The Invisible people: An Installation of documentary photographs, videotapes and text

Suzanne Frew

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THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE:
AN INSTALLATION OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHS, VIDEOTAPES AND TEXT

BY

SUZANNE L. FREW

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
March 1986

THESIS BOARD

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Associate Professor
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Anthony Bannon
Art Critic
Buffalo, New York

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Malcolm Spaull
Chairperson
Film and Video Department
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, RIT
All we ask, oh Lord,  
is to be safe from the rain,  
just warm enough in the winter  
to watch the snow with a smile,  
enough to eat so that our  
hunger will not turn us to angry beasts,  
and sanity enough to make a justice  
that will not kill our love  
of life.

Joseph Pintauro

This work is dedicated to those whose eyes live silently in the back of my mind. To those with whom I tried to communicate and failed. And to those who understood.

It is dedicated to Gene, whose funeral I could not attend; Tex, Chester, Tom, Mike Austin and George who always seem to make me smile. To Peggy, who first trusted enough to open the door. To Phil, Mark and Michael and the staffs at St. Joe's who struggled with the question of human dignity.

My deepest thanks to my family. To Charles Werberig, for also being my friend. And especially to Tom Paul, whose dedication and insight kept me strong.

in memory of my dad
Permission Statement

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Huntsville, Alabama 35801

March 4, 1986
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I. PROPOSAL BACKGROUND

For about a year before my thesis proposal was due I had been photographing street people and staff at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker House soup kitchen and homeless shelter in Rochester, New York. (1) Serving lunches as a volunteer had opened doors to photographing in the innocuous dining and lounge rooms at St. Joseph's during the recession of 1983. My attraction to the Catholic Worker House grew steadily over the months as I saw the daily practice of the organization's principles of Christian charity. I decided to base my thesis on personal observations of the Worker. My statement of purpose was as follows:

Through still photographs and video recordings, I propose to present my personal perceptions of the Catholic Worker Movement in Rochester, New York. The distinctive qualities of video -- movement and sound -- complement those of photography -- arrested detail. By providing the viewer with a depth of rapport and insight that might not be possible without this complementary relationship, I hope to encourage personal viewer interpretation.

I faced many challenges in developing my proposal into a strong, cohesive body of work. First, my portrayal of St. Joseph's through still photographs had been poorly received by my RIT colleagues and professors. Although I had grown away from much of the photojournalist influences that had characterized my street work, I wrestled with a stilted, almost public relations
style approach in photographing at St. Joseph's. Even I found little realism and artistic merit in the work. Yet, I followed my instincts which were decisively directing me into the dark and quite gloomy rooms of the Worker House, where existed what I believed to be a vital and exciting statement of faith in action amidst a somewhat gutsy, brooding world. My simplistic camera approach would be forced to change. I had to grow as both observer and photographer/videogapher in order to visually express what I was experiencing.

While being a small, young, white female had it's advantages in opening doors, there were also disadvantages and barriers in exploring and portraying a hardened inner city population experiencing hard times. My intentions were often misunderstood. Fear of exploitation was extensive, and I knew these problems were indicative of many more yet to come.

II. PRODUCTION

A. A Continuation

I continued dividing my time between serving lunches and photographing two to three days a week. The more involved I became with the staff and guests the more guilt I experienced when exchanging dishes for cameras. I found myself being fully accepted as a volunteer but a subject of suspicion as photographer.

Shooting video footage usually evoked a strong personal fear
of rejection by the guests and staff. I often avoided direct or lengthy confrontation with individuals. My quick movements allowed only minimal interpersonal contact, limiting proper material development. I was initially very clumsy operating the equipment. The footage lacked cohesiveness as an overall body of work. The shoots were unproductive and exhausting.

Overall, I experienced interpersonal involvement most successfully while using the still camera. It's manageable size encouraged playfulness and spontaneity. I used a handheld Nikon FE black body, a 28mm 3.5 lens in natural light. My film stock was Tri-X shot at 200 ASA. The small lens aperature severely limited photographing in the darkness of St. Joseph's waiting rooms. Unfortunatly, I never considered changing the lens to one with a greater aperature ability.

