Everything was Moving: Photography from the 60s and 70s
Barbican Art Gallery, London
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While an exhibition entitled ‘Everything was Moving: Photography from the 60s and 70s’ might summon images of Carnaby Street butterflies, muddy hippies at Woodstock, or anti-Vietnam flowers in rifle barrels, the signifiers of the counter-culture are conspicuously absent in this intelligent and original assemblage of international photographers from a period too often reduced to a minute area of cultural activity in London and San Francisco. The only bell-bottoms on display are in photographs by Malick Sidibé and Raghubir Singh of trendy Malians and Indians respectively. The Movement in the title is not the underground version, but refers to a host of other dynamics: intense political events in dramatically shifting social contexts and with world-historical import; social movements geared towards dislodging intransigence, especially in matters of racial politics; the emergence of an increasingly global camera eye serving non-Western photographic subjectivities; and appeals for a profound reexamination of the radical properties of photographic realism in wake of postmodernism. Not to mention that the images assembled by curator Kate Bush themselves carry a potency that is both emotionally moving and potentially consciousness altering. If the ultimate agenda of the exhibition is never plainly stated, and its political suggestions sometimes remain opaque, then its effects linger due to an imaginative and provocative selection and sequencing of established and relatively unknown practitioners working to diverging purposes across multifarious structures of dissemination and display.

The exhibition consists of generous selections of images by twelve photographers on two floors: David Goldblatt, Ernest Cole, William Eggleston, Bruce Davidson, and Graciela Iturbide occupy the lower floor, whilst upstairs the sequence picks up with Sigmar Polke, followed by Boris Mikhailov, Shomei Tomatsu, Larry Burrows, Li Zhensheng, Malick Sidibé and Raghubir Singh. Initially, it seems that the former section tends towards straight documentary images whereas the larger upper display explores photographic experimentation, but there are no obvious attempts at literal bipartition. However, it is striking that the opening brace of Goldblatt and Cole addresses the heyday of apartheid with unflinching reportage of its comprehensive everyday horrors, from the perspectives of white and black photographers respectively, through up-close, direct examinations that are in different ways brutally effective indictments. As an opening gambit, Goldblatt’s photographs bring the viewer bluntly into a non-whimsical 60s wherein facets of South African life, from the banalities of lives on either side of the colour line to the specific brutalities of apartheid violence, cohere into a complex mosaic that eschews platitudes. All the photographs invoke the struggle against apartheid but only a few directly demonize the ruling Afrikaans - even the seemingly ridiculous National Party cavalry in assorted traditional hats somehow invite pathos - nor exacerbate or worse exploit the victimhood of the blacks, as is documentary photography’s occasional wont.

Whereas Goldblatt’s offering marks the opening of a long and fruitful career, by contrast Cole’s work is more concentrated in both temporal terms and in approach. A self-taught photographer (by correspondence course) who started out at the black-oriented Drum magazine, in 1966 Cole fled South Africa for New York, where he amassed his covertly produced photographs of the severity of conditions for blacks into his photo-book House of Bondage, a publication that contributed greatly to the international condemnation of apartheid. In these photographs, apartheid is a ubiquitous and menacing presence: in scenes such as a scattering of white commuters casually observing blacks crowded into the other half of a segregated railway station platform, a white man clutching a young black boy for begging, and a lonely black servant contemplating her tiny, rudimentary living quarters. Yet, conversely, in these images whites and blacks also intermingle in flirtatious laughter, and black teenagers jostle and mug white men. The radicalism of Goldblatt and Cole lies in showing the fluidity of engagements behind the seemingly immovable edifice of apartheid in the 60s and 70s, and this social flux helped its official demise, if not the eradication of its societal injustices.

