Revolution: The Central American War Photography of Susan Meiselas and Adam Kufeld

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Barring the conflict in Chiapas, which has been portrayed more like theater (though deadly serious theater) than as warfare, the Central American civil wars of the 1980s and 1990s have ended, at least for the foreseeable future.[1] Yet the body of photographic work to which they gave rise holds important lessons for photographers imbued with a social conscience and interested in communicating to a larger public both the agony and suffering as well as the heroism implicit in peoples' conflicts. How does one reach a distant audience whose internalized dispositions, or *habitus* in Bourdieu's (1990: 52-65) terms, is resistant to the pain of Latin American others, historically stereotyped as simple but long-suffering peasants, dogmatic Soviet stooges or corrupt (but loyal to U.S. imperial masters) dictators and military officers? Putting aside the largely discredited vision of the "photograph as truth," how and what should a progressive photographer attempt to portray when he/she has (relative) control over the imaginational project? And since violence, physical violence of the most shocking sort, was a signature of these wars, to what degree might it be imaged without engendering either a pornography of violence (photographs of the dead and dying as commodities exciting viewers' hidden desires) or effecting desensitization (in which the specific quality of suffering in time, space and form dissolves in the sheer quantity of it)? In the following, I don't pretend to answer these questions so much as to explore them through the examination of two photographic projects: Susan Meiselas's well-known *Nicaragua*, and the less publicized *El Salvador*, by Adam Kufeld. Each project was founded in a humanist politics which was progressive in the context of social and political forces being contested at the

time. However, by insisting on a universal essence as the basis for "First World" viewers' identification with the plight of "Third World" photographic subjects, humanism elides the social, economic and political domination of the latter by the former. Moreover, it does nothing, apart from asserting equality, to discredit the hierarchical categorizations employed by First World viewers to justify their privileges and to explain why others have not attained the same levels of material development.

Susan Meiselas and the Nicaraguan Revolution (1978-1979)

Nicaragua contains seventy-one color photographs of the Nicaraguan revolution, covering the period from June 1978 to July 1979, when the Sandinistas successfully culminated their seventeen-year struggle with a triumphant march into Managua's central plaza. Photograph captions, text and a chronology occupy the last third of the book. Unusual for a war-related documentary project, the photographs are in color, occasionally vivid but more frequently muted in tone, lending to many images a slightly unreal, painterly effect.

In articles and interviews published in the mid-1980s, Meiselas explained that the book project grew out of frustration with her lack of control over the use to which her photographs had been put by international news agencies to which she sold them, and that she was troubled by the cultural/political misappropriation of individual images by a U.S. public lacking the experiential basis to "properly" interpret them. Hence, she decided that "it was necessary to create a book that would link otherwise isolated images together to make them understandable to an American audience" (Meiselas, 1988: 11; also see Meiselas, 1987).

The resulting narrative, read off the pictorial materials augmented by the text, is clearly sympathetic to the Sandinista cause. But it would more effectively reach the reader were visual and written materials interpolated rather than grouped and distanced from one another. The letters, testimonials, communiqués, poems and other writings, many of them affecting in their own right and much more personal than the anonymous photographs (with the singular exception of Somoza, she does not name her subjects), deserve a central place in the montage.[2] As it is, the strong, color images, carefully balanced aesthetically (both internally and in their pairing with those on facing pages), dominate *Nicaragua*. But they merit more commentary than Meiselas provides in the short captions attached to black-and-white, postage stamp-sized reproductions found in the last section of the book.

