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HOUSE OF PICTURES: A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN MEISELAS

The following interview with Susan Meiselas took place at Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) in spring 2013. Meiselas spoke about the collaboration between Magnum Photos and VSW that brought ten photographers from the collective to photograph in Rochester for two weeks. The collaboration was part of a larger project called *Postcards from America*. Rochester is one of four US cities included in the ongoing project thus far.

Meiselas has been a member of Magnum Photos since 1976. She is the author of three books, *Carnival Strippers* (1976), *Nicaragua* (1981), and *Pandora's Box* (2001), and editor of five collections, *Learn to See* (1975), *El Salvador: The Work of 30 Photographers* (1983), *Chile from Within* (1991), *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (1997), and *Encounters with the Dani* (2003). In 1998 she developed *akaKURDISTAN*, an innovative online website for collective memory and cultural exchange. She is the recipient of numerous awards for her work, and in 1992 she was made a MacArthur Fellow. Meiselas's coverage of human rights violations and the insurrections in Central America was widely published throughout the world. Venues for one-woman shows include the Whitney Museum of American Art; the International Center of Photography; Foam, Amsterdam; Hasselblad Center, Sweden; the Art Institute of Chicago; and the Museum Folkwang, Germany.

MEREDITH DAVENPORT: I want to ask you some questions about the Magnum Photos project here in Rochester, about Magnum Photos in general, and about the current and future state of photojournalism.

SUSAN MEISELAS: I have just come from a factory that is thinking about the future of manufacturing. Ours is a small problem.

MD: I was impressed with how involved the students were able to be with the Magnum photographers when they were here in Rochester for the *Postcards from America III: House of Pictures* project. I thought when you got here you would all need to be on your own. In fact, the students were integrated into what you were doing in a really wonderful way.

SM: The ten photographers (and one videographer) who came here have their own distinct approaches. Some knew Rochester. Some had a connection to Rochester. I did, certainly. Jim [Goldberg] did. Martin [Parr] did, in different ways. Not everyone, though. I don't think Donovan [Wylie] had a clue what Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) was. I think some people had heard about Nathan Lyons, but in a very extended way, not really connected to the history of teaching photography in this country. It's quite separate from the European history of photography. There are a lot of different entry points.

Our conversation really began a year and a half ago. It's important to know the conversation was initiated at the Magnum annual meeting that we have once a year. Photographers come from wherever they are in order to get together. Of course not all, but quite a large number of them, come. There was a conversation about how we spent so much time dispersed. We missed not having the kind of time we had in that very short interlude of two or three days of meetings. So a conversation began about what we could do to change that dynamic among ourselves. I think that is where the first *Postcards From America* took off, as an idea of being in an RV and traveling together. Through the RV project we also determined we would like to try a very different, more sedentary, approach.

So in each variation of *Postcards From America*, we are searching for different ways to relate our community to a larger community, as well as to ourselves. We connect. That is the glue that keeps a very disparate community thriving together and committed to each other. That's the core of this inner circle and looking outward to a larger circle of community. Coming to Rochester was an ideal opportunity because there are multiple communities here. There's the community of VSW, there is RIT (with which I personally had no prior relationship), and George Eastman House, which has a slightly larger framework of community.

The RV was one kind of framework and the house became another; the *House of Pictures* at VSW and the house we all lived in together, both of which were metaphors for the process. Everyone had a room in the house and each had a separate, individual process. Each of us worked differently to figure out how to interact in this environment in a meaningful way. Our approaches are very different. Some are more directorial, some more classic—to capture images, rather than construct. Obviously, the portraitists could figure out how to work with the teams of students most efficiently. For instance, Martin [Parr] and Alec [Soth] moved around the city, with a strategy of cutting across social groups to find diversity, curiosities, and eccentrics of various kinds.

I think others of us—and certainly I would be in this group—tried to figure out what it meant to be here without a predetermined theme. What is the "hereness" of this place? I started with an almost historical framework, trying to think about Rochester from the little I knew about Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony, and asking what that might mean for Rochester today. Not that there was a visual strategy connected to this search, but I wanted to understand how this community could have birthed such significant political, historical, and cultural figures.