My most reliable guides for a productive shooting day were the weather and day of the month. Social Service Insurance (SSI) and welfare checks were issued at the beginning and middle of the month. Like good weather this replenished cash flow acted as a calming agent for the street population. The days just prior to check dispersal were usually tense and occasionally marred with violence. My understanding of the guest's and staff's mood swings grew over the months and greatly aided the quality of my work.

Once I formally decided to use my street/St. Joseph's efforts as my thesis, my vision grew more defined. Contact sheets reflected a sense of greater depth and confidence in my shooting. Interaction with my subjects became more challenging and
fulfilling. I was pleased by the more positive response towards my work by my subjects as well as by my RIT colleagues. Yet, underlying these changes was a lack of overall direction. I couldn't understand why the images felt so disconnected from my experiences. I wrestled with my approach.

What I soon realized was a need to cut the apron strings with St. Joseph's and involve myself directly with the people who depended on the shelters and soup kitchens. My most successful work had been based on just such involvement. My interest in the Catholic Worker movement was rapidly being replaced with a desire to focus on it's guests. I knew that the Worker House existed because of the street population that cycled repeatedly through the shelter, streets, and single-room-occupancies (SRO's). I felt that I had to change my emphasis.

My rudest awakening to the realities of the homeless occurred the first day I roamed the sleeping spots and hangouts of Rochester's uprooted. Accompanied by Tom Freeman, a sleeping and eating guest at St. Joseph's (and later a prime subject of my work) I visited Midtown Plaza, a favorite daytime gathering location and the City Parking Garage with it's makeshift beds and ate lunch at a soup kitchen where the staff thought I was Tom's daughter.

Switching sides and losing my identity for a day left me emotionally and mentally exhausted. I was overwhelmed and alienated from the street life outside of St. Joseph's. Confused by my strong reaction I could not write about the experience in my
thesis journal. I also stopped photographing for a few weeks. I didn't even carry my camera to St. Joseph's where I continued to do volunteer work. Further discussions with Charles Werberig, my thesis chairperson, helped me regain some of my composure. The panic of a mental block subsided.

B. Extending the work

By sorting out my feelings I came to realize that my visuals alone were not sufficient for communicating my ideas. The photographs needed a supportive, informational context in order to be fully understood. Questions had to be asked and answers, or viewpoints on responses to questions, had to be provided. After all, who were these people?! Why were they in the soup kitchens and shelters? Combining picture with written text would mark a return to my earlier work with social advocacy issues. In the past, that combination had always produced the strongest, most effective communication of an issue. My initial reason for excluding text or captions in my thesis was to somehow demonstrate my artistic ability within the realm of an academic institution characterized by little interest in social change.

I began meeting individuals, outside Rochester, whose visual artistic works successfully utilized the power of language (verbal and written.) Acknowledging the potential of this new thesis direction, I reviewed Fred Lonidier's THE HEALTH AND SAFETY GAME (2) which had greatly influenced me in the summer of 1982 during a Visual Studies Workshop course with critic, Martha Rossler.
Lonidier's merging of straight documentary photographs and a text of facts and oral history had been well received in both union halls and art galleries. He had successfully combined the two traditionally separate schools of art and documentary. California art critic, Alan Sekula, in the commentary "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation) " accurately reflected this merger.

A small group of contemporary artists are working on an art that deals with the social ordering of people's lives. Most of their work involves still photography and video: most relies heavily on written or spoken language. I'm talking about a representational art, an art that refers to something beyond itself. Form and mannerism are not ends in themselves...If these questions are asked only within the institutional boundaries of elite culture, only within the "art world," then the answers will be merely academic. Given a certain poverty of means, this art aims toward a wider audience, and toward considerations of concrete social transformation. (3)

Sekula's article reminded me that by itself the visual could not reveal the breadth of subjective ideas that I wanted to share with my audience. Combining words with visuals could perhaps foster a clearer understanding of my intent.