Many of the photographs in *Nicaragua* exhibit high aesthetic value. In

several cases formal composition, balance and color contribute to make the political message, as in the case of "Country Club" (p. 6), where a dark-skinned *mestizo* maid attends a very light-skinned young girl, while a little boy in the foreground, probably her brother, stares at the camera and chews on one end of a pair of adult-size sunglasses. At the extreme right margin, in the background, a middle-aged man in a swimsuit lounges in a deck chair. Race, or at least the Nicaraguan version of it (see Lancaster, 1992), and class — this photo represents it all. Likewise, "Motorcycle Brigade" (p. 22) presents a vivid contrast between dozens of bright lights shining into the camera and a patch of darkening sky in the background. The blurred image of motorcycles in motion and their cheering, flag-waving riders and passengers convey the intensity of the enthusiastic crowd leading Las Doce into Monimbo on a September day in 1978. In another photo, a young boy, an index finger held over his lips, is transfixed by the Mona Lisa smile of a female Sandinista in full combat gear. Everything about this slightly-overexposed image, bathed in a translucent, yellow light, is a little surreal (p. 57).

Just as often, however, the aesthetics fails, as in an unconvincing photo of a stevedore loading sacks of grain on a boat in Granada, (p. 5, compare to Kufeld's image of two men sawing planks by hand on p. 40 of *El Salvador*) or a National Guard tank preceded by a lone soldier entering Estilí (No. 30). Other aesthetic touches are politically troubling. Meiselas prints the National Guardsmen in her photo of a "Guard patrol in Masaya beginning a house-to-house search for Sandinistas" (p. 42) as darkened silhouettes, individually indistinguishable. Perhaps she intended to represent the anonymity of repression from the point of view of the victims, but it's easy to interpret the Guardsmen's identicalness as an inverted form of the same dehumanizing ideology that the National Guard employed to define opposition figures and justify its oppression of them. Admittedly, in a later photo of "National Guards taken prisoner in Sebaco" (p. 61), she does portray them as downtrodden individuals, tied up and seated next to a wall, demonstrating the shallowness of the arrogant confidence displayed by them in an earlier photo of two "Guardsmen on patrol in Managua" (p. 12).

Nicaragua also contains many images of human and material destruction, especially that inflicted upon the poor by the National Guard's seemingly boundless capacity for repression, and a few, such as a photograph of women waiting for missing relatives at Managua's central police station (p. 46), that register the human effects of the war. In a move of desperation, Somoza ordered the bombing of the cities, and Meiselas provides images of the planes (p. 29), people fleeing the bombs (p. 34) and a haunting photo of the aftermath in which a young woman in a red jersey dress poses with the few

utensils that she has recuperated from the ruins of her destroyed home (p. 37). Later (p. 59), in preparation for what became the final battle, residents of a working class neighborhood in Managua construct a bomb shelter in the street; in this finely-balanced photo, humans and a dog are arrayed around the mound of dirt piled over the shelter in a manner reminiscent of middle class suburbanites attending a pool party.

It is important to note that *Nicaragua* is not about the making of the revolution per se; its documentary value is limited by the photographer's emphasis on the military contest. Thirty-nine (fifty-five percent) of the seventy-one photos portray the National Guard (12) or the opposition (27), whether Sandinistas from the mountains or urban guerrillas allied with them. The years of organizing that preceded this final phase of the revolution, as well as the intense organizational work among urban cadres that accompanied it, are limited to a few images of funeral marches, political graffiti and student demonstrations (pp. 15, 18-21, 45). The political message is a relatively simple, linear one, easily read off the sequence of images: poverty and exploitation beget repression, which leads to resistance and, finally, revolution. Resistance, or at least collaboration with it, is represented as generalized across classes (see pp. 53-54).

Adam Kufeld and the Salvadoran Civil War (1985-1989)

Adam Kufeld pursues a much more conventional project in his *El Salvador*, which consists of 143 crisp and captioned (though seldom dated) black-and-white photos preceded by a lengthy introductory essay by Arnoldo Ramos and a brief discussion by the author explaining about his Salvadoran experience. Several poems written by Salvadoran novelist Manlio Argueta have been intercalated among the photographs. Kufeld states that he made eight trips to El Salvador between March 1985 and November 1989. He divides the book into six thematic sections that range from daily life to the November 1989 offensive. Images of violence and warfare represent a much smaller proportion of the corpus than in the case of Meiselas. Less than a quarter of the photographs image the Salvadoran military or FMLN (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation) guerrillas, and Kufeld presents dead bodies or remains "only" six times (4.2 percent of the total compared to 11.3 percent for Meiselas).

