Adolescent girls

Chae Kihn

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This thesis is dedicated to all the girls I worked with at Heritage High School in New York City, and Beginning With Children Middle School in Williamsburg. They are a continual source of inspiration.

It is also dedicated to my three advisors, Professor Elaine O’Neil, Professor Willie Osterman, and Professor Loret Stienberg who worked with me tirelessly on completing my degree.

Most of all, this degree is dedicated to my parents, Dr Ronald Kihn and Professor Patricia Kihn for their continual love, belief, and support.
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Introduction

From April 5 through April 17, 2002, I presented a photographic exhibit entitled Adolescent Girls at the SPAS gallery on the Rochester Institute of Technology campus. I subsequently exhibited the same show at Heritage High School from May 15 through June 15, 2002. The show consisted of sixty-five black and white, silver gelatin, photographic prints mounted behind glass, and a list of words commonly used to label young women. The images were juxtaposed against the words so the audience could contrast the “labels” with the images of the girls. While the show was put together to complete part of the requirements for a Master of Fine Arts degree, Adolescent Girls fits into the broader context of my work; it explores the relationships the girls have with each other and themselves, investigating how they naturally interact in their world on a daily basis. I focus on their communication through body language and gestures, which is a common theme throughout my work. This project extends the parameters of my previous projects because it is the first long-term, in-depth, documentary photography project that I have done within the freedom of an artistic framework. By having the luxury of unlimited time I felt that I really got to know the girls within the context of their school environment. This knowledge aloud me too minimize my own expectations and preconceived notions.

At the opening in the SPAS Gallery one of my guests asked me how I choose the subject of my thesis exhibition. Exactly what interested me about these young women? I stopped for a moment and thought, how and why do you choose a subject? The problems of what the subject is and how it should be represented are the same for the photographer
as any other visual artist. The photographs themselves, in part, embody the beliefs and concerns held by the photographer. But I also felt like answering: the subject chose me.

I was still living in Rochester, New York, and I photographed a cheerleading competition at the Blue Cross Arena. I became intrigued with the way that the girls interacted with each other. They were physically and emotionally very connected. They seemed to have a different idea of personal boundaries and body language. I became very interested in learning more about this age group and the important connections they were sharing with their peers, particularly as these contrasted with popular media portrayals of adolescent girls.

When I moved to New York City, I started to take photographs in city schools. I wanted to observe how the girls related within the structured confines of a school system. I spent almost two years photographing at Beginning With Children Middle School in Williamsburg and Heritage High School in Spanish Harlem. I began this project wondering: Who are these young women, and why are they so misunderstood in society? Why are they portrayed so negatively in the media?

For my thesis project I also wanted to do a “pure” documentary project. By photographing them over a two-year period I not only began to understand them better as people, I more clearly understood the forces that motivate me as a photographer. Importantly, I had a clearer picture of the way I work, how preserving dignity is more important then creating a photograph that will create scandal. I made an impact in the lives of the young women. I believe that seeing positive images of themselves in the school environment boosted their self-esteem. Many of them were surprised at how
beautiful they looked. Through this project they seemed to be more connected with the school and each other.

This written thesis explains through research into the history of documentary photography, my own personal history as a photographer, and insights into the exhibitions themselves, how I developed this project, what it looked like when it was completed, and what I have learned from doing it. I believe that I was successful because I not only showed the young women in a positive light, but in some ways I allowed the girls to speak for themselves.

**The Elements Of Photography**

Only through a thorough exploration of an artistic body of work; an exploration that includes breaking it down into the important elements, does any significant understanding of the work as a whole emerge. This is especially true within photography because it is a complicated medium full of layers of interpretation, meaning, and active elements not present in other art forms. The photograph itself has physical attributes that define it which include amongst other things the frame, style, color, size, focus, time, tone, condition, quality, and composition. The photographer ultimately determines all of these formal photographic strategies based on perceptions formulated and reinforced though a lifetime of experiences. One clear example of the control a photographer has over meaning within the photograph is the way photography relates to the idea of time. While the photograph as an object is static, it represents a world that is continually moving and changing. The photograph takes an event, or moment in time, and through a mechanical process instantaneously captures it in a completely original way, changing moments into permanent historical records. By taking something that is inherently and
continually dynamic, and in a state of flux, and isolating a single moment, photography is able to change the meaning we associate with this fundamental property of life.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1*

In photography the idea of capturing or stopping motion is completely controllable by the photographer. How motion is depicted can change depending on the shutter speed. For example, a photograph of a particular scene is made when the camera is pointed toward a subject and the photographer decides how she wants the image to look. Depending on a variety of elements within the scene including how much light there is, and if the subject is moving or standing still, a particular shutter speed is chosen. When considering two photographs that were taken under exactly the same condition a photograph taken at a shutter speed of 250\(^{th}\) per second is much different than the same one taken at 15\(^{th}\) per second. At 250\(^{th}\) per second the photograph is much more likely to have captured the motion even if the subject is moving. At 15\(^{th}\) per second the subject, if not completely still while the shutter was open, will most likely be blurred within the frame. This slight difference in the way a photograph was made creates an enormous difference in the way a photograph is seen. For example, *figure 1* was made at a low
shutter speed in low natural light, this allowed for the little girl sitting in light to remain in focus, while the man sitting behind her is blurred because he was moving within the frame. Because of this use of motion and blur within the frame more of the viewers attention is given to the main subject, the little girl, while the blurry man behind her creates an uneasy feeling because you cannot clearly see his face. This technique of using motion creates a mood within the photograph. The photograph in figure 2 was taken on a bright sunny day at a high shutter speed. Even though there is a lot of motion within the frame all movement is stopped so there is no blur. This gives the photograph the feeling of being captured in time.

Figure 2

Another inherently photographic element is the use of the frame: how a photographer decides to frame something affects how the viewer interprets the subject. “The photograph has edges the world does not,” explains Stephen Shore. “The edges are what separate what is in the photograph from what is not” (Shore 28). It is part of the photographer’s job to decide how to use the edges of the photograph. To use the frame as a creative element based on the composition of objects, people, events or forms within
the photograph. The objects that are important to the photographer when making the
decisions about how to photograph a scene are the recipients of the frame’s “emphasis”.

![Figure 3](image)

A frame might be used “actively” by placing a subject close to the edge of the frame
causing a tension between what is included in the frame and what is not. This also can
indicate what part of the subject is important. For example, *figure 3* uses the frame
actively in order to create tension and ambiguity within the image. This tension becomes
as important as anything else within the frame.

![Figure 4](image)
For other photographs the frame is passive or neutral, and there is nothing placed at the edge of the photograph; it only represents where the photograph ends. For example, *figure 4*, the photograph of the girl in art class looking through a frame creates the idea of a frame within a frame. But it is still a passive frame. There is nothing close to the edges causing tension within the frame. The subject is passively placed within the frame. Then there is the combination of the two ideas as in *figure 5*. This photograph is from the *Mirror Stage Series*, the title is *Mirror Stage Series XVI*. In this photograph you have the active element on the left side of the frame, the woman’s face is right in the corner of the photograph, and on the right hand side of the photograph you have a lot of empty space which is very passive. Together they create a dynamic within the frame that causes tension and makes a statement about the relationship between these two people.

![Figure 5](image)

The basic facts in a photograph can be totally transformed after the photograph is made by a number of things, including the sequence, condition, and presentation. Another important variable in photography is the “space” or venue in which the photograph is viewed. “The meaning of an image can change depending on what is seen immediately
beside it,” writes John Berger (Berger 29). This is true to such an extent that even the space that the photograph is seen in affects how a viewer interprets it. The photographic image’s location - whether a well-known gallery space, a newspaper, the wall in a dentist’s office, a family photo album, or on a billboard in Times Square - gives it completely different importance and meaning. For example, the same photograph can be presented in a gallery in an expensive frame or it may be seen on the front of a discarded newspaper lying in the street. These conditions will have an effect on the viewers and the importance they place on the image. This implies that photographs actively communicate with the world. Therefore it is extremely important for the photographer to be aware of her intended message and how it is changing as the location of the photograph changes. This becomes a crucial element within the understanding of the photograph. An example the work of photographer James Nachtwey, one of the most important war photographers of our time. In the documentary War Photographer (2000) produced and directed by Christian Frei, Nachtwey clearly states that he does not see his work hanging in galleries but aims for mass publications because wide exposure of the issues he is covering which he views as his primary purpose. For Frei, the photograph has its own life as an object which can be highly influenced by the surrounding elements.

Obviously the photograph itself is not changing from one environment to the next. What is changing is the viewer’s perception of what the photograph is, and what it is trying to do. For example a photograph, of an old woman, sitting in a shoebox could represent an important memory to someone. Hanging on a wall in a gallery the same photograph could signify an important piece of art, and on a billboard in the middle of Time Square it could be an advertisement for a new product. Each of these locations
carry with it an intrinsic meaning which will effect the value placed on the photograph by society. This effect of any environment on meaning brings up the important issue of the fundamental “truth” possible within a photograph. The interpretation, perceptions, even an understanding of photography influences the “objective” view of the photograph. Because the objective truth within a photograph changes depending on the surrounding environment; photographs become evidence of perceptions held by both the photographer and the viewer.