My thesis quickly formed new roots. I allowed myself time for extensive questioning. I visualized a socially significant, cohesive body of work. Many uncertainties about purpose disappeared.
C. Intensive Research Stage.

I have always been curious, willing to explore. Weaned from Nancy Drew mysteries, I actively pursued forensics during high school, legislative research and advocacy in undergraduate school, and later spent extensive time periods abroad observing European and Asian cultures. My thesis now offered opportunities for critically examining governmental and public action reports as well as individual accounts of street life. This diversion from lengthy, dull classroom rhetoric on photography revitalized me.

The material I collected eventually became the third component of the thesis installation. Ironically, none of this research was shared with RIT colleagues other than my thesis board prior to the show. The MFA student body exhibited little political interest. This critical void (which I never understood for a masters level art program) forced me to be self-reliant and dependent upon outside support systems. The undergraduate film and video department provided significant assistance and encouragement during my last year of MFA classes. Charles Werberig acted as an invaluable guide for the socio/political implications of the text on the overall project.

My understanding and knowledge of the homeless and uprooted population developed rapidly. I collected valuable information from state and local advocates in the religious, private and public sector. I found city documents that reflected a number of unmet housing promises made during the heavy gentrification period of the late 1970's and early 80's. Correspondence with New York
State's Governor Cuomo generated valuable historical and statistical information. Each new piece of information expanded upon the conditions revealed in the photographs and videotapes.

The body of work slowly grew into a sizable multi-media description of a population that included not only young and elderly single males, but families with children, teenagers and single women -- many of whom were never seen or suspected to be among the homeless. The thesis title THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE was therefore extracted from a descriptive phrase coined by sociologists several decades ago.

III. FINAL PRODUCTION STAGE

My photography grew more spontaneous and I became less obtrusive to my subjects during the last three or four months of production. Steps taken to overcome improper shooting and an elusively malfunctioning light meter produced rich negatives. As the literal and figurative darkness opened up, my shooting style reflected a whimsical exploration of the frame's edges. In addition, the onset of warm weather uplifted everyone's mood, allowing me to shoot more freely.

I also experimented quite successfully with recording film. It's grainy texture appropriately mirrored the coarseness of my subject matter. Had I used this film earlier, I'm certain I would have been successful in photographing in the darkened interior of St. Joseph's during the preceding months.
The last three or four months were also the most successful in gathering useful video footage. Yet, throughout the entire production stage, my video experiences were technical nightmares. First, there were personal difficulties. Working alone compounded the problem of being technically inexperienced. Many shoots were cancelled at the last minute by the subjects for reasons varying from "electrical emergencies" to "softball games." The disorganization of the video equipment facilities during this period created extreme setbacks later rectified by new management. Improper electrical systems in rooming houses prevented the use of needed lighting, resulting in "video noise"—grainy imagery and audio static.

Working alone made it possible to achieve greater intimacy with my subjects, theoretically allowing me more control over the quality and character of what I shot. But having complete responsibility for the technical and aesthetic elements of the production created precarious situations and continuous problems. I battled poor audio, malfunctioning equipment and mixed indoor/outdoor lighting. The heavy camera equipment distracted me during interviewing sessions. My 5'2", 106 pound frame suffered physical stress while attempting to handheld three-quarter inch video equipment. I often became irritable, moody and impatient, which, of course, encouraged further technical deficiencies and a general lack of concentration and rapport with my subjects.

Under those circumstances I would frequently ask for assistance from untrained street friends or the subjects.
themselves. Often their assistance provided an added element of personal protection, yet also caused a loss of quality in audio and visual footage. I occasionally questioned the advantages of such support as I watched a 56 year-old alcoholic lugging my video equipment up five flights of stairs.

My meeting with Malcolm Spaull in early September left me exasperated; he had seen "no quality video" in my raw footage. Quite disillusioned and knowing I had to produce, I returned to those individuals who I had shot before and gathered additional footage. While I was openly received by the individuals with whom I worked most closely, I was also threatened by many others from the sideline who might have been included in any crowd shots. I was forced to overcome any remaining timidness or feeling of exploitation with which I struggled. By the end of September I had gathered enough film and video footage to start post-production.