Kufeld's settings are wide-ranging. Images of markets, street vendors, factory workers, a banana warehouse, protest marches, a peasant religious service and people reading a letter coexist with the almost mandatory shots of military repression, guerrilla training and combat. I read this variety to suggest that whereas the war can indeed be boiled down to a struggle between

the haves and the have nots, it is for all that quite complex. In contrast to Meiselas's preoccupation with action photos, *El Salvador* contains a high percentage of "quiet" frames: guerrillas drinking a soda and chatting, a child sleeping on a bench next to a hand grenade, former refugees collapsed in the grass following their return to their previously-abandoned community, and many photographs of petty merchants and laborers at work tending market stalls, selling goods on the street, sorting bananas and working in factories.

A number of sequences stimulate the viewer to create an imaginary narrative by filling in the gaps between adjacent (or in one case widely separate) frames. For instance, page forty-five contains portraits of three peasant children in war zones arranged in a horizontal panel. Forty-five pages later there appears an almost identical series of portraits of young adults bearing arms, labeled simply "Guerrillas." The young woman on the left wears a long print dress and smiles for the camera; an ancient rifle hangs from a strap over her right shoulder. The man in the center cradles an M-16 just below the Oakland Raiders logo of his long-sleeved tee-shirt, while the third guerrilla, a somewhat older and perhaps more-seasoned combatant, looks pensively into the distance. Going through *El Salvador* for the second time, I was drawn to think that, surely, the FMLN combatants in the second panel had once been quite like the children portrayed in the first, and that, moreover, barring a resolution to popular demands, the young children in the war zones, which the caption represents as "the nation's young...the prime victims of poverty, hunger, and war" (p. 45), would grow up to become future guerrillas. The last photograph in the book reinforces this idea: a government soldier leaving the working class neighborhood of Zacamil following six days of fighting during the November 1989 offensive passes by five young children, including a little girl, who play with dozens of spent cartridges.

Other "mini-narratives" also find places within the grand design of the project. A photograph of vendors receiving copies of *El Mundo*, San Salvador's afternoon daily, for street sale is followed by one of the identical setting taken shortly thereafter. In the first photograph, the stacks of newspapers that vendors carry in their arms or on their heads sag under their own weight; from the side, the edges present the striated appearance of mounded filo dough. This scene, flush with fine details, contrasts notably with the sterility of its counterpart, populated by three empty-handed men who, according to the caption, "wait patiently to see if there will be more papers to sell" even though "they earn only two cents per paper sold." The sequence is an excellent visual statement of one meaning of underemployment.

In another sequence (pp. 88-89), a playful photograph of a smiling guerrilla seated next to his bashful *compañera* (she looks down and pulls at a sock) is

paired with another in which the same youth appears in the front rank of a rebel training formation, his M-16 rifle held at "present arms." The rifle blocks out the details of his face, but he is recognizable by the stripe on his uniform shoulder and his incongruous hunting cap. From one image to the next, he seems to undergo a transformation: boy one moment, man the next. Of course, he is both.

Many of these sequences lack the formal aesthetic balance that predominates in Meiselas's work. I can think of nothing in *El Salvador* that compares with Meiselas's two photographs (pp. 19-20) containing the red and black FSLN banner: held above an open coffin in the vertical image of the left-hand page, and below the front rank of massed participants in a funeral procession for assassinated student leaders in the image to the right. However, the first funeral took place in Diriamba, the second in Jinotepe. Here, the shared ideological commitment, symbolized by the banner, collapses space and transcends time. Each group has been touched by state violence in a specific way and has integrated into the Sandinista movement (although it would be wrong to assume that all participants in the funeral share the same level of sympathy or even sympathy itself for the revolutionaries), but the dynamics, beyond the encompassing dialectic of repression-resistance, remain abstract. As Kozloff (1987: 167) noted in a favorable review, *Nicaragua* "should not be treated as any kind of historical analysis;" it "does not attempt to fill in the gaps between occurrences, [though] it does impart their flavor and mood." Of course "flavor and mood" reference food and music, leaving meaning inexplicit and subject to determination on the basis of the received politics of the viewer.[3]