So I landed here not having a clue about what I was going to do, which I think was very tough on the RIT kids who kept dutifully, every week, asking, "Any updates on what you're going to be doing?"

I think this is a difference of practice; you can prescribe a framework within which students can work very efficiently or, on the other hand, bring them into a process where you really don't know, and you are, day-by-day, trying to peel back the layers of things—of clues—you're gathering to kind of frame a path eventually. So it's different than a framework, it's a path. And it's a path through encounters, a series of encounters that inform how I feel someplace or what I can discover and become more curious about.

Postcards from America has always intended to be a way of relating to very distinct communities by anchoring ourselves or moving through a landscape. We started with the RV road trip project throughout the Southwest. Then we anchored ourselves in Rochester with the *House of Pictures* project. We went to Florida later in the year at the time of the 2012 presidential election, which seemed to be important in some way as a potential barometer reading of this country. We head to Milwaukee next.

Why Rochester? We were thinking about the Northeast and industry, and Detroit has had a lot of focus, though you might also read about Syracuse or Buffalo. But Rochester has the photography linkage we all know. The Kodak Tower of Power, Image City, the City of Memories, all of that was certainly in our minds. Then of course Kodak announced bankruptcy after we had already set in motion coming to Rochester, and this reassured us that it was the right time to be here. I don't think any of us were prepared to assimilate the enormity of what has been happening and is continuing to happen to this community inside a country struggling with the same problems. Rochester reverberates crises of various kinds, whether they are racial, economic, or otherwise. I don't think whatever we did in two weeks was ever intended to be the authoritative "Rochester."

But coming back to the RIT students working with us as drivers and researchers: the thing I was most struck by is how very few of them knew anything about the city. That was really surprising to me as a documentarian. To me, you find out about the places you are. I think the biggest impact on them was to realize you might wake up in the morning not knowing what you're going to do, or having only a vague idea, and then dive into reality and respond to reality.

MD: I'm interested in that because you talked about starting with Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass on your mind. Can you talk about how you got from that place to what you're working on now, which includes an extension of your project in Rochester?

SM: I had a couple of leads from things I was reading online. Of course, what's really striking is there's almost no trace. The world has washed over that history like a wave over the sand on a beach, other than the memorializing of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass in small museums (the one for Douglass no longer extant) and of course their writings, and the markings of the underground railroad by signposts.

There were many people who took phenomenal risks to hide people. And who were those people? How well does history remember that action, whether or not we remember the actors? Probably the most impactful moment for us—and I think it was on the second day—we literally had a list that Lexi, my student assistant, had found through library research. We drove up to a house, and no one was at home and there was no historical sign in front of the house either. She said, "Well, in the book that I read, in the basement there was a tunnel." I said, "Well, why don't we leave this woman, man, family, whoever, a note saying who we are and see if they'd welcome us back." We wrote the note and left it on the front door. We were about to get back in the car, when a car drove up, a big van. Some kids got out. This woman was sort of taken aback, a little startled, looking like, "What are you doing here?" We were immediately apologetic. "I'm sorry. We didn't have a way to reach you, but this is what we're doing and who we are." She said, "Oh, do you want to come in?" I think I said, "Sure, absolutely." And within twenty

Above
Trim pocket workstation, Hickey Freeman factory, Rochester, NY (2012) by Susan Meiselas

minutes we were in her basement and there was this tunnel, the famous tunnel. It was amazing.

The reason she loved this house was very much for that connection to history. She was startled that we could care. We did a short interview with her. The surprise was that she was so beautifully articulate about her emotions about being connected to history. Then we got back in the car. The students were just stunned, because they had gone from an abstract library assignment to the reality of somebody who exists in the world. It was a deep dive—a very quick shift. Although of course it wasn't the answer to what I was going to do in Rochester. It was just something in the process of mentoring maybe, or trusting that it's OK to follow someone into their house and not know where it leads or to spend an hour and find out that there was nothing. It is just what a certain kind of practice involves, so that is where we started.