An abrupt shift of gears occurs when we encounter William Eggleston’s languid vistas and sultry portraits, as the exhibition takes a left turn away from black and white topicality into the richly colourful dye transfer prints of the notorious flâneur of highways and hinterlands. The juxtaposition of Eggleston’s incidental snaps of the American South, at once both elegiac and laced with violence and sexuality, with the tense quotidian details of Goldblatt’s and Cole’s works, intelligently extracts the oft-ignored critical engagement immanent in Eggleston, whilst simultaneously enhancing the poetics of the South Africans. A similar move occurs between Eggleston and the next photographer, Bruce Davidson, who accompanied the civil rights crusade of the Freedom Riders through the southern states in the early 60s. The latent narrative of racial conflict in Eggleston’s simmering studies of African-Americans remains inescrutable, foiling Davidson’s sharp and assertive high contrast commentaries on the persistence of legislated segregation and its brave opponents. The effect is to liberate Eggleston from the torpor of self-determining expression by resituating him amidst a shifting sociality, a configuration that risks casting his vision as disengaged and decadent. Yet the lower floor culminates with Iturbide’s quizzical portrayals of the residues of Zapotec culture in Mexico, which were produced under the auspices of an artistic cum ethnographic workshop in Juchitán. At times, her photographs outdo Henri Cartier-Bresson in snaring the uncanny in everyday life and dramatizing the exotic allure of idiosyncratic popular rites, but her focused study of this embattled demographic in a particular locale jars with his genial universalism. Fittingly, Iturbide’s technique of overt estrangement chimes with Eggleston and, to a degree, Goldblatt, just as her social engagement corresponds with Cole and Davidson’s works.

Whereas the lower storey selection moves elegantly through degrees of confrontation and reflection, the larger upper level display intensifies the disparity between the exhibited photographers and expands from the hitherto implied theme of changing patterns of resistance to racism. For one thing, the specter of the Cold War hovers in the background, expanding the (already atypical) post-colonial agenda into unexpected areas and making more strident imaginative leaps. The upper section begins with Polke, an artist who used photography unlike the aforementioned, heralding an expanded terrain both thematically and pictorially. His purposefully tarnished prints showing the violent clash of a black bear and two white dogs surrounded by Afghans spectators, obscure the event that they supposedly record, and encourage a non-linear allegorical reading about putative Soviet colonialism. The warped, decaying aesthetic creates surface static that impairs literal decoding, acting as a haunting presence that both disrupts topical urgency and suggests fissures in supposed totalitarianism.

Moving into the Soviet Union proper, Mikhailov’s equally distorted mode imports into photography the improvised diversionary tactics of Samizdat culture (which ranged from contraband novels to homemade vinyl transfers of Beatles albums) via colourful, crude tableaux comprising multiple exposures. These images of people and objects hold an eroticism that oscillates between creepiness and comedy. In one astonishing image from

the late 70s, Mikhailov appended a giant ear to two ominous KGB-type men in overcoats and hats who survey assorted passing longhairs (who a decade previously would have been forcibly shorn). The narratives of these pictures are often deliberately impenetrable, as if Mikhailov’s assembled protagonists perform a secret language made to confound the censor, although these works were conceived for private dissemination.

The mix of formal experimentation and darkly erotic coding continues with Tomatsu’s photographs of Japan in the aftermaths of the atomic bombs and American occupation. A substantial figure whose photography has appeared in books such as Nippon (1967) and Oh! Shinjuku (1969), and has been presented in major institutional shows, Tomatsu’s work ranges from straight photographs of young Japanese appropriating American popular culture to inky abstractions. The images are by turns visceral and lyrical, yet nonetheless contingent to the total impact of America upon postwar Japan. Polke, Mikhailov, and Tomatsu combine into a trio of medium experimenters concerned with interlinked themes of occupation, sexuality, and language, in which any potential political messages are veiled in symbols or somehow ingrained in the image surface.

A further switch occurs in the sudden jump to the photojournalism of Larry Burrows, whose dramatic scenes of the American invasion of Cambodia appear as a blast of professional photojournalism after the above creations, but in other respects pick up on Tomatsu’s theme of American operations in Asia as well as the latter’s action shots of protestors clashing with police. Although Burrows was London-born, his work was paradigmatic of Life magazine’s vivid reportage and presented an American perspective (literally shooting behind the shoulder of a GI firing off M16 rounds), conveying the melancholy heroism of soldiers at war in rich cinematic colour, blown up in large prints that show muddy scenarios of battle-weary troops in disrepair, whooshing rotor blades, and exploding paddy fields. It could not be more different than the secret archive of self-portraits and public panoramas of mass events in the China of the Cultural Revolution, which characterize Li’s decidedly odd contribution to this Asian corner of the exhibition (notwithstanding a very well-behaved state sponsored anti-Vietnam demonstration). As multitudes wave giant poster heads of Mao in Li’s official work, the photographer represents himself in assorted (and often silly) postures that constitute a proto-conceptual private practice. As with Burrows, his work is not intentionally critical, but via this curatorial recontextualization receives implicit reframing as part of a global movement against tyranny.