IV. POST-PRODUCTION

I began post-producing by experimenting with photographic printing processes and deciding on the appropriate presentation that would complement the photographs and video. The most important aspect of this stage was to carefully structure the text, video and photography as interdependent components. To accomplish this, each component had to develop simultaneously with the others, a slow, maddening process. I constantly fought the
desire to complete one group at a time. The interdependency of
the three installation components complicated the production
schedule because of my dependence upon facilities in three
separate school departments.

Another significant obstacle was designing the installation
for a known space. The school's inability to confirm whether I
had the entire gallery or only half that space until approximately
five weeks before the opening made design and planning extremely
difficult. Space determined installation design. Available wall
space would determine text and photograph sizes. Their placement
determined placement of the video monitors because they in turn
depended upon a functional, contextual setting, as well as audio
clarity. The overall design, conveying the message succinctly,
economically, dictated the treatment within each grouping of
components. The complexity of the installation overwhelmed me at
times, as the following journal entry indicates.

It's hard to see where it begins. What are the
categories? What's missing? Visualizing without
actually seeing the [completed video tapes] is
difficult. Separated, everything seems weak, but
putting it together almost seems impossible.

My main goal was to take the viewer beyond the idea that s/he
was looking at a photograph -- beyond the "form and mannerism"
that Sekula had described. At one point of frustration Charles
commented that I could "give up and have a photo show" to which I
quickly responded that a photo show was the last thing I wanted
and began working even harder.
A. PHOTOGRAPHY

My initial lack of vision of the finished installation made editing the photographs, which represented a year and a half of major style changes, quite difficult. My development of shooting and structural style soon became apparent through this editing process. The transition from a traditional, well-centered frame to a potpourri of captured movement and detail throughout the frame amazed me.

The necessity for exact selection and integrated placement of the material led to extensive planning during the weeks before the gallery was available. Initially, photographs were edited out for the following three reasons: unacceptable negative quality, romanticized imagery (i.e. pretty pictures of the poor) and tangents from the narrative structure. Many basic video editing ideas and text panel decisions were reached during these sessions.

Through my only meeting with Tony Bannon I resolved a major structural issue. I decided on a narrative structure, breaking the material up into segments within the flow of the overall narrative tract.

I simulated the layout ideas in both the North Light Studio and on the floor of the MFA gallery three weeks before the show. The editing process was so successfully executed in the weeks prior to the show that only two of forty-four photographs and two of twenty-five text panels had to be edited during the actual show set-up.

Since many of the photographs could not be printed until
their desired size was definite, a large amount of printing was done after the preliminary, simulated layout of the show in the North Light Studio. Also, all of the older photographs, many printed to correct size, had to be reprinted on Kodak Polyfiber, the paper I had chosen for exhibition prints three months before the show. Although I truly preferred the warmer tones of Portriga, I needed the contrast characteristic of this Kodak product for my many thin negatives. The use of filters with a fiber-based paper was an economical answer to my financial and time restraints.

I printed the photographs in either 11 X 14 or 16 X 20 inch format. All prints were developed in Neutol and fixed in two baths of C23, a non-hardening fixer compatible with the selenium toner (1:9) I used as an archival bath.

Three weeks before the show, in the midst of a very heavy production period, I accidentally splashed chemicals in my left eye, burning off the top layer of cells. Six days were spent with an eye irritation that did not clear up after emergency room treatment and an eye patch. My eye finally healed, but I was completely exhausted from the eye strain that resulted from extended exposure to video monitors and photographic fumes (to which I later realized I had grown allergic).

The finished prints, all printed with the same irregular border dimensions were left unmatted for simple placement behind glass.
B. TEXT

The text panels were produced over a four month period. The costs were initially very frightening; realistic production required much thought, creativity and assistance from capable colleagues.