I then started to be curious about more contemporary crossover people. The Anthony and Douglass relationship—who in this community today crosses over? Obviously that led me to the House of Mercy for the homeless, because [founder] Sister Grace represents the most classic example you can imagine of the idea of crossover. People trying to not just live in the world they came from, but reaching out to a world on the other side of whatever boundaries exist.

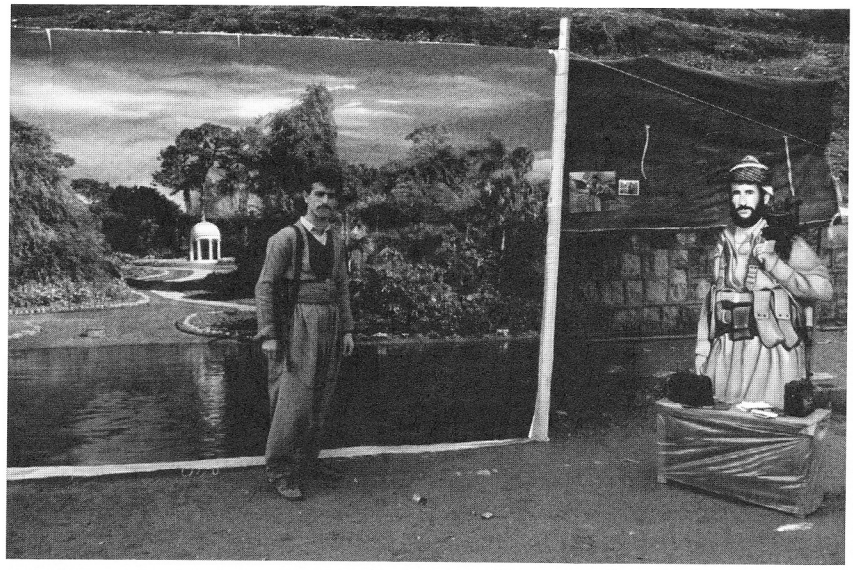
That theme was strong, but it didn't lead me into any kind of visual narrative that I could build off, which just happens to be what I do, or like doing best. Actually, that came later with a VSW graduate student, Juliana Muniz, who had taken me to a public housing project, where there was a small baptism for a Latina baby. I had a certain comfort level, speaking just enough Spanish so that I could communicate directly what I was doing there. In a bizarre way, you don't belong to this place, but you're trying to make sense of it. I think we asked someone, "Where do people, Latina women, work in this community?," having read a lot about Kodak not hiring black or Latino community members. She said, "Actually, some of us work right down the road at Hickey Freeman." I had heard about [menswear manufacturer] Hickey Freeman from a couple of people. I think it may have even been on the list of many things in Rochester that the producers Claire Wearn and Rick Hock had put together, but it didn't mean anything special to me, and the name itself did not lead me there. What led me there was thinking, "Ah. If I want to figure out how to get a feeling for what people's lives are like here, maybe going into their working environment would be an entry point."

I got a tour of the factory with Martin [Parr] and Bruce [Gilden]. Martin took one picture and left. Bruce came in for, I don't know, another twenty minutes, and photographed a few people. I kept walking around and at the end I asked to speak with a few people. I kept seeing the signs of difference. The women who were there, most of them had their heads covered, and the diversity was in everyone's face. I just started asking, "What's your first name, and where do you come from, and how long have you worked for Hickey Freeman?" And within the hour I was there, there were twelve different countries represented, and that stunned me, it was absolutely fascinating. I asked the factory manager if I could come back the next day for another hour, and also asked how many countries were represented at Hickey Freeman. He said, "I actually don't know, but a lot."

So I went back the second day, and then I started to really take notes, and within the second day there were something like thirty different countries. I don't know, I just became intrigued, and I still am six months later. I am trying to figure out the layers of history that are embedded, and to what extent they can be separated out and reconfigured. The company was founded in 1899, over one hundred years ago, and there are all the choices that individual people have made to come to be working there now. In this one box, rather than being outsourced, you have people from all over the world in Rochester making something very high-end, for the one percent, as it were. The irony of that fascinates me. The fact that it takes a hundred-and-sixty operations to make one object, that really fascinates me. How do you visualize that? You need all these little pieces stitched together and a lot of people working together to make one thing.

