purpose, letting the *file* be the format. But files are not usually as available as Lange's now are in Oakland, and even if they are, they tend to transfer the analytic job to the file's user. This lack of standard formats for the presentation of social science photography is perhaps its major problem today.

Finally, Ohrn's extended comparison of Lange's and Ansel Adams's documentation of the World War II relocation of Japanese-Americans demonstrates the differences between an "artistic" approach, in which unacknowledged political commitments work under the surface, and a forthrightly political one. Lange knew what she was doing. Her understanding of the economics and politics of California led her to conclude that the Japanese-American operation was illegitimate. Adams, more naïve, thought the internees were doing well, making the best of a tough situation which circumstances had forced on the country. The differences in their photographs, which Ohrn analyzes in detail, are striking.

Their treatment of the environment is a case in point. Not surprisingly, Adams made beautifully composed pictures of people at work under the majestic beauty of the Sierras. Lange, in contrast, made closer-up pictures of the dust and sweat that accompanied that labor, dust that Adams's faraway views hid. (Ohrn also makes very effective comparisons of Lange with others doing similar work under similar circumstances, with Imogen Cunningham, a portraitist in the twenties, and with Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee, members of the FSA staff.)

Ohrn has set a high standard for the monographic examination of a photographer. It is an example that needs to be followed by others with respect to such other major figures as, say, Walker Evans, Brassai, and Robert Frank.

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