Challenged with presenting research to what I considered a visually sophisticated and politically naive audience regarding social justice issues, I was concerned with good visual presentation. The panels needed textual simplicity, visual boldness, credibility and strength within the installation's narrative structure. Extensive thought went into balancing hard data (statistics, reports) with soft data (oral history, personal perspectives.) My only personal commentary was the introductory text which by establishing the mood of social concern connected THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE with individuals currently living in Rochester and cautioned the viewer that the problems of the street world were complex ones without easy definition, explanation or answer.

Typesetting for the text was done on a McIntosh computer using a dot matrix printer, owned by Gordon Goodman, an RIT faculty member and close friend. Enlarging each page of text, which represented one panel, caused the letters to break down around the edges, therefore limiting enlargement to 200%. A series of tests run on computer printouts, film negatives and paper positives showed that New York style typeface at 10 and 14 points maintained the most durable and aesthetically pleasing
style.

The paper printouts were shot onto 20 x 25 inch orthographic reproduction film with the aid of John McCracken in the printing department. I then filtered out excess dust spots on the negative with a red magic marker and trimmed the negatives down to 16 x 20 inches where we contact printed them onto Kodak Contact and Brovira #5 photographic paper. The finished text prints were dry mounted onto foam core for presentation. This treatment projected the panels from the wall slightly while maintaining similar photographic display size.

C. VIDEO

The video component grew to be the most challenging and frustrating part of my work. Long hours in front of editing room monitors were both totally exhausting and exhilarating. My "one-man-band" experience during production became an opportunity to experiment with many ideas during post-production. I faced several drawbacks in this stage that affected my work. The group editing facility was usually distracting and chaotic. The limitation of four-hour time slots on the editing stations was quite different from long uninterrupted, unrestricted hours in the darkroom. Time was further limited by continual equipment problems with one of the two Sony brand editing stations available for my use with Sony field tapes.

My own lack of experience with a large project involving the production of several video shorts slowed down my decisionmaking
process. Inexperience also prevented me from fully utilizing the available post-production equipment such as the audio equalizer for correcting poor audio.

Choosing an editing style compatible with subject and installation was discussed frequently with my board. I chose to combine the immediacy and grainy hand-held character of my cinema verite' style footage with a casual, general broadcast cutting style that drew the ideas and storyline together. Creating this more "basic" documentary proved difficult for me, tempted as I was by an institute of technology where high tech videos and the "MTV" style were in fashion. My own editing style slowly evolved and the issue was soon forgotten.

I structured the tapes into a series of video shorts, each with a running time of eight minutes and under. Theoretically, this structure would encourage viewers to concentrate for short periods of time on the videos and then to continue viewing the rest of the show's narrative material. Five video shorts were created from the footage and separated into two tapes. Each short was individually titled with character generated letters and each tape with an opening title and credit roll. Both tapes successfully merged the characters and ideas of the installation.

V. INSTALLATION

My early attempts in defining the narrative structure were finally resolved when my crew and I installed the show. A few
major wall readjustments created the desired atmosphere. We contoured the walls to create a narrow, darkened entry walkthrough, an open well-lit assembly area and a secluded and darkened screening area for the four piece videotape.

Video monitors were positioned within the surrounding narrative structure to maintain audio clarity. Chairs, ashtrays, sidetables, and an actual plank board that had appeared in photographs and videotapes as a street person's bed (and had been cleaned of human excrement that morning) were placed throughout the gallery. The introductory text was suspended by wire in mid-air and lit.

I was extremely frustrated by the short time period alloted for setting up a mult-media installation--all day Friday and Saturday until the opening Saturday night. Not only did we have to install my show, but also strike the last show, and spackle and repaint the gallery walls. The set-up time was tense and problematic because of poor quality video equipment provided by RIT. I was compelled to borrow equipment from another Rochester school.

The opening was well-attended with over one hundred people, mostly from outside the MFA department. I served food indigenous to soup kitchens (i.e. government peanut butter and macaroni and cheese) and street wine. Many guests were delighted. A few were disgusted.