It could be further argued that everyone’s perception of what is in the photograph varies depending on his or her previous experiences and expectations. In other words, the viewer is not neutral. Viewers have a subjective eye depending on past experiences, and this has a profound influence on what the viewer actually “sees” in the photograph. It is through the viewer’s relationship with the image that the photograph gets its power. There is an entire set of “symbolic” meanings connecting not only the photographer to the context of the environment, but the viewer as well. Recent psychological studies have rejected the idea that the act of looking and recording can ever be entirely neutral, passive, or objective. It contains and expresses relations of power and control between the artist, viewer, and subject (Wells 2). Communication theorists call cognitive dissonance the process by which individuals reject information that does not support attitudes already held or decisions already made. The way a viewer looks at a photograph can be skewed by strongly held opinions tied to emotional responses. In other words, photographs are interpreted within the context of social beliefs already held by the viewer.
Just these few examples show the art of photography as a series of complicated and active relationships-between the photograph, photographer, subject, and viewer-that need to be taken into account in order for the photographic project to be clearly defined and interpreted. My own creative process is an interrelationship between me, the photographer, and the external elements that create photography. The external elements including the photograph, the subject, and the viewer. That is why it is important for my audience to understand that each one of these elements alone and in relation to each of the others has a significant amount of influence and weight, rendering it impossible to consider the project as a whole without thinking about these elements separately.

**Documentary Photography**

Photography is a potent medium of expression. Properly used it is a great power for understanding. Documentary-Photojournalism; because of the tremendous audience reached by publications using it, has more influence on public thinking and opinion than any other branch of photography. For this reason it is important that the photographer has a strong sense of integrity and the intelligence to understand and present his subject matter accordingly.

W. Eugene Smith

Within our society photographs are used in a number of different ways including: artistically, on gallery walls; journalistically, conveying information in newspapers or magazines; and commercially, to sell products. From the invention of photography in the mid 1800’s the medium has been separated into many opposing traditions, “at first between the scientific and aesthetic ideologies, later between purism and pictoralism, and finally as window vs mirror” (Hugunin 6). In her book *Photography At The Dock*, photo-critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau expresses this tension: “Photography is just about everything ...or alternatively nothing at all” (Solomon-Godeau 169).
My thesis project, Adolescent Girls, exemplifies the type of photography known as “documentary”. What is documentary photography? Newhall defined it as, “authenticity implicit in photographs as records.” In other words, the very nature of the photographic image makes it a document. He goes on: “Photographs are subjective and for that reason, powerful criticisms of the impact of an economic system on the lives of others” (Newhall 235). Here he is writing about the influential photographs of the Farm Security Administration as records of what happened during the depression era. Newhall is expressing the idea that photographs are subjective interpretations by the photographer: not just important records, and therefore can be used as a way to influence change in society. He further states that while documentary photography is neither a “record of fact nor art for art’s sake” the photographs are “brilliant technically and highly artistic”. At their best documentary images involve observable fact combined with creativity, imagination, and data gathering, and subjectivity from a belief system or philosophy held by the photographer.

The question “what is documentary photography?” and more specifically, “how is it different from other types of photography?” leads us to the definition of “document”. “The word ‘document’ can be traced back to a medieval term for an official paper” (Clarke 124). John Grierson first used the word “documentary” in 1926 to describe the kind of cinema that he wanted to replace the fantasy film produced in Hollywood, and the term was quickly embraced by still photographers searching for a phrase that captured their quest for the “quintessential quality of truth” (Wells 56). 1930 Grierson directed Drifters, a film about fishermen, which laid the foundation for documentary filmmaking. In 1935 he went on to found the Film Center to finance and support documentary films.
In his long career he has been associated with the production of hundreds of documentary films. It was through his dedication to the documentary image that future filmmakers who wanted to portray something “real” found a voice. In other words, these documentary filmmakers wanted to capture reality in a way that just was not being addressed by the mainstream Hollywood movies.

In the Webster Dictionary, a “document” is defined as: “Supplying evidence of reality.” Documentary photographers are attempting to show some aspect of reality. A photograph is after all fundamentally a document. The camera makes a record at the moment of exposure as everything within the angle of the lens is recorded on light sensitive emulsion or, more recently, on a memory card through digital technology. The concept of not interfering with, or changing a scene, is essential for most traditional documentary photographers, which directly relates to the “authenticity” of the photograph. Traditionally a reference point for whether a photograph was considered a documentary photograph is based on its “authenticity”. However, this assumption of authenticity entirely denies the influence that the photographer has while creating the photograph. Directing the elements that create a photograph is an essential part of photography. “Therefore, ‘documentary’ as a defining term is misleading because it plays on the assumption that photography has an ability to record the objective truth without the influence of subjective interpretation,” writes Marien, “Current documentary photographers consider the idea of complete truth within photography as an unrealizable goal“ (Marien 449). Noted art historian John Burger agrees. “Every image, even ‘documentary’ images, embodies a particular way of seeing” he writes. “This becomes obvious when we are looking at a photograph and we become aware that the
photographer made conscious decisions to take this photograph in a particular way out of an infinite set of possibilities” (Berger 10).

Given this interplay between documenting reality and subjective expression, documentary photography is profoundly complex and multi-layered based on many socially constructed ideologies. In A World History Of Photography Rosenblum defines documentary photography as embracing two goals: “the depiction of verifiable social fact and the evocation of empathy with the subject” (Rosenblum 384). Walker Evens states that, “Documentary is a sophisticated and misleading word ... the term should be documentary style ... document has a use, whereas art is really useless and documentary photography falls somewhere in the middle.” Lewis Hine explained the photograph’s goals when he stated, “Light is required to illuminate the dark areas of social existence.”

It is an interesting dichotomy between fact and subjectivity because many arguments arise about the basic truthfulness of a documentary image when much of its power comes from the subjectivity directly connected to the photographer’s particular view.

Even though it is clear that objectivity within photography is under question, it can be argued that photographs are in some respects able to represent tangible facts. For example, if there is a red ball in front of the lens of a camera and a photograph is made, no one can argue that a red ball will not appear in the photograph. But we cannot generalize to the point that all red balls look exactly like this one or that this red ball is in fact the “average” of all the red balls.

The primary role of a documentary photographer is education through understanding so there should always be thoughtfulness and respect for subjects. Therefore it becomes the responsibility of the photographer to have insight and integrity,
especially when investigating something that is disturbing or degrading, because the photographers are presenting something difficult to view. The more difficult the subject matter, the more important it is for the photographer to be guided by morality. The question of morality or ethics within documentary photography is extremely important because of the power of the photographic image and the importance we place on what it shows within our society.

Within this context, the history of documentary photography contains three tensions. Above, I discussed the tension between subjective impression and objective reality. Now in a short history I will consider the tension between documentary work and photojournalism, and the tension between art and documentary photography.

A Short History

The documentary tradition within photography, especially in the United States, generally refers to photographs specifically made from a “humanistic” or “social” point of view. This tradition begins with Jacob Riis (1849-1914). He began his career as a police reporter and through his experiences became a socially conscious journalist. In his book How The Other Half Lives (1890) Riis produced both a visual and written account of the living conditions in New York’s Lower East Side which revealed the horrible poverty in which United States immigrants were forced to live. The images were very powerful documents that depicted the degradation and waste of lives. There were particularly powerful images of children who were forced to live and work in staggering conditions of poverty. One of the important documentary elements was the fact that the photographs gave access to an otherwise unknown world. Demonstrating another
important documentary element, the photographs motivated social change because of the horrible images they depicted. The photographer’s initial response to the subject, the photograph as an object itself, and the viewer’s response of social action is what created the “documentary photograph.”

This tradition continued with Lewis Hine (1874 - 1940) who declared himself a “sociological photographer.” He was a sociologist who only used photography in his research, he thought photography was very powerful form of communication. Initially, he wanted to show the lives of the underprivileged in New York City. He was not a photographer for photography’s sake, rather it was merely a means to an end. He believed that documentary photography should not have any kind of artistic purpose, that there was no place for it in the world of art. Its best use was as a powerful way to change people’s minds about social conditions. Although he felt very strongly about this at the time it is obvious that today, over fifty years later, his work reflects one of the tensions within documentary photography because now it is considered art. The George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, has a large collection of his negatives in their permanent archive and in 1998 held an exhibition in their gallery of his work. Within this role as art his photographs move beyond being “documents” of a time and place into the creative expression of an artist (Clark 54).

The documentary tradition received a boost in the 1930’s. Under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration, a branch of the United States Government, photographs were made by some of the leading American photographers including: Arthur Rothstein, Theo Jung, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Rusell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, John Vachon, and John Collier.
Director, Roy Stryker saw photography as a way of gathering evidence of the impact of the Great Depression and documenting the average American. Many of these images have become icons of American history. At the very least they have maintained a place in American history and are a valuable record of the depression era. "One of the most recognizable images of this period is Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother (1934). It was chosen by Stryker as the photograph to symbolize the concern of the government for the displaced farmers," writes Rosenbloom (Rosenbloom 369). It is clearly an image that represents a balance between document, beauty, art, and social concern.