Kufeld is even less faithful to chronological issues than Meiselas, though he (logically) precedes his images of the refugees' return from Mesa Grande, Honduras, to El Salvador with a selection of photos taken in the camp itself, and ends the book with images from his trip during the November 1989 FMLN offensive. Many of his sequences convey a sense of local and multiple times. Despite the war, everyone is not marching to the same clock. The grand narrative of oppression and resistance persists, but as a collage composed of innumerable mini-narratives, each with its own time and place.

Representing Violence

Both photographers use the camera to represent violence, albeit in somewhat different ways. Meiselas employs a more kinetic approach in which still images of furious action are mixed with quieter ones that precede battle or portray its aftermath. Eight of the seventy-one photographs (eleven percent) consist of corpses or their remains, indicative of the fascination with

death that marks most photojournalists and mass communications media editors (Pedelty, 1995).[4] Four of these photos are positioned opposite blank pages, eliminating competing visual fields and stimulating the viewer to focus his/her entire attention on these visual representations of horror.[5] In several cases the central horrific figure contrasts with an aesthetically pleasing ground: a dead man in jeans reclines on a sidewalk at the center of a series of square and horizontal frames formed by windows, doors and a grey-painted wall (p. 28); in another (p. 14), the headless and armless remains of a death squad victim lie on a grassy outcrop overlooking a pleasant green valley and Lake Managua. His swollen jeans incline toward the distant water; the bony, fleshless spine attached to them points towards the lower, center margin of the pagean arrow aimed right between the viewer's eyes.

Of this photo, Meiselas stated, "[T]he American public could not relate their reality to this image. They simply could not account for what they saw" (1988: 11). Preceding that image by a sequence of photos of National Guardsmen in training and on patrol is her way of assigning attribution, establishing causality through visual metonomy and thus making sense of a seemingly senseless and barbaric act. But I find this approach politically problematic because it locates the violence elsewhere —"down there" in Nicaragua, El Salvador or wherever— rather than "up there" in the United States as well, and can easily be read in ways that enforce widespread Western stereotypes of Latin American cultures and elide U.S. involvement, including the vicarious involvement of a majority of U.S. citizens in underwriting the conditions that produce and sustain violence (Andersen, 1989: 102). As Jonathan Garlock noted in his review of *El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers*, which Meiselas edited along with Harry Mattison and Fae Rubenstein, "Mutilation inflicted by one person directly upon the body of another can...be read as pathological, as if it were somehow worse than comparable injury inflicted by pushing a button thousands of feet in the air" (1984: 6).

Moreover, is it not legitimate to inquire what, really, one can learn from a photograph of a dead body? Doris Salcedo, a Colombian artist who creates installations that invoke the effects of violence on survivors (eg., the spouses and children of the assassinated and disappeared) without portraying it directly, asks: "If I show a dead body to an audience, what can they interpret? The audience will be incapable of producing meaning because there is no way of interpreting the image... The photographs of corpses of tortured bodies shown by artists in and outside of Colombia, are examples of a detached and classicist gaze that is extremely violent" (cited in Villaveces-Izquierdo, 1997: 250, 251). Such portrayals run the risk of turning violence into a spectacle that entertains viewers who imagine that they reside in a qualitatively

different social environment, in this manner reinforcing a sense of difference (hierarchically structured) among a majority of inhabitants in the North which contributes to the maintenance of violence in the South. The danger grows, I believe, when the images are in color. While it is true that "we see and live in color" (Kozloff, 1987: 168), it is by no means certain that we *imagine* in color. Color photography shrinks the field of play of the imagination and, by virtue of that fact, strengthens the camera's "truth effect."