My formal thesis sharing, attended by about 15 students and persons in the related field and two faculty members (one being my
thesis board chairperson) stirred few feathers. My true "sharing" came a couple of days later when a carload of street men visited the show. They responded positively, offering many constructive criticisms and suggestions for future projects. I later found a crumpled thank-you note left on a table in the gallery. The rest of the week was quiet with many people continuing to express interest in the installation.

CONCLUSION

THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE reached many assorted audiences outside of the academic art world soon after my formal thesis showing. Approximately 500 people viewed the show at St. Joseph's during an open house five weeks later. Publicity for the work included an extensive front page evening news article. The work, either in it's entirety or in parts, was viewed at Rochester City Hall's Link Gallery, the University of Rochester and St. John Fisher College. Video excerpts opened an independent artists series on local Cablevision the following January. The work was also presented to medical students in a health issues seminar at Rochester's Strong Memorial hospital.

One of the homeless issues that I felt most misunderstood and yet vital--the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill by dumping them into the streets--became the basis of a new videotape documentary on which I am currently working. Again, I am finding the process painstakingly slow because of the delicacy of the
controversial subject matter. But my thesis experience has given me a solid, supportive base for my work. The thesis project, steeped in technical, aesthetic and ethical problems from its inception, had blended my expressive and advocacy skills and challenged me in a way that I could never have predicted when I began the work in 1982.
ENDNOTES

1. Catholic Worker Houses across the country are houses of hospitality for street men and women where food, clothing and shelter are offered. The communal houses are part of the Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933. It's radical Christian principles, expressed through direct action and The Catholic Worker tabloid, proclaim the essential quality as well as the dignity of all persons in the human family regardless of race, creed, color, gender or previous conditions of servitude.


3. Ibid., p. 247.
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Thesis Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree

MFA Photography Program
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

January 1984

THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT

(working title)

Suzanne Lynn Frew

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Through still photographs and video recordings, I propose to present my personal perceptions of the Catholic Worker Movement in Rochester, New York. The distinctive qualities of video-movement and sound-complement those of photography-arrested detail. By providing the viewer with a depth of rapport and insight that might not be possible without this complementary relationship, I hope to encourage personal viewer interpretation.

BACKGROUND

The fall season of 1982 brimmed with news of economic hardship. I saw in this a need to explore the visible consequences of these difficulties. This need was also influenced by undergraduate study in social work and communications, my experiences in social advocacy, and my Christian beliefs.

I considered various means that the social-documentary format could be used to depict the human problems I saw around me. While researching street outreach programs in Rochester, I found myself returning again and again to St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, run by members of the Catholic Worker Movement. For over fifty years this international movement has strived to put into daily practice the principles of Christ's Sermon on the Mount by providing food, shelter, and clothing.

After an initial period of helping to prepare and serve the free noontime meal, I began photographing various meal activities and the guests who frequented the house. As the months passed I slowly began comprehending the everpresent contrast between the dedication of the workers and the transitory nature of street life. I grew aware of the fine line I walked in establishing even a limited
sense of trust. Acceptance to my openly - displayed camera changed as quickly as the mood swings of the alcoholic poor; occasionally, the consequences were unsettling for me as well as my subjects.

The following quote by Alan Rosenthal, excerpted from The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making (p. 31), effectively describes the dedication I feel in depicting such an organization, the people it touches - and fails to touch - and the multi-faceted environment within which it operates.

I now see the concerned film maker not only as one who tries to bring about direct change, but as one who bears witness. This "bearing of witness" has two elements. On a modest level it means that the film maker is interested in telling us about a certain truth. It is not "the truth" or "the eternal message" but is rather a very personal statement that says: 'This film arises out of my feelings, background, and integrity and on the basis of what I show and how I show it you can take it or leave it for what it's worth.' It is this kind of modest personal truth that makes Mike Rubbo's quiet, seemingly rambling work so interesting, for example.