Another photographer from this time, Margaret Bourke-White created images that raise questions about the idea of integrity within documentary photography. In her book Have You Seen Their Faces? she shot very personal photographs, changing names and locations for the sake of anonymity. Other photographers describing themselves as documentary photographers working at the same time as Margaret Bourke-White distanced themselves from her because the idea of truth was crucial to their work.

A recent exhibition entitled “Bronzeville: Black Chicago in Pictures, 1941-1943” provides another example of how documentary photography can be important in recording a time and place, and also have an important place in the art world. Held in April 2003 at The International Center For Photography the exhibition included documentary images made by the Farm Security Administration photographers Rusell Lee, Edwin Rosskam, John Vachon, and Jack Delano. In his book which accompanied the exhibition, Stange stated:

They produced over 1000 documentary images of Chicago’s South Side in the early 1940s. At the time this was an unparalleled coverage of a black urban
community. Chicago’s South Side is seven miles long as well as two miles wide, was the capital of black America in the 1940s home to such people as Joe Lewis, Mahalia Jackson, Congressman William Davison, Defender Newspaper editor John Songstacke, Ebony Magazine editor John H. Johnson, and the Nation Of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. The photographs are of city streets and sidewalks, prosperous middle – class businesses, cabarets, and overcrowded ‘Kitchenette’ neighborhoods where dirty poor migrants from the deep-south struggle to survive ( Stange 4).

Documentary photography continued to develop throughout the twentieth century. Robert Frank in his book The Americans (1958) redefined documentary photography in terms of his radically personal style and philosophy. His original style included a self-awareness about the role of the photographer and her intention in the photographic process. In his view what the photographer was trying to say about the subject became more important than the subject itself. He used American icons in his photographs in a way that contrasted sharply with the facts of the 1950’s in America. The icons were supposed to represent America of the fifties. He contrasted them with what he actually observed as he was traveling across America. “So the automobiles and television sets became conduits of an insidious commercialism that was profoundly alienating individuals from each other and the wider society,” writes Marien. “There was a sense in his photographs of unfulfilled lives and spiritually vacant environments of the post World War II period. The soul-damaged population somewhere between violence, ignorance, and despair” (Marien 344). He shot images of bleakness and sadness in a country determined to ignore anything that was not considered “moral” or “good.” This was a very important conceptual leap in the documentary tradition that was, to this point in history, trying to accurately record everything that happened with minimal influence from the photographer.
Robert Frank led the way in understanding that there could be many possible meanings within a photograph. His book was a direct attack on America and stood in sharp contrast to the *Family Of Man* exhibition organized by Edward Steichen in 1955 at the Museum Of Modern Art in New York City. This exhibition was considered the quintessential documentary exhibition because it illustrated the human condition using still photographs. "The Family of Man exhibition brought together over 500 photographs by many different photographers from 68 countries," writes Rosenbloom. "The photographs depicted an 'essential oneness of mankind throughout the world'. A variety of universal themes and cultures were illustrated" (Rosenbloom 483). It was a cross-section of humanity but did not have the critical eye of Frank's work. Seen in contrast, the work is as opposite in nature as you can get.

Robert Frank did not care about the fine print or presentation of the photograph. His prints were gritty, tilted, blurred and completely unpremeditated (Marien 344). Because of the spontaneity and energy in his work he brought a new excitement and originality into photography that was long overdue. Along with W. Eugene Smith, William Klein, Leonard Freed, Gerry Winogrand, Jim Alinder, and Bill Owens, Frank's work rewrote the terms of reference for American documentary photography. In his newest book *Hold Still ... Keep Going* (2001), Frank pushes the idea of "documentary" even further as he describes putting down his camera for a movie camera because he could ask the people who were sitting in front of this lens what they thought instead of just inferring it. He believes that this is a more direct and less obscure approach.

Frank also states that he does not believe in capturing a decisive moment; rather every moment in the photograph is created by the photographer, and nothing is found.
This view contrasts sharply with Henri Cartier-Bresson who is among the most influential documentary photographers of the twentieth century. Cartier-Bresson believes in the decisive moment, in the idea that the documentary photographer finds everything in the world; the photographer only has to wait for the decisive moment when everything comes together. He wrote in his book The Decisive Moment (1952):

For me the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously. In order to ‘give a meaning’ to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what one frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry – it is by great economy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression. One must always take photographs with the greatest respect for the subject and for oneself. To take photographs means to recognize - simultaneously and within a fraction of a second – both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one’s head, one’s eye, and one’s heart on the same axis. (Bresson 16)

Whether or not documentary photography in fact “documents” reality, it has changed the understanding of history in the 19th and 20th centuries. Within the 20th century, documentary photography, through technological advances and practical uses, visualized history as a series of events that speak of the complexities of human experience. Far from being passive witnesses, photographs often became directors in the way historical events were seen. This raises a second tension within documentary work: when is it documentary, and when is it photojournalism?

For example Eddie Adams worked as a photojournalist during the Vietnam War. His Pulitzer Prize winning image of a man at the moment of death not only changed the face of the Vietnam War but America’s involvement in all wars in the future. It was the first time that a wide public audience had witnessed, in the photographic image, the moment of death. It spoke to the rising death toll of the war; it put a face to the long list
of names and numbers. Powerful photographs like this one brought the attention of the war to the American public. In another example, the photographer Hung Cong’s photograph *Accidental Napalm Attack* (1972) presented a moral condemnation of the Vietnam War and has been one of the most reproduced images in history. His image introduces the ideas and complexities of morality within documentary photography. When should photographers take photographs and when should they put down their cameras and become involved? Are there moments when it is inappropriate to photograph?

The negative implications associated with documentary photography directly relates to the fact that “photography was born in the days of the ‘British Empire’ when photography was used to capture images of ‘native people’ which only confirmed views of them as the other” (Wells 97). That is how documentary photographers are associated with taking pictures of people from different cultures from their own. Historically this was particularly damaging because photography “claimed to be able to create objective, scientific records which were free from bias” (Wells 85). The people seen in the photographs became representatives of entire groups, and were used to classify entire races of people. Unfortunately this negative use of photographs has followed the tradition of photography throughout history. It is argued that photography has been used as a way of consuming the world in a manner that gives both the photographer and viewer power over it.

One entity that fully understands the power of “photojournalistic” documentary photographs was the United States Government. During the first Gulf War George H. W. Bush and the United States Government controlled the press to such an extent that
photographers were not allowed to photograph what they wanted to, only what the military said they could. Because of the American public's response to the extreme censorship imposed by the United States Government during the Gulf War, the American public felt strongly that the government was trying to hide something. During his lecture at the New York Historical Society in May 2002, Peter Turnely discussed what it was like being a photojournalist during the Gulf War: "It was extremely frustrating, we were being watched constantly and we were being kept from the action. No one was allowed to make photographs freely during the Gulf War. There was always at least two military people with us at all times ... the government was trying to control the media and the spin that the war was making."

From the beginning, tensions have existed around whether documentary photography depicts "reality" and what differentiates it from photojournalism. Another tension exists around whether or not documentary photography is "art". If photographs are really created by the photographer and not objective records then is documentary photography art? In the early 1900's Alfred Stieglitz brought photography into museums and galleries, to create an atmosphere in which the photographic print would be as common in an art gallery as a painting or sculpture. Today there are countless examples of photographic "art". The Civil War, for instance, was the most documented war of its day because of the technical advances within photography. Even though at the time these photographs were being made as pure documents of events, today they are considered valuable collector's items and are present in a large number of important collections. In another example, at Christy's Auction House in April 1999, a Timothy O'Sullivan photograph of the Great West sold for $10,000. Is there an inherent worth in
O’Sullivan’s subjective view of the world? We know that they are not pure objective representations of reality. Because they are an interpretation of reality based on someone’s subjective view, we can then conclude that they are important both as art and as documentary evidence of events.

Another example is Matthew Brady’s military group portraits which always conform to military hierarchy with the general as the center of attention in the middle of the photograph. This is a good example of a subjective document. Mr. Brady was limited to the accepted formula of the day. He could not, for example, put the general at the end of the line on the outskirts of the photograph. This would have been seen as a direct insult to the general, and by extension, the United States military, rendering an image that was not socially acceptable. In other words, while documenting the officers, Brady was also producing an “artistic” work within the limits of that society and his vision. Within his own aesthetics he had to consider accepted social norms that in some ways dictated a conventional form to him. Understanding the time period and society in which the images were made is invaluable in determining the reality within the photographs themselves. Without this knowledge a complete understanding of the photograph is lost.