Meiselas's prints, produced from color slide film with limited exposure latitude, are often soft, with a slightly washed or faded appearance that lends them the aspect of watercolor paintings. Reality frequently seems to transcend itself, as though revolutions were fought in another space/time dimension. But aesthetic effects cannot contain the spectacle of blackened bodies burning in the middle of the pavement (one with a portrait of Somoza thrust upon it) or corpses wrapped in sacking and being rolled "casually" down a cobblestone street on a wheeled cart like a freshly butchered animal being taken to market. Death has its finality. What can be said about it except that these bodies are other, they are not us?

In this respect, Kufeld does little better, though in several instances he does remind us that the dead leave survivors. (Meiselas has one image, which I consider intrusive to the extreme, of a father collecting the carbonated remains of his assassinated son, "identified by a shoe lying nearby," p. 70; and her carefully-framed, soft-toned photo of two young children injured in a bomb blast borders on a pornography of violence. The caption concludes by noting that "They died shortly thereafter." With this perfunctory note, she intensifies the pathos, i.e., the passage from life to death, and validates her presence on the scene.)[6] While the dead portrayed by Meiselas generally display a quiet repose, the torn, rumpled carcasses of the war victims on both sides in *El Salvador* are tossed about like sacks of corn (pp. 55, 71, 165, 169). The one exception is Kufeld's photo of Dutch journalist Cornel Lagrouw, lying dead in a hospital in the eastern province of Usulután. Two fellow journalists (judging by their dress) somberly gaze at his cropped beard and closed eyes, and a female, who wears audiophones around her neck, rests her hand tenderly on his forehead. The image acknowledges an individuality in this European death that is absent in the cases of Kufeld's photos of combat dead, whose casual treatment (piled in the rear of an ambulance, tossed together in the corner of a cemetery) suggests interchangeability and cheapens the worth of Salvadorans. The caption under the image of Lagrouw states, "Two Salvadoran journalists also were killed by government forces as they covered the 1989 elections" (p. 77). But their names do not merit mention. The only way to justify the inclusion of this photograph would be to discuss the very real differences, which likely existed, in the treatment of Salvadoran

and nonSalvadoran dead; in other words, to have engaged politically the preservation in death of the hierarchies of power that shape life.

Imaging Civil War

Of these two projects, Meiselas's *Nicaragua* is more polished, more pleasingly aesthetic; Kufeld's *El Salvador* is more narratively complex. Perhaps some of the difference can be accounted for by specificities of place and time: the last insurrectionary year of a mass uprising against an unpopular dictator versus a prolonged class war preceded by almost a decade of organizing (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). By the late eighties, keeping track of the acronyms of the organizations in El Salvador's rapidly-growing popular movement required sustained effort. However, I don't believe that the historical particularities explain very much. Kufeld certainly could have imaged a great deal more combat action had he sought to do so, and nothing prevented Meiselas from registering more dimensions of the struggle: camp life, organizational meetings, marches, and the daily life of those who were and were not drawn into the struggle.

Rather, the distinctions reflect different political conjunctures and the photographers' analyses of them, as well as their particular sensibilities regarding what is and what is not a "proper" photographic subject. Meiselas effected a justification, which she drew in broad strokes, of the Sandinista revolution at a moment of political transition in the U.S. executive branch from a "liberal" Democrat (Carter) to a conservative Republican (Reagan). And as the introductory essay by Arnoldo Ramos makes clear, Kufeld's *El Salvador* was part of a project intended to hasten a negotiated end to the Salvadoran conflict by convincing the U.S. government and its citizenry to reduce, or eliminate, military assistance to the Salvadoran military. Kufeld's photos and the accompanying textual materials portray the civil war as a broad "people's struggle" against a bankrupt military-dominated regime maintained by Washington's largess. The many details of daily life and popular organization define various dimensions of poverty and the multiple effects of the war: refugees and the displaced, economic crisis, homelessness. Here, civil war is not just, or maybe even not principally, about firefights and bombings; civil wars send shock waves throughout society, affecting material and nonmaterial relationships at every level, although not everyone experiences them in the same manner or with the same gravity. For instance, sequential images portray the eradication of a block of homes in Soyapango, "caused by four bombs dropped in the area"; the flight of a (minimum) two-car family from their home in the wealthy Escalón section of San Salvador; and an elderly woman sitting next to a concrete block wall in the Flor Blanca