On a different level of bearing witness the film maker is one who says: 'This is our world. See its joy and be happy. But see its sorrow and learn from it, and don't say no one ever told you what the world was like.' This kind of bearing witness is not something one does logically. It is something one does compulsively. Kopple, Osheroff, Cohen and others like them are led not by reason, but by a conscience that says this story must be told, and these facts must not stay hidden. Robert Vas knew this better than anyone and expressed it as follows:

'I've brought with me from the other side a "baggage"...a great many things to talk about. This baggage, the message that nobody asked me to talk about, is absolutely central to me. I can't exist without it. And I must talk about it to audiences that never experienced these things directly.'

This is what drives the concerned film maker: the baggage, the ineluctable personal message that nobody asks one to talk about. It is difficult, but the film maker knows that somewhere out there the witness will be heard and the message will find a response. And it is this knowledge, this sure knowledge, which makes everything worthwhile.
PROCEDURE

Most of my experiences have been with the 35mm hand-held still camera. I will continue to use this format, shooting in the candid, documentary style. The video camera, which has only recently become an important artistic medium for me, will be utilized to create images that are both specifically preconceived and documentary. Storyboards will play an important role in initially formulating these preconceived pieces, even though much of the work's direction will evolve from the shooting. These previsualized ideas will then be combined with the documentary footage during editing.

I plan to increase my personal involvement with the Catholic Worker activities in hopes of establishing myself as less of an outsider. Openness is essential for encouraging dialogue with the guests. To achieve this I will occasionally show work to the guests and workers (i.e. workprints).

Two major technical problems I face are extremely low light levels and space limitations. In my attempts to overcome problems of low light levels with the 35mm camera, I will experiment with recording film and special developers. Low light levels will be of greater concern with the video image. Here I will be challenged to explore methods other than the traditional procedures. Also, once such instruments as the video process amplifier become familiar, I will look for possibilities of altering the image during the editing stage.

With the public spaces of the house limited to the kitchen/dining area and two very small lounging rooms, my work will extend beyond the confines of the Catholic Worker house. Since the people who frequent the house spend the majority of their time in the city streets, I see the urban area as a natural extension of their environment. I do not believe the work would be complete without including images of the city.
I presently plan for the work to be exhibited as an installation, separately displaying the still and moving imagery within the same gallery space. To help create the feeling of surrounding environment I might feed an independent audio track through free-standing stereo speakers. What specific form the visual display will take is undecided.
ESTIMATED TIMETABLE

Preliminary research and shooting; committee selection
Begin proposal writing
Submit draft to committee; begin rewrite
Submit final draft to committee and program chairman
Begin bimonthly meetings with committee members
Shoot ten minute documentary on a portrait of a person
Begin drafting video storyboards; continue with still camera work
Submit drafted storyboards to committee for suggestions
Revise storyboards; begin video shooting
Present work-in-progress to Catholic Worker staff
Begin emphasis on written thesis
Travel to Buffalo to view video resources
Begin editing raw video footage
Present work-in-progress to C.W. staff and board of directors
Emphasize final editing of video sequences and still photographs
Submit work-in-progress to full committee
Thesis show and sharing
Complete first draft of written thesis; submit; begin rewrite
Complete final version; submit to committee and program chairman

September-December 1983
December
January 3, 1984
January 16
January
February
March
March
May
June
June
July
August
September
September
late October
early December
January 1, 1985
WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY


Households below the poverty level pay an average of 50% of their income on rent payments.

year, 2.5 million Americans are displaced because of revitalization of neighborhoods, economic development projects, and demolition. In addition, an estimated 500,000 low cost rental units are destroyed each year, owing to the combined forces of demolition, arson or conversion of low to moderate income housing.
year...2.5 million Americans are displaced because of revitalization of neighborhoods, economic development projects...

In addition...an estimated 500,000 low cost homes are razed each year, owing to the combined forces of demolition, arson or conversion of low to mid-rise dwellings.
September 27, 1984

Dear Ms. Frew:

Thank you for your recent letter concerning the homeless. Best of luck on your thesis. I have forwarded a copy of your letter to Commissioner Perales of the Department of Social Services. On October 4, 1984, he will release a Statewide needs assessment and plan for dealing with the crisis of homelessness. He will send you a copy of that report as soon as it is completed.