From the beginning, many critics blurred the distinction between documentary and art photography by placing fine art photographers within the documentary tradition. For example, Eugene Atget (1857 – 1927) is considered the father of European modern documentary photography. His work figured in the early exhibits establishing modern photography as art: the first Independent salon of photography in France (1928), for example, and the first independent exhibition of modern photography in America (1930).
In the years 1898 – 1914 Atget sold images of Paris to architects, decorators, publishers, and artists. More often then not he was self directed, not commissioned, and only sold his photographs after they were made. “He was extremely interested in recreating a Paris of the past,” writes Rosenbloom, “not just recording Paris, but instilling it with an artistic eye. He made close ups, long shots, details, views from many different angles of the same thing at many different times of the day.” (Rosenbloom 279) Atget was not well known at the time of his death, but Bernice Abott brought thousands of his photographs to the attention of the Museum of Modern Art. While Atget created photographs with the intention of making art, other documentary photographers were brought into the art world by galleries and collectors. Marianne Fulton, senior scholar of the George Eastman House in Rochester New York states, “people like Brassai and Kertesz and Cartier-Bresson have been welcomed by the art establishment.” This welcome has not been entirely easy, however. These and other well-known documentary photographers have been “so appropriated by the art world and within society,” writes Eskin, “that you have to remember that when they were actually making the photographs they were professional working photographers. These photographers did not consider themselves as artists; they were not making the photographs as pieces of art to be hung in galleries but to be used in some kind of social context” (Eskin 105). In March 2002, the International Center of Photography in New York City opened The Rise of the Picture Press, a show of classic photojournalism images from the 1920’s and 1930’s. “Documentary work that was done 30 or 40 years ago was not done as fine art, but it has life as fine art,” said Stephen Daiter, a Chicago
dealer, who sold a 180-picture portfolio of mid-century street photography by members of the Photo League to the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio (Eskin 104).

A current trend in documentary photography supports the idea of photography as artistic perception or description, not fact. For example, Nan Goldin’s book *Ballad Of Sexual Dependancy* is a highly personal account of her life and friends’ lives during the 1970’s, 1980’s and 1990’s. Another example is Richard Billingham’s book *Ray’s A Laugh*, an intimate document of his family. The photographs are color, taken with a cheap point and shoot camera, and printed at a one-hour lab.

Within a few weeks after the terrorist’s attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, a vacant storefront on Prince Street in lower Manhattan became an interactive gallery. The digital prints were available for sale at $25 each. The profits from the sale of the photographs were donated to the victims of the tragedy. The book *This Is New York* was later created from the images in this project. This is an example of a symbiotic relationship between the traditional meaning of documentary photography, as a recorder of events, and the concept of traditional art as viewed in the art gallery, as the viewers became the recorders of history, and the recorders became the artists. Peter Galassi, curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art states, “The most interesting, most successful, and most imaginative response to the September 11 tragedy within all the visual arts came from photojournalism” (Eskin 101).

At first the idea of “beauty” was conceived as one of the greatest dangers for a documentary photographer. According to Featherstone, many photographers thought that “bringing beauty where there is ugliness makes light of critical issues” (Featherstone 43).
Because of this there is a strong anti-aesthetics and anti-elitist movement in the early documentary tradition. A more recent view dictates that even though documentary is not about aesthetics, the photograph has to be appealing enough to attract viewers, based on a social construct of what beauty is. According to this view, the beauty of the photograph fundamentally makes the viewer acknowledge the importance of the subject matter.

The idea of beauty in the documentary image is based on the idea that we are trained from infancy to be attracted to beautiful things and to turn away or be repelled by ugly things. So, even though within the documentary tradition there is the basic principle of anti-aesthetics, it is really all about aesthetics, employed to capture the audience’s attention. For example, Eugene Richards, a world-renowned documentary photographer, prints beautiful, large prints for his traveling exhibitions. He believes that if the photograph was ugly or had unattractive aesthetics, no one would be interested in the subject matter of the photograph. The photograph would ultimately be unappealing.

Vicki Goldberg states in an article about Richards that, “… no one can quite pin down what makes a photographer seek out nursing homes and blind men and babies dying of AIDS to make them somehow beautiful, somehow comprehensible, somehow visible to those who were not there and would not, perhaps even could not, look if Gene Richards did not show the way” (Goldberg 2004).

In another example, Sebastiao Salgado’s book Workers (1993), a landmark book of modern documentary photography, contains beautifully reproduced black and white prints that draw the reader into the subject matter. Even though the subject is “ugly” or “difficult to see” by many viewer’s standards the ugliness is portrayed in an “artistic” way that is less threatening to the audience. This perceived safety allows the audience to
feel more secure inviting them to contemplate not only the photograph but also the subject itself. If Salgado did not take interesting photographs people would be less interested in what he was trying to say. If the photographs did not comply with the accepted sense of beauty in framing, vision and understanding, it would be much easier to look away faster and entirely dismiss the image and therefore the subject matter. In this way Salgado uses the “art” of his photographs to promote their “documentary” nature.

Another aspect of the “documentary-art” tension concerns the quality of the print. Mary Ellen Mark, a well known documentary photographer, is very concerned with the quality of the fine print. “She does expect it to be beautifully printed,” writes Fulton, “and to reflect the tonal range present in the negative, as a bad print can ruin the impact of a photograph, she feels a good print is essential” (Fulton 14). As Mark expresses it: “I want to take strong documentary photographs that are as good technically as any of the best technical photographs, and as creative as any of the best fine-art photographs. That’s what I want. And certainly a good print is part of that”.

In the end, to answer the question of whether documentary photography is art, we need to look at the nature of art and photography as two unique categories that merge together. In the early part of the twentieth century Alfred Stieglitz raised photography’s status to art by introducing it into the gallery space and treating the photograph itself as an “object” of art. Traditional documentary photography falls into the “straight” photography category. Is it still art? I believe it is also art. Documentary photography not only exists as a factual document but also as a style and is therefore a form of art.
The Relationship Between the Documentary Photographer and Her Subject

Another issue raised by Adolescent Girls is the complex relationship between photographer and subject. Henri Cartier-Bresson has explained this relationship as follows: “... a certain identity is manifest in all the portraits taken by one photographer. The photographer is searching for the identity of his sitter, and also trying to fulfill an expression of himself. The true portrait emphasizes neither the suave nor the grotesque, but reflects the personality.” The relationship between the photographer and the subject is far more problematic cross-culturally than within a single culture. In its worst form photography dehumanizes, victimizes, and stereotypes groups of people, and it can be used as a tool of propaganda. “The photograph is a screen upon which wider social forces become visible, for example, racism exists and photography makes it visible,” states Wallis (Wallis 111). For example, Eugene Richards’ book Dorchester Days (2000) documents the racist Boston neighborhood he grew up in. He wrote:

Dorchester Days speaks clearly enough about growing up in a racially charged and changing inner city neighborhood. Dorchester Days was begun, I suppose, upon my return a bit fucked up and disappointed from years down south as a social worker / activist. Unemployed, having returned to Dorathea and the neighborhood I escaped, I began photographing – what was in front of me ... mine was a notable birthplace with racist South Boston next door. In 1974 – 75 there occurred in South Boston a violent resistance to school bussing that would have made George Wallace and the KKK proud. I have the photographs to tell this melevolant story.

Eugene Richards

If the photographer has an idea of the subject or has preconceived notions, this will be represented in the work. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the early photographs of the British explorers in Africa and India. Through advances within photography the European explorers were able to use the new medium of photography to depict the different cultures they visited as “savage” and “less advanced”. The
photographers did this in the way that they used photography to accentuate the
differences between the cultures. They posed the people within the photographic frame
and thus determined what they conveyed about the cultures upon their return to Europe,
where Europeans would use this information as their only source of information about
entire groups of people. Early commercial photographers who capitalized on travel
photographs realized that the more exciting the images were the more they could sell, so
they wanted to make the subjects in the photographs seem exciting and dangerous often
posing them and giving them props that propagated myths. “According to this view the
diversity of human beings’ physical characteristics was taken as evidence of the fact of
racial differences,” states Wallis (Wallis 2). The way that these early photographers
defined and determined photography influences what was being photographed and the
way that the photograph is viewed today.

More recently, as audiences have become more educated and more aware of the
problem inherent in documenting other cultures, it has become a central question in the
value of many documentary projects. This audience awareness happened when the
editors of Time Magazine darkened O.J. Simpson’s skin color in a cover photograph in
June 1994. “Readers everywhere recognized both the nature of the alteration and the
intended racialized connotation that a person of darker skin is more likely to be a
criminal,” writes Wells (Wells 111). This inherent social racism is both created by and
expressed through the photographic image.

Filmmaker Jim McKay addressed this tension during an open discussion at the
Film Forum on May 25, 2001, about his film Our Song that follows three adolescent girls
living in Brooklyn during the closing weeks of summer. He was asked: “Was there any
difficulty being a white director entering a black and Hispanic world, and how would you respond to criticism that you’re an outsider / voyeur depicting a world that’s not your own?” He answered:

The criticism is only valid if it speaks to specifics. If I’m inaccurate I should be called on it. It’s bullshit that I don’t have a right to tell the story. My responsibility is to tell it with respect, truthfulness, and a lot of hard work.... However I do recognize my outsider status, and do everything I can to check myself. I don’t take it lightly, and I do my collaboration and research very seriously. (Anonymous flyer)

The idea that photographs are documents of the world as absolute truth obviously ignores the entire cultural and social background against which the images were taken just as it renders the photographers as neutral, passive, and invisible (Clarke 112). A successful photograph is always a reflection of a specific point of view. In other words the photographer has a theory about a subject and what she wants to say about a situation before shooting begins. This concept is shaped from her personal history, experiences, relationships, and previously held views of her role. Eugene Richards, one of the most respected American photojournalists, said that he could never trust photography. “You won’t catch him saying that the medium is truth,” commented Goldberg. “Photography can let the ideas loose and start the discussion, but he doesn’t believe you can change anything, though you can do the best you can” (Goldberg 2004).