soccer stadium following the destruction of her home (pp. 175-177). The family fleeing Escalón and the homeless stadium dweller both felt the effects of the FMLN offensive and the army's response, but they experienced them in quite different ways. After all, the High Command did not order the bombing of Escalón when the FMLN occupied homes there as it did of the working class communities of Soyapango and Zacamil. As an anthropologist who has studied some of the effects of the Salvadoran civil war (Binford, 1996), I find Kufeld's more variegated approach preferable to the "shoot-em-up, gun-em-down" action recorded by Meiselas.

Neither photographic project breaks away from a liberal perspective, informed by a humanist ethics, that casts the Western public as bystander in Latin American civil wars. The photographs seek to represent the consequences of the deep class divides in Nicaragua and El Salvador which, sustained by repressive state apparatuses supported by the U.S. government, caused the conflicts. They also "humanize" the revolutionaries, portraying them as regular people and underdogs —especially in Meiselas's *Nicaragua*, where pistols and hunting rifles confront planes, tanks and automatic weapons— with moral right (and the people) on their side. The authors seem to presume (or hope) that Western publics are equipped with the mental categories to comprehend these arguments, and that once shown the "truth," which each photographer seeks to communicate in his/her own way, they will act on it by supporting Latin American liberation movements or at least opposing U.S. government assistance to the repressive forces. In *El Salvador*, Arnoldo Ramos, Democratic Revolutionary Front representative in the United States, ends his condensed discussion of Salvadoran history by linking the then current (1990) FMLN program to the liberal project of "the patriots who declared our independence from Spain in 1821" (p. 29). He concludes by appealing to North Americans in the following terms: "Given our past experiences we still have to ask ourselves and our North American friends, how can the implementation of this American dream endanger the security and well-being of North Americans?"[7]

In these books, the imagined U.S. audience remains distanced from the conflict, a spectator to the terror perpetrated by despotic state apparatuses upon innocent people compelled to respond with violence when peaceful methods failed. For the consumer of *Nicaragua* and *El Salvador*, the violence is always somewhere else, and their intervention on the side of the oppressed masses can only be a *moral* response to the plight of others in whom they, at some level, recognize themselves. Though not without internal contradictions, each book (*El Salvador* more so than *Nicaragua*) seeks to engender or reinforce that recognition.[8] The reader is invited to imagine his/her response to situations similar or comparable to those portrayed in the photos and

discussed in the accompanying texts. Underpinning these projects, therefore, is the idea that humans share a common essence, that people everywhere "are pretty much the same" despite their distinct cultures and historical trajectories.

In their assumption of a common human essence, the authors implicitly minimize the differences between underdeveloped South and overdeveloped North, and underestimate the historical, and especially the contemporary, relationships involved in the genesis and perpetuation of inequalities. Focusing the spotlight on the physical violence and insecurity "there" means relegating to the shadows other forms of terror that predominate "here", and that have become naturalized through their incorporation into the very warp and weft of language and culture. I am thinking in particular of "the universe of the undiscussed," i.e., Bourdieu's *doxic mode* in which "the world of tradition [is] experienced as a natural world and taken for granted" (Bourdieu, 1977: 164). And, concretely, I am referring (in particular) to the growing social isolation of the middle classes in the United States (and other countries), whose *actions*, as opposed to their *conscious explanations* for them, suggest that the poor and suffering eighty percent of the world's population constitute threats to their "inherent" right to endless accumulation of material goods, through which they measure their self-worth. Few middle class United Statesians would admit that they hate and fear the poor, yet the suburban middle class, increasingly isolated in guarded and gated communities, has played and is playing an instrumental role in the government's assault on the social welfare system, the passage of anti-immigrant legislation and the destitution of affirmative action (e.g., Feagin and Vera, 1995).[9] On the other hand, their self-perception is one of being on the sidelines, spectators rather than actors (except in their personal lives), shaken by political and economic forces that seem to be beyond their control (e.g., Newman, 1994). By virtue of their absence in these books and the appeal the photographers make to them, this is precisely where they have been (erroneously) situated by Meiselas and Kufeld.