At the end of the ten days of shooting various aspects of Rochester, I reassigned my RIT team immediately to work with me on Hickey Freeman. We captured some audio by interviewing a couple of different people at the factory. The students went to the library to see what they could find out about the legacy of the business. We wanted to find physical stuff, so we went back into the factory and got some of the trims of material. What's left of the material, after one of these

Above
Final touch up inspection area, Hickey Freeman factory, Rochester, NY (2012) by Susan Meiselas



high-end computerized machines they have in the factory cuts everything up, looks like an abstract painting. Most everything else is handwork. Symbolically, I wanted to gather as much as I could to hint at the complexity and the texture of the experience of these two, three days in Hickey Freeman. That was the material for the pop-up exhibition at VSW.

MD: Can you talk about the pop-up exhibition?

SM: The pop-up idea came from what we did on the first trip. I think we liked the challenge of making sense of something very quickly. We kept a Tumblr as we traveled, and when we arrived in Oakland we made something like eight hundred 4 x 6-inch prints at Walgreens of all our work. We found a space that had never exhibited photography before and all the prints were completely anonymously just spread out on two long tables. People were invited to just pick them up. It was very spontaneous and process based.

I think the idea of the process here at VSW was different. To us, VSW represents the center of a community. Not the one that is physically here, necessarily, but the one that has historically emanated from VSW. The question became to what extent could we reignite a connection to VSW as a process, a transformative process of place, at a place that values transformative processes?

Before we arrived, we had a lot of pragmatic issues we had to work through. Where could we get black-and-white film processed, or get prints made? And there could be a lot of audio to edit, and video. The pop-up was to be an expression of process, ideally changing day by day, pinning up work as it progressed, then finally re-presented at the end of our two weeks of shooting. It was to be just the opposite of what is going on today in photo culture, which expects the rarified, limited edition prints, where everything is precious.

Above
A Kurdish peshmerga pays to have his photograph taken on the streets of Arbil, Northern Iraq (1991) by Susan Meiselas

We were sort of saying, could we crash between George Eastman House and VSW and would this contribute to your community? We wanted to experiment and create a kind of model that makes sense in a different way.

MD: Did the photographers have some prior relationship to George Eastman House, VSW, and this particular community? Many of them had probably come in and out of here.

SM: About half had work in the George Eastman House collection. Alison Nordström, the curator of photographs at Eastman House, knows Magnum well. On the whole, however, there were few contemporary connections. I think from within Magnum we often feel misunderstood by the larger photography community. I have always been fascinated by the fact that the [Robert] Capa "brand" is so strongly associated with Magnum that it still dominates our image in the US. In Europe, Henri Cartier-Bresson dominates the image of Magnum. When you go beyond the first generation, I would guess your average graduate student, in any advanced program, would not be able to name a dozen of the Magnum members. They would not know that Martin Parr has been working with Magnum for the last twenty-four years, nor would they associate Jim Goldberg with Magnum. Within its own community, Magnum members have been making work and stretching the boundaries of documentary in a multitude of ways for quite a long time.

MD: Magnum seems to me like the foundation of what we consider contemporary photojournalism, a period that started around the same time as Magnum did. Magnum played a huge role in creating the idea of what we consider photojournalism. From its initiation, it seems as though the Cartier-Bresson and Capa split between aesthetic and information has always been there.

SM: I would not call it a "split." I would say there is the tension in any image between the two: the form and the content and how they are balanced. Maybe it is about one dominating in one sense more than the other, or counterbalancing. The history of whatever we want to call it—be it photojournalism or documentary work—the terms are used for so many different things, I'm not even sure what they mean anymore. If you think about Magnum's formation in 1947, people had already been using a Leica for ten years by then, and it is very identified with taking a small camera into the field. Now we have several members who use large-format cameras, including Mark Power and Alec Soth and Donovan Wylie.