Thus an important influence in creating a photograph is the photographer’s own priorities and her understanding of how her expression of the subject relates to those priorities (Featherstone 43).
Adolescent Girls

The Photographer

The photographic project Adolescent Girls, lies entirely with the “photographer”; it was conceived, funded, and produced solely by me. It is essential to understand the photographer in order to understand the project and the photographs.

In 1990 received a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Wayne State University. My continued interest in human nature, social psychology, and relationships is a strong motivation in my photographs. While I was at university, I picked up a camera for the first time and I became immediately hooked. I knew that I wanted to do this “thing,” whatever it was, for the rest of my life. So I sold everything I owned and I moved to South Africa. The country my father was born in and left in the sixties. Growing up I heard a lot about South Africa and felt the displacement of having to live in another country without an extended family or sense of community. In part, I returned to South Africa to find out what my father had been talking about, to understand him better, and what it meant to be a white South African. Politically, it was a very interesting time in South Africa. I arrived just after Nelson Mandela was released from prison on Robben Island and many changes were happening within the government.
When I arrived in South Africa I did not have any work but wanted to use photography in a socially relevant way so I created a project taking photographs of children living on the streets of Cape Town for a research project at the University of the Western Cape. At the launch of the project, I met the Director of the National Street Law Project, a United States based human rights organization. He gave me a job as a documentary photographer within his organization. *Figure 6* is from a project I completed for Street Law on human rights for farm workers. From this job I got other assignments working for human rights organizations in South Africa. *Figure 7* is from a project I did for an oral historian at the University of Durbin in rural South Africa. During the first national democratic elections I worked for USAID and Project Vote on voter rights and education. My photographs were being used to teach first time voters, especially those people who could not read or write, how to cast their first ballot.

*Figure 7*

I worked as a freelance photographer in South Africa from 1993 - 1998. By 1998, working on projects in “high risk” conditions away from other photographers had left me extremely isolated and burned out. The feeling of separation also resulted from living
away from America for five years. I realized that it was time to either put down permanent roots in South Africa or move back to the United States. I also wanted time to concentrate on becoming a better photographer. As a creative person, I thought it was essential to find my own voice within my work and I could not do that while I was working for other people. I learned what my employers liked and did not like, and I began to shoot for their tastes and not my own. So, I applied to graduate school and moved back to the United States.

![Figure 8](image)

I came to Rochester Institute of Technology in the fall of 1998. I loved the freedom and space graduate school provided me to work on my own work and expand my knowledge of photography. My first Walk Through (at the end of each term during the first year of the Master of Fine Arts Degree at the Rochester Institute of Technology there is a day long examination and investigation of the student’s work meant to further the ideas and understanding of the artist as a person and the body of work as a whole) was all about discovering the freedom that graduate school provided. I tried to fit words in with photographs for the first time. I overlapped photographs, stuck photographs to the
wall with masking tape and glue and wrote with black paint right over the print. The photograph itself became unimportant. I was interested in breaking the constraints and boundaries that I had felt as a working photographer. I wanted to play with extremes, to discover what was possible, and then come back to something different. Figure 8 is an example of my first term Core class and was a part of my first Walk Through. It illustrates the need I had to break away from the constraints of my previous work.

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 9**

After the first *Walk Through* I went home for Thanksgiving break. I felt isolated from my family, because this was my first holiday we had spent together as a family since my return from Africa. My immediate family consists of my mother, father, and older brothers, Martin and Paul, and Martin’s wife, Julia. I realized how much the family dynamics and my role had changed since my departure. More specifically, I realized how much I had changed during my stay in Africa. All of a sudden I went from being a child in the family to an adult with an adult role. So I started to photograph my parents as a way to understand the changes within my primary family and as a way to bring them closer to me. *Figure 9* is the first image I made for this body of work. It is an image I made during Thanksgiving break. I wanted them to understand what I was so passionate
It was a project we could all actually work on together. It was also a project where I could “safely” work with the ideas I was learning in the classroom and incorporate them into my work.

![Figure 10](image)

When I returned and developed these photographs, they spoke to something that I wanted to say, not only about that specific relationship but about relationships in general. After I looked at the photographs, I became extremely interested in gestures and body language, and how we infer things about people through nonverbal elements. I also became interested in the perceptions we have of people based on their body language: how they stand, walk, sit, and move and how we communicate through nonverbal communication. I started making photographs of my own relationship and laying them out randomly mixing them with the photographs of my parents. *Figure 10* is a photograph I made of my boyfriend and me for this project. When I mixed the photographs up there was an anonymity that was created between the couples and individuals: the viewer was not sure who was who or which couple it was, and the boundaries were blurred and extended beyond any specific couple. I wanted to extend the boundaries to create a sense of ambiguity within the work. Through the use of
ambiguity the audience could relate to what they were seeing. The photographs began to have the anonymity that I was striving for. When I went home for Christmas and New Year I continued working on the project, photographing my parents and myself in my new role. At this time my images were becoming a lot more layered with meaning. Within the framework of this project my photographs were gaining a lot more depth.

Figure 11

My second Walk Through in March 1999 consisted of two 4 x 5 grids made out of 16 x 20 fiber based black and white prints documenting my family and relating it to the influence on my new relationship. Figure 11 is an installation photograph from my second Walk Through. Further, I wanted to explore the idea of truth and the narrative within the visual document. I struggled with the question of the way the narrative element within documentary photography dictates an understanding of “truth”. The project developed into a complex exploration of interpersonal communication through body language and gesture. Through this investigation, I came to realize that relationships are not just one thing, they are not “good” or “bad” but consist of a very complicated layering of memory, communication, and meaning. Relationships are
rhythmic, not static, continually changing over time and space. Within this body of work, it is important that images play off of each other in a dynamic way, forming patterns and meaning which force the audience to create the narrative rather than the photographer.

After my second *Walk Through*, I knew that I wasn’t finished with this project; I needed to spend more time photographing and researching. So I kept taking photographs of my parents and myself and pushed the boundaries of comfort. At the end of my first year at Rochester Institute of Technology in the Spring of 1999 for my final *Walk Through* I created a wall of photographs (in a double studio) which would not have a beginning, middle or end. *Figure 12* is an installation photograph from my final *Walk Through*. I also took the photographs off of the wall and hung fragments of the larger images from the ceiling. I put a fan in the studio so they would continually move and play off of the photographs on the wall. The viewer had to look through the hanging images to see the photographs on the wall. I enjoyed the playful way that the moving pieces interacted with the still photographs on the wall. The installation coincided with
my inclusion of the idea of movement within my work, specifically movement within the frame. By including motion as an element it created more excitement and dynamics between the series of photographs.

Figure 13

After my first year at Rochester Institute of Technology, I moved to New York City for the summer and interned with renowned documentary / portrait photographer Mary Ellen Mark. One of the most influential woman photographers of all time, Mark has created some of America’s most well known imagery. On the days when I was not assisting or interning I shot like a “mad thing” trying to capture something of the relationships through the gestures I observed of daily life expanding upon what I had learned during my first year. The part of relationships I was most interested in capturing was the visible aspect of people’s everyday interactions. More specifically I was interested in what we are able to casually observe, a tilt of the head, a hand on the shoulder, crossing and uncrossing legs in everyday life. I felt that all these little gestures added up to say something important not only about the people themselves but the
relationships that they find themselves in. *Figure 13* illustrates my interest in capturing the importance of body language within a relationship. When I was photographing I also became interested in the idea of personal space; or the distances between people as they move through the world. How people need this distance in order to feel secure, and feel threatened when it is challenged.

![Figure 13](image)

*Figure 14*

When I came back to Rochester for my second year in the Master of Fine Arts Program, I prepared for a show I had at the Pierce Art Gallery in West Virginia. This consisted of my *Walk Through* photographs and some work I had done in Africa. I was very excited about this show because it gave me the opportunity to show work from the second and third *Walk Through* together for the first time. *Figure 14* is an instillation photograph from my show at Pierce Art Gallery. After that show, I developed and printed the photographs that I had made during the summer and had a show in the Alumni Gallery at Rochester Institute of Technology entitled *Fragmented Evidences* which was a very appropriate title given my condition at the time, although I did not realize it.
Looking back at this body of work it is clear that I was “trying on” different styles, exploring the limits of traditional black and white photography. Because of all the information I was absorbing in the first year of graduate school I was “fragmented” as an artist. By extension, so was my work. I shot street scenes one minute and an intimate photograph of my boyfriend the next, then put them all together within one body of work. This fragmentation was an important developmental step to finding my own voice, my reason for enrolling in a Masters program in the first place, so I had succeeded. I was where I needed to be at the time. Figure 15 is just one of the many photographs that I made during this period. I was experimenting with the idea of portraits and people in their natural environments.