The negotiation of identity through photography continues in Sidibé’s upbeat studio portraits of young Malians in their finery (especially the brilliant sartorial display in Very Good Friends in the Same Outfit, Evening of 3 June, 1972, an identically clad group of five young men, resembling The Temptations preparing for the stage) as we finally meet the ‘Swinging 60s’, albeit morphing into the ‘Funky 70s’. In this context, the fascination with pop culture is particularly black American music and especially James Brown- and reveals an identification with the aesthetics and politics of Black Power. The liberatory gestures detectable in these photographs are nuanced assertions of identity through fashion and pop music against an authoritarian socialist regime that saw Afros, flares, and all other trappings of Western mass culture as signifiers of colonialism. Colonialism might be a thread between these images and the final section of the exhibition, which features a selection of Singh’s images of India, but there is no such obvious sequential continuity. Singh’s display does not so much conclude the various narratives of the exhibition, but presents a body of images that have a summary effect, alternately echoing elements such as the vibrant colours, post-colonial communist iconography, social and ethnic fissures, and extraordinary nature of everyday life amongst the country’s countless poor. In his photographs, the colour red is ubiquitous in cars, a hipster’s loons, ice lollies, and hilariously the red banner that makes a communist leader’s head seem either disembodied or part of a socialist realist mural of Lenin addressing a crowd. These scattered reds leave an impression, a perplexing retinal ghost, which eventually provokes reflection on the implicit political narrative of this exhibition.

You might well categorize Singh’s work as documentary, a term that typically would describe several of the photographers in this

exhibition. Yet not all of the photographers warrant the description of documentary, which in its most literal sense is a mode of recuperative realism predicted on the veristic mythology of the photographic medium, which is rhetorically effective even when the viewer knows that the camera is habitually mendacious and sensitized plates are slippery. In his catalogue essay, Gerry Badger argues that the exhibition suggests 'a multicultural and multi-faceted ... photographic art where the word documentary has little meaning, but a genuine sense of authentic means everything' ('Spirit of the Times', 2012). Indeed, the exhibition includes overtly manufactured images that are unambiguously inauthentic, thus drawing attention to the dangerously arbitrary nature of photographic truth, but which nonetheless operate in oppositional discursive frameworks or use covert, absurdist language systems within nominally totalitarian environments. These subverted documentary images, by Polke and Mikhailov for example, might be called 'counter-documents' or 'post-documentary' works that eschew the naïve truth narrative of documentary, and paradoxically manipulate the indexicality of the photograph for social contingency. At any rate, these are images that never occlude the real, but lead the viewer into a dialogue about genuine political situations via the opacity of the photograph rather than its mythic transparency, and as such have a mediated yet intractable documentary quality.

Kate Bush writes in her introduction that 'the now rather one-dimensional postmodern discussion around realist photography, and its proscriptions over who has license to photograph who, will become more subtle and more complex in the twenty-first century' ('Everything was Moving', 2012). As Bush says, there is a definite need to recast the realist determinates of photography in the wake of postmodernism, due to enduring needs for images that engage, rebuke, and insist upon transformation. For this reason, I argue that there is no urgency to abandon the term documentary, a choice that risks slippage into indeterminacy, but rather we should continually assert that it is a contested terrain at the centre of any possible radical photographic art. In this case, the collation of doctored and straight photographs from a global camera eye coheres the works into a potent document of troubled times, but one that is saved from melting pot generalizations through sharp segmentation. If a substantial overriding message is not evident (nor perhaps viable, especially given the diversity of the exhibits) there certainly are radical implications in the multiplicity of images of instances of structural inequalities, small-scale resistances, medium plurality, and lively interruptions of everyday life on global basis. The achievement here is to offer new opportunities for reconsidering the photographic medium through an original form of reframing, although conversely there is a danger of emptying out the contingency of each manifestation. This balancing act is secured through the post-colonial subtext, which disavows the generic account of the world turning on its axis (likely sound-tracked by Buffalo Springfield’s 'For What it’s Worth') into which the exhibition narrative occasionally blends. Everything was moving could be merely 'shit happened', but I think that the more profound suggestion is that change can always be bargained for and won. We should remember, as this exhibition mostly does, that everything was indeed moving, but was not necessarily moving forward for everybody at the same speed.

Barnaby Haran is Teaching Fellow in History of Art at University of Bristol. Everything was Moving was on view at the Barbican Art Gallery, 13 September 2012 - 13 January 2013.