When I use the word "photojournalism," it becomes about who you are working *for*. That distinction is very rarely spoken about. I feel like I came into the Magnum community in 1976

having, first of all, done an in-depth body of work, *Carnival Strippers*, that was not made for anyone. It was grounded in classic documentary values, which is really about long-term connection to a subject over time. Later, my Latin American work brought me into a landscape where the media became partners. The media partnerships for almost all of my generation were a means of production. They were a way to make what we were doing visible and certainly helped to sustain us working in the field.

So if you think about Alex Webb going to Haiti or his great work in Mexico, Gilles Peress in Iran, or Eugene Richards, who was very actively involved in Magnum at that time—that is sort of my generation, from the mid 1970s to mid '80s, let's say—all of us were strategizing ways to stay wherever we wanted to be. We were self-assigning more often than we were assigned. We were able to sustain ourselves through the fees for the reproduction of our work internationally.

If you go back to the way people were making work in the 1970s, you could either teach and make work over the summer, or be on the sidelines of teaching and shoot "on spec" with the hope of publications paying you for the work later. That was one clear strategy to survive as a photographer. There was no art market in the early 1970s, which is when I began. That was not our sight line. Obviously a lot has changed now. I am sure your students think about where they want to be, where they want to go, what they want to do. Gallery walls are what they are thinking about. They were not there for us, so we did not think about them. They came later, and as they came, we were on the walls too. But our work was not done *for* them. I felt like whether it was pages of a magazine, walls, books, or ultimately films, the medium was a question of the story you were telling. Where does the work belong? How do you explore all these different environments simultaneously?

I actually think that is true for myself still today. When I think of Magnum, cross-platform has always been the approach. I think of Magnum Photos as having a very diversified approach to creating streams of income for photographers to potentially explore. There was never any obligation that you had to do any particular thing. But it was all there kind of à la carte. If you did not want to do anything in one realm or another, you found your own way with a network of support internationally. The strongest invention at Magnum that was really the centerpiece was this idea

Above
View of installation by Susan Meiselas at the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, New York, April 28, 2012

of a "distribution." Whether or not you shot something on your own, whether or not you had a magazine or client, you made an edit. That edit was organized into a distribution and that was sent to our agents in twenty countries around the world. That was a very powerful engine for an independent photographer. You were not dependent upon one client. This all ties back to copyright ownership, which was the essential fight of Magnum's founders.
I think in the broadest sense, bookmaking is the thing that most Magnum photographers care the most about. Recently we put together a collection spanning sixty-five years and about the same number of photographers—including anyone who had been associated with or been within Magnum at any time—and there are something like 1,050 books. Our thinking is that it is a common language we share across different generations and internationalities.

MD: What do you think Magnum is doing now to expand documentary photography? Where are these new streams of revenue for you? How are you all going to survive?

SM: Extending the documentary could mean asking whose voices are included beyond your own as an author. I think I'm speaking for myself now. Obviously this relates to my bringing the book *Kurdistan In the Shadow of History* together. I can't say this is what the other photographers are thinking about. But I think today we are really challenged with those dual roles: authoring, and aggregating or curating. The bigger question of financial models that are going to be sustainable for individuals or collectives is still a huge challenge for all of us. Yes, *Postcards* was in some ways an exploration of how to create work, first of all together, working off of each other. We talked about it like riffing, like jazz. We had this motif of a band of five. But it was also an exploration of a working model where there was a presale of postcards as a way to literally pay for our gas and motels. It meant that we were free to work as we chose. No one was paying us to do any specific work, but the expenses were all covered.

MD: Can you talk about that part of the process for the Rochester trip? It was a different formula.

SM: The idea in Rochester was that ten of us were going to be here photographing for essentially ten days, and we then translated that into a two-week timeframe—the pop-up portrait shoot at the public market and the show at VSW meant that we were not shooting every day for the entire two weeks. We pre-sold the idea of an archive of those ten photographers for ten days in Rochester. George Eastman House purchased one of the five archives we sold. The goal was not to have precious prints, just to have one hundred working process prints from each of us, which meant one thousand prints in the archive of this window of time in the life of Rochester.