![Figure 15](image)

The body of work *Fragmented Evidences* represented an interest in how people interact within time and space through observing body language and non-verbal communication. I was intrigued with how reality is observed and fragmented through the camera’s lens. I became interested in the idea that photography only ever captures parts
of things, ideas, moments, gestures - but never anything in its entirety. It uses reality more as an object to be distorted than to be represented, thus giving an impression of, but never a complete understanding of the world. There was a series within this body of work that led me to my next project. It was a series of cheerleaders I took at the Greater Rochester Cheerleading Competition at the Blue Cross Arena in Rochester, New York. The photograph in figure 16 became my inspiration for my work with adolescent girls. I became very interested in the way the girls interacted with each other within the school teams. This seemed very different from other personal space boundaries I had experienced before. I noticed how the normal boundaries of space and distance did not apply to them within this context. There was definitely a strong connection and spirit between these young women. I became very interested in learning more about this age group and the important connection they were sharing with their peers.

Figure 16

During this crucial period of starting the initial work for my thesis, I continued to question my identity as an artist. Is my work relevant in the world? What am I actually
doing? What does it all mean? I tried to define what I am and what label I wanted, and what I would do with its definition and limitations. These important questions need to be asked, but not to the extent of being immobilized by fear and a sense of irrelevance. I believe the only way past this was through the photographs themselves. So, instead of stopping, I continued to work harder, took more photographs and ultimately let my photographs guide my explorations. The photograph in figure 17 taken at Beginning With Children Middle School in Williamsburg was one of the first photographs I made and inspired me to make images of the girl’s internal beauty and spirit. This difficult process has taught me the way that I work best as a photographer: backwards. I like to derive the concept after I have done some work and have seen the photographs. The photographs themselves speak to me in ways that words will never be able to.

![Figure 17](image)

Throughout this development, and as I developed Adolescent Girls, I have been greatly influenced by a number of documentary photographers. One of the most influential photographers in my life, my work in general, and Adolescent Girls is Mary Ellen Mark. Mark has influenced my work for a number of reasons including the fact
that I have spent so much time with her. Her strong presence and work ethic has had a
great influence on me. She is a woman photographer who started in a field when there
were hardly any other women working in photography. In addition, her focus on people
and portraits resonates with my own work. According to Fulton, Mark has a “great
talent, conviction, strength, and a certainty of her role in photography. The photographs
themselves always have a central theme of people. In fact you could say that the reason
she photographs at all is because of the people themselves. There is a real humanistic
edge to the way that she deals with people visually”. Fulton continues quoting Mark:
“It’s a desire to get close, discover, understand, and reveal the complex and rich
variations in individual lives that makes my work so personal” (Fulton 12).

Mark was one of the first photographers that I looked at when I was becoming
interested in photography. Her projects are deeply felt and full of conviction including:
Ward 81, Teresa of the Slums, Streetwise, Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay. She
primarily works in black and white because she thinks that, “The difficulty with color is
to go beyond the fact that it is color – to have it be not just a colorful picture but really be
a picture about something. It’s difficult. So often color gets caught up in color, and it
becomes merely decorative. Some photographers use it brilliantly to make visual
statements combining color and content; otherwise it is empty” (Mark 5). Black and
white photographs are more abstract than color, taking them one step further away from
our understanding of reality yet drawing out the essence of a scene and somehow making
it more universal. According to Fulton, “It is evident in all her work that she looks for
the universal in the particular, endeavoring to understand something basic about being
human in the lives of those in the fringes of society” (Fulton 12).
Mark’s work focuses on both people’s faces and gestures. She feels that only through photography can she gain access to people she would otherwise never meet. She likes to have a “total immersion” when she is working on a project. I agree that unless you have the intensity and passion about what you are photographing then basically you are just wasting time. She works slowly on a story idea, usually taking years between when she becomes interested in a story, to unraveling an idea through thought and research, to when she eventually takes out her camera and starts photographing, letting the idea grow in her head before the photographs are actually made. She feels that the only way that people will trust you, especially when you are engaged in a long term project, is if you are completely honest with them when you are taking their photograph.

A story researcher who has worked with her on a number of projects stated:

She has such a hypnotic way of working with people that she really captures their attention … I think it’s because she’s so intent on what she is doing that, for the moment, nothing else exists for her except taking that photograph. It’s such an overwhelming kind of commitment. She is also a very direct and honest person. She goes straight to the point. She talks about their drug problem, their addiction, their pregnancy, their unemployment, and their criminal background. She goes straight to the point, and its not garbage with her… I think she makes people feel very special. She kind of gives them the attention that many are desperate for – she is very gentle with people (Fulton 16).

I have learned a great deal from Mark’s way of interacting with people and from her photographs. In particular I have learned from her compassion that she shows toward her subjects and the dignity that she illustrates in her photographs. In contrast to Mary Ellen Mark is a young photographer, Lauren Greenfield, who also influenced my development and Adolescent Girls by her lack of insight into her subjects. Her first book, Fast Forward: Growing Up In The Shadows Of Hollywood (1997), examines the ways in which “Hollywood values” influence youth in Los Angeles. “Through her photographs,”
writes Greenfield, “she is able to reveal the realities of growing up too fast in a culture that is, at once, irresistible and unforgiving” (Greenfield 1). Her photographs are bright colors, larger than life, almost designed with an edge; they are on the surface very glamorous images about alienated youth living on the edge. In her second book, Girl Culture (2002), Greenfield tries to go beyond where her first book left off. Again she tries to “capture the essence of youth culture.” My own interests, developed through Adolescent Girls, closely match hers. According to Greenfield:

She acts as a reporter, cultural anthropologist as well as an art photographer. She provides a visual narrative of the ways in which girls, their bodies, and their psyches entwine with American popular culture. The message in this collection is about the interaction between the garish commercial culture and the psyches of ordinary girls. Her photographs consistently point to the unhappy symbiosis between the special psychological needs of adolescent girls and the superficial narcissistic content of so much of what young people see through popular media. It seems to be saying that American popular culture is especially dangerous for young girls (Greenfield 5).

I completely agree with the basic premises of her work. What I do not agree with is her choice of “ordinary” girls in both her projects. She did not choose the average or ordinary girl but either the “exceptional” or the “freak.” In fact she does not seem interested in the average girl at all; maybe it is just not sexy enough for her photographs. In one series of images she has a young model named Sahara shopping in small clothing stores in SoHo New York City, which is one of the most expensive places to shop in the world. Not many young women are able to afford the lavish lifestyle that allows them to shop in expensive stores. And not very many women, young or old, look like Sahara. It seems that Greenfield is only further propagating the myth of what the “Adolescent Girl” looks like, and what they like to do, as seen by the mass media.
Along with work by Mark and Greenfield, a project that influenced my project is *School* written by Robert Coles and photographed by Nicholas Nixon. They explore the lives of children who are attending three Boston area schools: a Cambridge elementary school, Perkins School for the Blind, and the elite Boston Latin School. The photographs and essays are about the students living and working in the school environment. I enjoyed the way that the authors separated and focused on this one aspect of the students’ lives, instead of showing a complete picture of all the students in every aspect of their daily lives. I wanted to model my project after this idea; students only in the school environment not at home. In the book Robert Coles states that, “The best kind of education takes place when we learn from one another—minds and souls touch, rather than the individual standing apart… I was witness to a human connection, built in and cemented over time… a photographer able and willing to have a heart-to-heart involvement, week after week, with youngsters in this or that schoolroom… coming together of observer and observed in the midst of conscientious ‘documentary field work’: trust given and received gratefully all the way around” (Coles 6). I agree with the premises that he raises. As photographers and researchers we have an effect on the people that we interact with. In my thesis project I wanted to acknowledge that interaction and get the students actively involved in some way. I also wanted to see how other photographers, like Nixon, were involved in schools.

Wendy Ewald has worked with school-aged children for over thirty years. “I am interested in challenging the fundamental distinctions between art and documentary photography,” writes Ewald, “and between photographer and subject” (Ewald 8). She wants her subjects to speak for themselves. This causes a directness in her work that sets
it apart from other photographers. Ewald challenges the photographer's role because, "the photographer controls the image of the person being photographed through pose, angle, exposure, position, distance. Even a candid photograph is structured no matter how loosely" (Ewald 6). She founded in Kentucky the Mountain Photography Workshop working with children between the ages of 6-14 years. She spent six years in Appalachia. She stated, "I want to make a document of my new community but my camera seemed to get in the way." So she gave students cameras and thus gave them tools and skills to document their own lives. "By handing the camera to the children she could erase a good deal of the distance between artist and subject," writes Ewald (Ewald 8). Her children are "in on the project." I wanted the students in my project to be "in on the project" too, to give them a say in what was being said about them. I did not hand my camera over to them rather I accomplished this through the editing process. They were in control of how they were seen; I only exhibited images of them that they chose of themselves. If they did not like an image of themselves I did not argue with them over the artistic relevance of the photograph. I asked them which photograph they liked better, and used that instead

The strength of Ewald’s work, however, is also its ultimate downfall. Last year when I was visiting the 2003 Photography Armory Show in New York City (the Armory Show is a very large exhibit where many galleries from all over the world have booths and show work) a few of them had "Wendy Ewald" photographs, which is understandable because she is very famous photographer. When I looked at the photographs they were not “created” or “taken” by Ewald herself but by schoolchildren. The children where not named; nowhere did it give anyone credit but Ewald. I wonder
who was making money off of the photographs being sold in these galleries. As a photographer working in this area I have a fundamental problem with this way of working. Ewald is a great photographer and artist who brought up important questions about the power between the photographer and subject. She is able to find a way to visually question this important and dynamic relationship. But to set up projects in “poor” communities advancing this concept of equal ownership only to take away the power in the end by claiming the photographs as her own both visually, by making a reputation off of them, and financially, selling them in galleries, is not solving a very complicated problem but adding to it.