This analysis may appear extreme, but I think otherwise. How is it possible in this day and age of intensified global relations, I would ask, for a project about Others not to implicate Us, especially when it is Us to whom the results are directed? Hence I would argue that We *are* unavoidably present in these and other books that make objects —even sympathetic objects— of postcolonial Others. To pretend otherwise is to further legitimate our spectator status, and to base the call to action solely upon a moral responsibility predicated on the questionable assumption of middle class recognition of a common human essence rather than a political responsibility to contribute to the reshaping of a very unequal world which We have helped

to configure and from which We continue to benefit materially at the expense of a majority of the world's people (cf. Binford, 1996, Chapter 10).

In terms of photography, I would like to see projects that seek to bring home to middle class United Statesians and other privileged groups the way in which the many mini-terrors of their daily lives —the fears of others, the siege mentalities, material waste, the hollowness of most social relations, conspicuous consumption, and so on (cf. Davis, 1992)— work through multitudinous channels to contribute to the production, maintenance and reproduction of the suffering and violence that regularly dominate the international sections of major daily newspapers, and which the news (and communications) media help perpetuate and justify. Also, I wonder whether the global situation merits (or ever merited) books with titles like *El Salvador* or *Nicaragua*. Would Meiselas, with scarcely more than a year in the United States, have claimed to be able to photograph "America"? Despite the pretentious titles, neither work provides balanced geographical or social coverage. Meiselas photographs mainly the major cities where the principal actions of 1978-1979 unfolded, while Kufeld hardly ever got east of the Lempa River.

Despite my critiques of these projects and my effort to mark their limits and suggest alternatives, both photographers —though Kufeld to a greater degree than Meiselas— took sides and employed their expertise to promote alternative social projects in Latin America. Following her year in Nicaragua, Meiselas worked in El Salvador and among other actions, she took the photographs that accompanied Raymond Bonner's *New York Times* articles that broke the story of the 1981 El Mozote massacre (Danner, 1994). In 1992 Meiselas testified about her time in El Mozote before the United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission (Meiselas, 1993). For his part, Kufeld made numerous visits between 1985 and November 1989 to refugee and displaced persons camps, popular organizations, FMLN zones of control and resettlement communities, among other places. Following his *El Salvador* project, he worked in Cuba, publishing a book of color prints generally sympathetic to the social experiment there. I think that it is important that we acknowledge such efforts even as we critique them. The moment has come, however, to develop new projects that articulate different levels of the "global ecumene" (Hannerz, 1996). These projects must problematize the process of making objects, even sympathetic ones, of the lives of the have nots, and they must avoid glorifying the lives of the haves.[10] The time is ripe for documentary work that, without claiming absolute or even relative "truth," bases itself on broader, more variegated conceptions of violence and terror (the violence of everyday life, the "ecology of fear," mini-terrors, etc.) which link multiple forms of suffering that reverberate between suburb (psychical,

