

Ed Kashi and the Third Frame: NGOs and Photography Conference Report

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Talking Third Frame

There is a crisis in the use of photography by NGOs, but that crisis is producing a flowering of creative practice and thoughts.

That's my impression after a packed day talking imagery and compassion at UAL's Paul Lowe's Third Frame Conference, put on with Polis at the London College of Communication.

Here's the problem. NGOs like Save The Children or Water Aid want to raise money and consciousness about development, Human Rights and economic oppression. They also want to do it in a way that empowers the subjects of injustice. They want to be democratic in the way that they try to change the world.

At the same time they need your attention and money to help them do all this. Photography and film is a powerful tool in their campaign kit bag. But it can reinforce stereotypes and replicate oppressive power relationships.

New media technologies open up new ways for NGOs to use photography and film in different ways. But there is still that fundamental contradiction. How to pull the heart strings without confirming the inequality?

David Campbell from Durham University denied there was a problem with 'compassion fatigue'. He said the problem was compassion. Instead of trying to move people emotionally, photography needs to get political.

And Lilie Chouliaraki from LSE suggested how that might happen by using imagery that makes you reflect. Instead of straight-forward images of suffering she showed examples where NGOs had tried what she calls 'post-humanitarian' communications. So use cartoons, or tromp d'oeil. [There's more on Lilie's work with Polis [here](#)] However, she warns that new media can create a more 'light-touch' activism.

Ben Chesterton from the multi-media outfit Duckrabbit insists that NGOs have to let people tell their own story. And they must be enabled to use the full range of media to do so.

Meanwhile, other NGOs are looking harder at how they use more conventional photography. SCF have teamed up with Paul Lowe on a [knowledge transfer project](#) where a researcher will help SCF to evaluate a photography project they have commissioned as well as their overall use of imagery.

WaterAid have also commissioned a photographer to record the effect of their work. Not to be put in brochures but to tour galleries. The photographer worked with the NGO but had a remarkable degree of freedom.

Then there was Ed Kashi, the American photo-journalist who has created the Curse of the Black Gold project at the Host Gallery. He's a very interesting man. On the one hand he is a classic documentary photographer but he pushes hard at the boundaries of the genre. For example, he works with non-media types on the economic and political issues raised by his photography. So his event at the LSE includes academics and Nigerian campaigners from the Niger Delta.

"Ten years ago I just wanted to get the book and the gallery show. That was the ultimate. Now I want to create an

online feed-back loop from my work using stills, audio, the voice of the subjects. I see my pictures as the way to bring you in..to respond..to start to react and care about something. And then to further contextualise the issues we want to cover.”

He talks about how self-obsessed photographers are and how he tries to move beyond the ego. He doesn't differentiate between traditional photography and new multi-media techniques. It's not the technology, it's the impact that matters he says.

In fact, sometimes the wiz-bang geekery can get in the way of telling a story that has purpose. Get out of Second Life into Real Life, says Kashi.

Take a look at this clever and powerful audio/stills piece about exploitation in the Niger Delta. Style-wise it could run on a newspaper website but the NYT turned it down because it is a rampantly 'partial' piece with little formal balance. There are no quotes from the oil companies for example.

Which means that funding has to come from NGOs or foundations. That might only reinforce its potential exclusion from the mainstream. So says, Kashi, we are at a moment when the kit has never been cheaper or more clever, but the outlets aren't there.

In the plenary that I chaired it was clear that this is an area where there are deeply held beliefs about both humanitarianism and photography. Frankly, I don't think they are entirely reconcilable. Both aid workers and photographers see themselves as moral agents. Worse still, the photographers think they are artists as well!

Joking apart, this can be a rich mix. But it can also create self-serving paradigms where the subject is ignored. That's why I think that it is still important to think about this as journalism – not simply art or a marketing. The difference now is that all of us – including the subject – can be part of the process.

Is that enough? No, in the end it is politics that decides these issues and why it was so good that it wasn't forgotten during this excellent and exciting conference.

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