Another photographer who has had an influence on my project is Bruce Davidson who worked in the same area of East Harlem where I was photographing. His project, titled East 100th Street, was only six blocks south of Heritage High School located on 106th Street in East Harlem. Davidson worked for Life magazine for a year before joining Magnum Photos, Inc, in 1958. In 1962 Davidson received a Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph the Civil Rights movement. In 1963 the Museum of Modern Art gave him a one-man exhibition that included his essays The Dwarf, Brooklyn Gang, and England. He received the first photography grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1967, which allowed him to continue photographing one block in New York City—East 100th Street. Mildred Feliciano, a resident of East 100th Street, stated about Davidson:

He came with a sincere desire to convey our desperate plight. Bruce’s pictures show the soul of our people even though we suffered in those deplorable apartments, he was able to capture the dignity and pride as well as sadness and despair. East Harlem was a different way of life compared to Manhattan below 96th Street. When we went to meetings outside of Harlem we brought Bruce photographs. I took East 100th street photographs with me to city agencies. I showed them the way we were living and what we needed. In the course of many years, we went through five mayors in order for our buildings to be rehabilitated.
Bruce’s photographs carried the message to our government and city agencies of how poor people lived. These photographs are not only historical, but they helped in the rebuilding of our community. (Davidson 10)

He photographed the project for several months in 1966. Over the course of the project he took many thousands of photographs and gave away over two thousand photographs to his subjects. He was not trying to glorify the ghetto. He used a large format camera on a tripod. “I was on the block long enough to see changes,” he wrote. “I’ve watched women’s bellies grow and I’ve seen their children being born. I’ve seen people die… that’s how you determine your time in the neighborhood. By what you saw, what you see and what has changed” (Davidson 150). The length and depth of this project influenced me. Davidson was interested in spending quality time in the community. He wanted to get to know the people and area through spending time. Also, I was impressed with the way that he interacted with the subjects in his photographs and how he is still involved in their lives today. He was an excellent example of what could be accomplished through photographs, and how you could touch people’s lives. “I was permitted to go into a life that I didn’t know, and experience it with my camera” (Davidson 159).

Another influence not only in this project but my career as well is photographer and researcher Eugene Richards. A couple of years ago I had the enormous pleasure of taking a photographic workshop with him. He is a soft-spoken, deeply-feeling photographer who is not interested in the glamour of photography, but sees it as a way of telling a story. He uses the power of photography to draw attention to people who would otherwise be overlooked. He says that he can get so close to people because they can tell he is not judgmental. He says, “My biggest problem is I’m so uninteresting that all these people forget I’m around” (Goldberg 2004).
In his book *Below The Line: Living Poor In America* (1987) Richards follows the tradition of the classic photo-documentaries that emerged from the Depression years. Through photographs and interviews it depicts the terrible poverty still existing in the United States today. This project came about because in 1986 the Consumers Union commissioned him to travel across the country to document the dimensions of American poverty. In 144 photographs and 14 essays, Richards captures the hopelessness of urban youth, the struggle of Midwestern farmers, the squalor of day-to-day existence for Mexican-American immigrants living in Texas border towns, the men and women of Shantytown on New York City’s Lower East Side, a fifteen year old Chicago girl with two children, and a Korean War Vet and ex-Green Beret living in a Boston shelter. In his book *Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue* (1994) Richards gives an in-depth look at three communities: East New York; North Philadelphia; and the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York. The startling photographs are accompanied with interviews and comments from the subjects.

Richards helped me to understand the particular tension of being a white photographer taking pictures of “black” subjects. In 1994, a black media watchdog group accused him of being a racist because he focused on black drug addicts when research shows that most drug addicts are white. He had few allies within the field of photography. Mostly he recalls that, “It was kind of a lonely year.” Goldberg explains that, “He finally met with the group’s representatives and convinced them that when he was photographing a subject like crack he just didn’t notice anyone’s color” (Goldberg). I work the same way with subjects. People have asked me why the students in my
photographs are all black and my answer would have to be the same. Because I just did not notice their color.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 18*

**The Process**

From my initial work with the cheerleaders and my research into the idea of "adolescent girls" I became interested in the age and idea of adolescent girls, especially how they are portrayed in mass media and labeled through school systems. The photograph in *figure 18* depicts a group of adolescent girls attacking one of the boys in their 7th grade class. It is an image from the beginning of the project when I was still shaping the concept of the types of things I wanted to portray in my work. It is more stereotypical of the type of images you would see in the media about this age group.

After my second year at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I moved to New York and started assisting Mary Ellen Mark. I realized when I moved that I would have to come back to Rochester to fulfill the requirements for the degree but I could not let the opportunity to work for Mary Ellen Mark pass.
I did a project at Beginning With Children, a middle school in Williamsburg where my brother was a respected English teacher. The photographs that I originally made there were used in classrooms and in discussion groups at the National Teachers Policy Institute. Figure 19 is an image they used to train teachers in their Continuing Education program. It was during this project that I had the chance to first interact with young women within a structured school environment over an extended period of time. I was completely stunned with how different the girls were to what I had seen or read about them in the media. They were positive and full of life, not the evil “bitches” out to cause trouble within the schools, as portrayed in recent books and the media. Even the documentaries I had viewed about schools did not do these girls justice. Somehow when researched or interviewed these girls were always the “victims” of bad families, communities, or societies. But when I met them, I found exactly the opposite. Most of them were very powerful, directed, and beautiful people in their own right. I started talking to the girls and visiting the school at least once a week. I had visions of how I would use their images and voices to make a statement that was more about me than anything to do with the girls.
But as I worked on the photographs, the project felt false, as if I was trying to make the girls into something that they were not. I kept going back and, even though I had trouble envisioning how I would put the project together, I started making photographs of all different kinds of girls in different places. Most of all I wanted what I learned about them to come through in the images. For example in figure 20 Tabitha is playing during recess, and figure 21 Angel is studying for a math exam.

At this point I started working at the Heritage High School located in Spanish Harlem, New York, because the vice principal there belongs to the National Teachers
Policy Institute and had seen my photographs during one of their meetings. He liked my work, and, when I approached him with my idea for the project, he liked the idea. That gave me the access that I needed to start the project. I started shooting at Heritage in the Spring of 2001 and kept shooting through that year, creating a project that focused on adolescent girls in their school environments. Though out the duration of this project I worked in both Beginning With Children and Heritage High School. Within the schools I concentrated on grades 7 to 10, and girls aged 11 to 16 years old. I decided on the age range because it seemed like the age of the most visible growth and changes within the girls themselves.

![Figure 22](image)

This photographic project lasted approximately 18 months. My schedule of visiting the schools once a week varied depending on the school calendar, and what was going on with the students. Whenever I missed a week, I would try to make the time up. I hung out with the girls during their free periods and during lunch. For example figure 22 is Monica during art class refusing Nico’s advances, and figure 23 is Jennifer and her friends in the lunchroom during a free period.
I went to class with them to witness how they behaved in the class environment. *Figure 24* is an image of a group project during English class. The girls all knew why I was making the photographs and they all agreed to have their photographs taken for the purpose of my thesis. There were a couple of girls who did not want to be photographed or included in the project, so I made sure that I did not photograph them. It is interesting that many of the girls who originally declined wanted to get involved after they saw the work prints. It is safe to assume that all the students were aware of my presence and why I was there but they did not pose for me in the traditional sense. Because of the length of the project and my involvement with the schools, I am confident that I witnessed something genuine.
It was important that they forgot that I was even in the room so I could be a "Fly-on-the-wall". The "Fly-on-the-wall" technique was originally used in documentary filmmaking when a filmmaker tried to have as little impact on an environment as possible.

![Figure 25](image)

The filmmakers tried to witness what was going on, without influencing the subjects. In recent years there has been an on going debate about the influence a photographer has on the environment by being in the room. If a researcher is introduced into an area his presence is going to change the condition of the scene. But such things as the length of time spent with the subjects can limit this initial effect. Although I had a stated agenda, only their comfort with my presence would allow me to capture as much of the individual personality of the girls as possible. For example in figure 25 Jennifer is asleep during science class. At the time that the photograph was taken she was seven months pregnant and slept during most of her classes. In figure 26 the senior girls are on a class field trip at a bowling alley in the Bronx. At the end of my project, when the teachers and students saw the photographs, they all stated that I had managed to capture
something of the girls that they knew. Somehow the images reflected something genuine about the girls at school during this crucial period of their development.