MD: That's a lot of pressure—a hundred prints.

SM: You know, it is. We were joking and calling it "shooting for Parr"—keeping up with him was a challenge. It is a fantastic thing to know someone for as long as many of us have known each other and not to know how someone works. What hour they wake up, whether or not they cook their own dinner, or have a beer at night. Are they willing to look at someone else's work? There are a lot of things that happened that are really important to keeping a kind of community meaningful to each other. Financially, the other piece of the experiment is to make something that is much more affordable. It is taking us much longer than we thought to put together what it is, what it should be, and how it feels—whereas we went to Florida several months later and something is already out. It looks about the size of a copy of *Afterimage*. It's modest, kind of like a magazine. It's a photographic object with each of us riffing off of each other in some way at that place and time.

MD: It sounds like Rochester was challenging for you all in many ways.

SM: I think it was incredible, looking back. Originally we had this idea of literally a house of pictures, which was going to be a physical house that we wanted to find. We thought it would be easy in Rochester, with all the foreclosures, to find a house that someone would just give us. We wanted to have each photographer take a room in the house and make an installation, and to literally cover the house in pictures and have it be a part of the community for as long as people thought it was interesting. That was a very abstract concept. But first we could not find a house; then we found a house, but at the last minute, the woman who thought she could offer the house did not own it and the owner did not want us to use the house, so we lost it.

We wanted to connect to the larger community in Rochester. The more we traveled around Rochester, the more we felt the dispersion of the community. In the end, the event at Rochester's Public Market became that connection. We chose one Saturday—it was pouring rain, we didn't choose that—and using one camera, we invited anyone who wanted to have a portrait taken to come and have one made by whichever one of us was there at that moment, and then come back the following week to pick up their print. It was done in the spirit of saying, "We are here, but we are visitors. This is a small thing we can offer as a token 'thank you.'" Having a crossover place was very difficult to find in Rochester, but the public market turned out to be perfect.

MD: I think this is a divided city. There are the bridges and the river. There are boundaries everywhere. It is a city filled with them.

SM: When I was working with the RIT students, I was totally reliant on them to drive. They were timid about driving places that for me would be less worrisome. Of course you have got to be alert, but at the same time you ought to find out what's happening. We were together when we walked into the House of Mercy, and it was the first time for them, too.

MD: Yes.

SM: Everyone had told us, "Don't go down that street, don't go into that place." I wanted to know this woman, Sister Grace. She's mythic. I wanted to meet her. She is the Susan B. Anthony of today, and as inspiring as a contemporary figure, in a way.

You have to be comfortable in your skin, and not everybody is. I'm someone who will also acknowledge boundaries. If I don't feel right, I allow myself not to feel right and leave. I never stay anywhere that doesn't feel right.

MD: When you think of the broader *Postcards from America* project, what stands out about the Rochester experience?

SM: In some ways it's really too early to tell, but I think it's interesting that three of us have already come back to do more work here in one way or another. We may not know where it's going to take us, but there was a sense that there was something important to continue to think about.

MD: Is it common for you to return to follow up with a community after having been there?

SM: In the RV, we were moving *through* places. It was exactly the opposite challenge. It was to see how quickly you could hit the road and find something in passing, which is quite hard. It is very different to be somewhere where you really have the opportunity to dig deeper, though two weeks isn't really deep. That's why I think it's interesting that three of us have returned and a couple more are thinking about returning. It gave us enough time to sense that there was much more to consider.

Again, who knows? I'm not someone who likes to talk about what I'm doing. I like to be doing it. When I start to see it, I can share it. That makes it hard when working with students, because you're sharing the not-knowing. That's honest, but I don't know how helpful that is to them.

MD: Your own insecurities and moments of trying to figure out what you were going to do and not being sure but still pushing through and doing it—I think for the students that was invaluable.

