



One of my problems with photography, especially documentary photography, is that it is intrusive. To alleviate this problem, regardless whether it concerns press photos or portraits, photography needs the collaboration between photographer and subject.

"War Photographer", a documentary by Christian Frei about the work of the photographer James Nachtwey, was nominated for an Oscar (in 2002) and won twelve international film festivals.

Two mini video recorders placed on Nachtwey's camera allowed the viewers to see what the photographer was seeing. In Kosovo: a crying woman. People try to comfort her. She has just learned, one suspects, that someone close to her — maybe her son, maybe her husband? — was killed, or found in a mass grave? We are not told, we do not know, we are left guessing. Neither do we know what the photographer knows. We see what the photographer sees: a woman crying, her face full of pain, women who try to calm and comfort her. Nachtwey is getting closer and closer, he aims the camera at her face and ceaselessly presses the button. How is he able to do that? Doesn't he feel awkward, and embarrassed? Doesn't he have scruples?

On the website of [this film](#) , this quote by Nachtwey can be found: "Every minute I was there, I wanted to flee. I did not want to see this. Would I cut and run, or would I deal with the responsibility of being there with a camera?" In the film we can hear him more than once stressing the importance of having respect. He also says he understands himself as being the spokesperson for the ones he portrays.

I'm glad that Nachtwey's photos exist and remind us of things we would probably rather not be reminded of. I want to believe his good intentions. Yet, I also feel that there is something wrong with this kind of photography because the ones portrayed are used; they have no say in how they are depicted and later are put in pages of books, or hung on walls.

Let's look at Nachtwey's rationalizations.

I'm not sure what this is, "the responsibility of being there with a camera." Does that mean that because he is a professional photographer who goes to take pictures in war zones, he has an obligation to take these photos? According to whom? And if so, toward whom does he have this obligation?

Yes, respect is needed, it is imperative, but how does it translate into action? To hold a camera into the face of a grieving person is indefensible; it is the opposite of showing respect; it is the total absence of tact, courtesy and decency. Is he really their spokesperson? How can he be? How does he know that they need or want a spokesperson?

Photography is an intrusive medium. Quite a few photographers describe their business in somewhat aggressive terms as shooting pictures. One way of softening this intrusiveness — if one so wishes — is the collaboration between photographer and the ones portrayed. Such collaboration is not uncommon, just think of photo ops or portraits.

In the London Guardian of 18 January 2003, Liz Jobey quotes the next note by the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron on what she saw as her first successful photograph:

"At 1pm on January 29 1864, a little girl with cherubic features and scraggy, shoulder-length hair was buttoned into her winter coat, waiting patiently for her photograph to be taken. In front

of her, a short, stocky, middle-aged woman fitted another glass plate into the back of her huge camera and begged the child to keep still. She was probably counting, too; it could take up to five minutes for the image to be fully exposed. If the girl was bored, she didn't show it. Her face, turned in half-profile to catch the light, was composed but alive, its curves heightened by the contrast between shadow and light. It was a happy result — we know, because the photographer wrote to the girl's father later that day: 'My first perfect success in the complete Photograph owing greatly to the docility & sweetness of my best and fairest little sitter. This Photograph was taken by me at 1pm Friday Jan 29th Printed Toned — fixed and framed all by me & given as it now is by 8pm this same day Jan 29th 1864. Julia Margaret Cameron.'

Ten years later, in her memoir, *Annals of My Glass House*, Cameron expanded on this moment, "I was in a transport of delight. I ran all over the house to search for gifts for the child. I felt as if she entirely had made the picture."

More recently, Murat Nemet-Nejat (2003), in *The Peripheral Space of Photography*, also stresses the importance of the subject's behavior: "The pose is a photographic dimension which goes beyond the intention of the photographer and suggests the independence, asserts even the very existence, of the subject. The pose is the key to catch the independent, socially ignored, unsaid unacknowledged in the photographic act."

Agreed, but there are photographers who do acknowledge the importance of the pose. Lisa Kahane (2008), in *Do Not Give Way to Evil*, writes, "Despite the official cynicism about street photography, the people I met in the neighborhood were happy to have their picture taken. They stopped their cars in the middle of the street (very Bronx) and got out to pose for me. They were proud and generous. No one I met had more than a passing thought about taking my camera from me."

In times when (some) photographers hold celebrity status, it is useful to be reminded that a good photograph does not solely depend on the photographer's ability to choose the right subject, location and light, but also on the chemistry and the collaboration, between photographer and subject.

A good illustration of this is One Step Beyond, the multimedia project about landmines and their victims by the German photographer Lukas Einsele. Because Einsele makes his pictures with a large-format camera, staging is unavoidable because, as he wrote to me in an e-mail: "The camera is visible, the photo — its exposition — lasts such a long time that a certain acquiescence has to exist between photographer and subject. Sure, there are exceptions, but actually I'm looking for these common productions by which the subjects become co-authors of an image-reality."

When looking at works of photography, viewers often don't know whether such types of collaboration as those mentioned above have taken place. Sometimes viewers learn about it, more often they don't. Photographs invite us to ask questions: What do my eyes show me? How did the photo come to be? What doesn't it show? And so on.

Walker Evans, while working for the Resettlement Administration in the 1930s, took photos of sharecroppers in Alabama. He portrayed them in their daily lives, at times with worn-out clothes, dirty feet, uncombed hair and unshaven faces, because he wanted to document the circumstances they were living in. That, however, seems not have been to their liking, for there exists one photo — one that Evans did not use in his publications — that shows the family clean and combed and in their Sunday best. One can safely assume that it was taken at the request of the family.

Despite my deep sympathy for socially inclined photographers, when the people portrayed feel ashamed of their portraits, there clearly is something wrong with this kind of photography.

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April, 2009

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