Please call him directly at (518) 474-9475 if you do not receive the report by October 15, 1984.

Sincerely,

Ms. Suzanne L. Frew
90 Rosedale Street
Rochester, New York 14620
Invisible no longer

Suzanne Frew calls them “the invisible people” — the homeless who live in Rochester’s tunnels, parks and old subway beds as well as those who depend on street facilities for their everyday needs. Frew, a 27-year-old artist and social worker, spent most of the last two years seeking those people and capturing them on film as part of a fine-arts master’s degree at Rochester Institute of Technology. The results are on view through March 25 in City Hall’s Link Gallery, where a free exhibit of Frew’s photos and text can be seen weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Frew sheds light on the loneliness, resilience and the few comforts of these “street people.” Seeing is believing.
Seeing the Lives of the Homeless through a Camera’s Eye

By Teresa A. Parsons

Suzanne Frew identifies with Moses. She doesn’t claim powers of prophecy, but her work for and with Rochester’s homeless population is a lonely calling and sometimes she finds herself, like Moses, asking “Why me, Lord?”

Having finished the video work for her thesis — which drew extensive attention when displayed last winter at two local universities, Rochester City Hall and St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality — Frew has chosen to continue working with homeless persons in Rochester. In particular, her next projects will deal with the “deinstitutionalized homeless” and the issue of providing shelter.

By some estimates, chronic sufferers from schizophrenia, manic depressive psychosis and psychotic depression comprise 25 to 50 percent of those who live on city streets. The public outcry against “warehouse” conditions in state mental institutions during the 1950s and the development of drug therapy influenced a trend toward community-based mental health policies. The results — between 1965-80, 61,000 patients were released from New York state hospitals alone, many with no place to go.

Although provisions for follow-up care exist for those released, Frew’s research maintains that the system is inadequate and that many have lost contact with it, falling through the cracks of the “safety net” to form a sort of permanent underclass.

Their situation is further complicated by the critical shortage of affordable housing. Rochester’s urban area alone lost 600 single-room housing units in 1982, and those which remain demand as much as $275 a month for what Frew’s first videotape illustrates as inhumane conditions.

To widen awareness of these issues, Frew is producing two 28-minute videotapes. One will document the nightmare quality of life among the mentally ill homeless population, and the other she envisions as an aid to groups trying to respond to the needs of homeless persons in their own communities.

Specifically, the second tape will concentrate on ways for grassroots organizations to establish “long-term transitional living” facilities.

Frew, an Alabama native, came to Rochester in 1982 to work toward a master of fine arts degree at Rochester Institute of Technology. She had yet to choose her topic, but knew it would combine a social justice issue in some way with her talent for photographic communication.

As a volunteer at St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker House on South Avenue, she began with a vague goal of documenting the effects of the 1982 recession on those who occupy the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. As she gained the trust of the population St. Joseph’s serves, she found herself becoming increasingly involved with homeless persons as individuals and drawn to become an advocate for them. For the next two years, Frew used videotape and still cameras to document their lives.

Frew is seeking both funding and volunteers to help with her current projects, from fund raising or research assistance to basic help in organizing the projects. “I’ve been doing this pretty much alone so far, and sometimes I just feel completely overwhelmed,” she said.

A start-up grant from the Diocesan Office of Communications has allowed her to purchase videotape, and she has received additional grants for the use of equipment from the Visual Studies Workshop and Portable Channel, a media access center.

“For her focus on local people and the need here, and her zeal for the project” were what prompted support from the diocesan Department of Communications, according to Mary Cronin, communications assistant.

For community or church groups interested in learning more about Rochester’s homeless population, Frew will speak and show her videotape and a slide presentation of her thesis work. She requests an honorarium to help fund her continuing work.

Anyone interested in becoming involved with this project or in arranging a presentation should contact Suzanne Frew at 442-6030.