social suffering) and city (physical, material suffering), across different ethnic groups and classes, and from one nation to another. Like transnational migrants whose lives unfold between the United States and Mexico, but which are rooted in neither, the documentary photographers (ethnographers, filmmakers, writers) whom I have in mind will move fluidly between portraying the most intimate details of the lives of International Monetary Fund functionaries, military contractors, or self-satisfied but psychically-damaged Chicago suburbanites, to representing (always in ways that simultaneously test the truth claims of the medium in which they are working) the human effects of the beliefs and behaviors of the rich and powerful on the poor, as well as the poor's resistances to them. In sum, I am asking photography (along with ethnography and other representational enterprises) to take up two necessarily contradictory tasks: (1) to document unequal power relations and their effects; (2) to raise questions about the unequal power relations inscribed in the documentary project itself. In this conception, the political critique of unequal social relations inscribed within a project of representation doubles back upon itself to engage the instruments, relations and concepts that facilitate it: the camera as instrument for the production of truth, "representation" as its product, the office of "photographer," and most important, the manner in which the aforementioned enter into relations with human beings ("objects") who, by virtue of their subordinate positions, do not have the absolute right of refusal to be grist for the photographic mill.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Frank Noelker, John Ewing, Nancy Churchill and especially James Faris for ideas, suggestions and critiques.
2. Not naming masked Sandinista combatants makes sense. Meiselas mentions that during the revolution, *Time* magazine editors ignored her request not to publish photos of undisguised combatants; the appearance of *Time* in Managua a few days later jeopardized their lives (Meiselas, 1988:12). However, there is no reason not to have named some of those subjects who appeared in photos taken on the threshold of the overthrow following Somoza's departure.
3. I thank James Faris for having pointed this out.
4. Pedelty (1995:158) relates that a photojournalist working in El Salvador listed for him the types of photos that sell best: "Assassinations, bombings, funerals, and press conferences. Those that go along with the biggest stories." On being informed that a photographer had acquired images of violence, the most common query from one editor was "How many bodies?" Told in one case that there were five, the editor replied, "That's not enough."
5. Sixty of *Nicaragua*'s seventy-one photos (eighty-five percent) are located on facing pages. Ten photos (eliminating from the count the photo opposite the title page) are situated on the right-hand page, facing blank left hand pages. Forty percent of these "isolated" images are of corpses or remains, which represent "only" eleven percent of the total collection, clear

evidence of the photographer's preoccupation with death and of her determination to ensure that viewers confront images of it with minimal competing visual stimuli.

6. The children lie on a black and white (actually yellowish) checkered floor. The eyes of the figure on the left are dull, lips slightly parted; the arms and hands of an invisible adult extend from the left margin to hold his arm and palpitate his chest. The boy on the right reclines with arms extended and stares wide-eyed at his compatriot. The figures have been carefully framed; each head points towards one of the upper corners of the field, and their sallow skin, which looks more painted than real, and black shorts add to the patchwork effect of the checkered tiles. If the field extended lower, the bodies would meet to form a "V" beneath the center of the lower margin.
7. I interpret Ramos's use of "North Americans" as a polite reference to citizens of the United States. The Canadian government did not provide military aid to the Salvadoran government and pursued a more open immigration policy than the United States with respect to Salvadoran refugees fleeing government repression. And, in August 1981, the Mexican government was one of the first governments (along with the French) to recognize the FMLN as a representative political force.
8. For instance, without additional commentary in the text, Kufeld's differential treatment of Salvadoran and European (the photograph of deceased journalist Cornel Lagrouw) dead assumes a hierarchy of value.
9. While seemingly clumsy, "United Statesians" is geographically and geo-politically precise, and avoids the imperial pretensions of "Americans" or "North Americans" (see Kearney, 1991).
10. That applies, of course, to those photo journalists whose self-image includes a lust for danger and a desire to be "where the action is" (Pedelty, 1995: 61-63, 153-156). Photographer's claims of having risked their lives in order to be "on the scene" play a role comparable to the anthropologist's presence "in the field" in authenticating their imageric productions as accurate (true) representations of reality. In this respect, every one of the images in Meiselas's *Nicaragua* was taken outdoors; a significant proportion of the photos are of combat or its aftermath.

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