SM: Also, in this contemporary landscape of what they may see as models of so-called success. You asked about photojournalism versus art. I don't find that division. I see it as a spectrum of work that moves across different time zones. Even though it's work that might have been created in one context it's re-seen and re-experienced in another context. When my work is in a magazine and then it's on the wall of a museum or sold in a gallery, the separation feels artificial. Whereas if you're thinking about making work for a wall, maybe it's different. You've seen a little bit of work made for walls ending up in magazines, but not very much.

MD: When Sebastião Salgado's work appeared on the walls of a gallery, there was obviously a big response to the aestheticization of suffering. How do you respond to that? How would you respond to that concern?

SM: I think those issues are appropriate to think about. I think about them almost every day. I've only been back to work at the Hickey Freeman factory for two days now, but there is a tension between wanting to make a photograph that speaks to what I'm looking at and not objectifying the subject to being just an object in an aesthetic landscape, which disconnects the feeling that I might have about those conditions and those lives. That's the challenge. How do you bring people closer to a reality through aesthetics? That's my intention. I think it's a thin line. I think you can cross it, and then your work is seen as a composition and not about connecting to those you are trying to portray. These are the challenges of documentary.

MD: Especially with these expanding boundaries in documentary. Because I think when their boundaries are expanded, it allows you to have a stronger voice or a clearer voice, like you, Gilles Peress, and so many Magnum photographers have had.

SM: The expanded boundaries go back to this question of "Who are you?" and the power of authoring or partnering or collaborating subjects. How do you find the right expression for it? Every day that I'm now back, it's nice that people recognize me and they're glad to see me, and yet they don't fully understand why I'm coming back. At the same time, that just opens the conversation up a little more.

Now, I don't know what the answer is yet, in terms of how the people working at Hickey Freeman will partner in this process, whether it's through telling stories about why they left their own countries and how they came to live in Rochester. Or how they feel about what they are doing now, or whether or not it will be a kind of sharing that leads me to very different ideas. What we're seeing a lot of now is people giving subjects cameras to image their own lives, as if it's as easy as that. I think what Jim Goldberg created is a visual language that many others have mimicked. It is a wonderful way to feel the presence of a subject with their handwriting on his images. But that may not be right for my relationships here.

MD: There's also the citizen journalist. So many of the news images that we see are made by the participants in the events. The technology has allowed for those voices to come through even if they're not given a camera.

SM: Yes. I think this is all the territory of what we now are trying to make sense of, what we're in the midst of, a dramatically shifting visual landscape. News may be informed by more participants, but history needs reflection, and gathering many perspectives over time.

MD: I love the way you described it, as though you're aggregators and creators at the same time in that kind of dilemma.

SM: I would like to think it's not just a seesaw, as in either/or, but it's relational. I'm looking for the form for the expression of that. In a way I think the project in which I faced that question most deeply was the Kurdistan project, which was a long process. It allowed me to see my own frames and then broadened my capacity to create a framework for participation that I could conceive of, but could not have created without that collaborative community.

MD: I think you foresaw a lot of these issues in that project, actually. I go back to the film you made because you started to look at the implications beyond yourself in this frame in this moment. In many ways, the Kurdistan project was very prophetic.

SM: Yes, and it's interesting, because looking at Hickey Freeman as a box, which it is—a factory that hasn't moved in 114 years, which in itself is kind of amazing—people from all over the world go into it, and have connections out from it, including all the people who wear their clothes. What they make does literally go out into the world. How do you represent that? I don't know that that can be done in two dimensions. It may have to be an interactive form to capture the range of what I'm thinking about, but I liked starting with a small installation.

MD: Have you worked with any interactive forms, or have you thought about this?

SM: I can imagine, gee, what if you created a means by which everyone who had a Hickey Freeman suit would photograph themselves and upload it? There's a big question. Has the culture moved so that hand stitching or pressing in a particular way doesn't have the same importance as it did at another time in the culture? Could you see that in a set of photographs?

Basically, one thing we know is that for Hickey Freeman to survive as a "brand," with its history of quality, people will have to share the values that it stands for. That's a really interesting question in a globalized environment where everybody wants something cheaper from China. Right? And perhaps our culture does not even care about suits anymore?

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