![Figure 26]

**The Photographs**

Photographs not only mirror the world but they actively communicate with the world. They are not dead or inactive, but are alive, and continually changing depending on their context, and how they are being viewed. There are continual “conversations” with photographs as they exist in the world. Through this “conversation” the photographer must be conscious of what she is communicating to the audience especially because the audience is continually changing. She must be aware of the intended or “coded” message imprinted in the photograph, especially because the space that the photograph is showing is continually changing.

Photographs can be seen any number of ways including through a publication, over the Internet, or on a gallery wall. Within each of these locations the photograph can easily be taken out of context. Even though there is a clear connection, as previously
stated, it assumes a bond between the photographer and the viewer that does not actually exist, especially in the digital age when things are even more removed.

Figure 27

I finished making this group of photographs on February 15, 2002, partially because of the time deadline for my thesis, but more important the need for definition and clarification within the work itself. The photograph in figure 27 was made during a class field trip. This image is important within the context of the project because the World Trade Center is in the background, which gives it a sense of history and timelessness. Included in the final selection were 65 black and white 11x14 prints in white mats behind glass. Ultimately I wanted the photographs and the girls to speak for themselves so the presentation was simple, with no beginning, middle, or end. All were printed the same size, 11 x 14 inches, because I wanted all to have equal importance. This would eliminate the possibility that some would be seen in this exhibit as individual images rather than part of a whole body of work. In this way I returned to my earlier exploration of the nature or property of the image within the larger context of the entire body of work.
This project is fundamentally different from the traditional documentary project because I am not trying to purely record the plight of the underprivileged or disadvantaged students in bad or evil school district. I am trying to illustrate the uniqueness of their friendships (figure 28) and their relationship with themselves (figure 29) within individual images. I am not trying to tell complete stories of individual girls. I could have chosen just one or two students and followed them throughout the school year and created a project around them, but I was not interested in creating a linear story line.
What I wanted to capture was the individuality and optimism that had struck me when I had first met the girls. Each of them has a complete story that I was not telling, but I wanted to create something small in the face of all the daily negative stereotyping of this age group. Mine is a positive statement about who they are as people. I realize that this lack of angst might be misinterpreted. Because the pictures have no “blood and guts” the photographs can come off as not deep and may not have the same impact as traditional documentary images. I also realize that as an artist and as a person I need to be strong about my core beliefs. If I lose that then I have lost everything. Because I was working with a very vulnerable age group for this project, I believed in representing the girls in the most positive light. It was important that I try not to manipulate them or the photographs in any negative way. I did this on purpose to balance the effects of a largely negative media portrayal of adolescent girls.

The Exhibitions

Figure 30
My photographic work to this time was all based on the narrative, or linear storytelling model. With *Adolescent Girls* I wanted to create an anti-narrative, in a different way from my earlier work, to take the power away from the photographer. I therefore used the exhibition space to create not a narrative but a group so that each single image would inspire the meaning. As Professor Loret Steinburg stated, it was like looking at one of my grids that I did in my *Walk Through* during the first year and exploding it across the wall so that I would have one continuous line of photographs.

![Figure 31](image)

The title of my thesis exhibition at the SPAS gallery at RIT from April 5 - April 19 2002 was a list of names that are used to describe young woman. These labels, such as “babes”, “chicks”, “chicas”, “sistas”, and “flakas”, play against the images to prove that the young women are more than the labels applied to them. *Figure 30* is an instillation photograph of the SPAS gallery. Just before the exhibition opened, after I hung the photographs, I stood back and reflected on my project in my visual diary:

As I see the photographs on the wall I have many ideas about how to expand this project. I see the work not as a completed project, like I thought I would but still as a development of what it could be. I would like to include the girls voices more. Make it an equal balance between what they say and what the photographs say. I think that is one of the biggest weaknesses of this show. I have a show in June at a gallery near the Heritage High School on 106 and Lexington. At that
show the young women are going to be involved in the planning stage right through to the opening. My goal is not only to bring attention to the young women themselves but also celebrate their style and individuality.... I also realize that as a photographer, I learn from everyone I meet and take a photograph of. The photograph I would make of you today is radically different from the one that I will make of you next week or next year. This is just a step in my development as a photographer. Not the final stage.

After my thesis show, I installed the same show in a gallery space at Heritage High School. Figure 31 is an installation photograph of the show at Heritage High School. The exhibition was hung in the lobby area of the school's main floor from May 5 – June 5, 2002. At the show's opening, the girls were there speaking about the photographs and what it was like to be a part of this project. They also spoke about the power of photography and the media and how they had to empower themselves in the face of all the negative criticism.

![Image of a girl looking into a mirror with the words "reel show aware."�](image)

*Figure 32*

The two Adolescent Girls shows varied on a number of levels including location, audience, expectations, and eventually acceptance. As previously stated in this thesis the same photograph seen in different locations by different audiences with different expectations can change the meaning of the photographs themselves. In Rochester, the audience consisted of the photographer, relatives and friends of the photographer,
professors, students, and people visiting RIT. In New York City the audience consisted of the photographer, friends and relatives of the photographer, the girls in the photographs, other students, teachers, friends and relatives of the girls in the photographs, and people visiting Heritage High School. The audience in Rochester did not know who they were looking at; the photographs held no personal significance for them. In East Harlem, New York City, the subjects in the photographs made up part of the audience. Because it is a relatively small school everyone knew the girls in the photographs which meant that the photographs held a lot of personal significance. They went beyond art images. In figure 32 Jessica is fixing her hair in the bathroom. When she saw this photograph at the opening she started to laugh she was so excited. She said “I look so beautiful don’t I look beautiful in that picture?”
At Heritage one of the teachers said “… you have actually managed to capture the girls themselves. It’s not like looking at a photograph of the girls, its like looking at the girls and how they are around school.” The Rochester feeling of the exhibition “look at them” was sharply contrasted in New York City where the feeling of the exhibition was “look at us.” In one of the photographs in the exhibition Ingred is excitedly sitting in Math class with her hand in the air (figure 33). She is waiting to be called on by the teacher. She was both shocked and happy to see the photograph. “You can tell how much I love Math in the picture,” she said. “I love being called on in math class.” Her mother loved the photograph, feeling that I had captured her daughter’s laugh.

At the SPAS Gallery the photographs were hung in a well-lit somewhat secluded gallery space in which they were interpreted as art objects. At the Heritage gallery space in which the photographs were hung in a gallery space that was directly connected to the school, so every time that students changed classrooms or entered and left the building they could see the photographs hanging on the wall. This was extremely important
because they were documents of a time and place to which the students could relate rather than objects of art to be looked at. I often heard, “I remember when you took that photograph of me...” When Angel saw the photograph of herself in the bathroom (figure 34) she told me a story of how she likes to practice kissing just to tease her friends and make them laugh. So the same group of photographs that were seen at the SPAS gallery as an entire body of work, were seen at the Heritage gallery as individual photographs. Ultimately when I conceived of the exhibition I envisioned it in a gallery space closer to the one at Heritage then the one at Rochester. This is due to the girls’ involvement in the exhibition from editing the photographs to hanging them at the Heritage gallery. This fundamental element was missing for me in Rochester. In Rochester I let the photographs speak for themselves, but the audience was confused without some form of written statement to guide them through the show. Learning from my mistake, at the Heritage show I put up an artist’s statement describing the project and the work itself.

Figure 35
Conclusion

As a society it is important to be aware of the messages we are sending through the images we are making, reproducing, and distributing of others and ourselves. It is my responsibility to be a positive influence, (figure 35) not propagate negative stereotypes about people or situations which will insure sales. That is what my project Adolescent Girls was all about. I took action against negative stereotypes by creating powerful positive images. I actively did this in several ways: through how I interacted with the girls themselves, how and what kinds of photographs I made of them, and finally in the editing process, through the photographs I chose for my show. The photographs hung in a gallery in their high school for three weeks. So the students saw them daily as they walked to their classes. As one student said to me, “I look so beautiful. I can’t believe it’s me.” Another student said how happy they were to be a part of this project. I have chosen to use my power as a photographer to positively influence the way people see themselves. The mirror I hold up will create a positive statement about people, rather than spotlight defects or abnormalities.

While involved in the project Adolescent Girls I learned many valuable lessons that I will be able to use not only in future photographic projects but also throughout life. Through the patience of the girls I believe that I have become a much better photographer, by going to the schools week-after-week and interacting with these amazing young women. Their spirit, energy, and individuality in the face of incredible obstacles is a never-ending source of encouragement for me. I learned about the documentary process itself, that the nature of the process and the human factor render it
fundamentally flawed. I learned, too, that there are no solutions to the problems that documentary photography raises especially those resulting from working cross-culturally in different communities. A hard look needs to be taken at the issues so that there can be thoughtful, intelligent discussion. Documentary photography is in fact not a predetermined predictable story with a beginning, middle, and end. Even though as artists we do have control over how we chose to tell a story, it is presumptuous of us to think that documentary work is in any way predictable, that we know the outcome of how a project will look before it happens. Documentary photography is as unpredictable as life itself. As a documentary photographer, if I know the result of my exploration before I begin, I will be shooting with an easily perceived hidden agenda that I am not interested in who they are but rather who I want them to be. I want to try and capture as much of who they are as possible because it's what motivates the documentary process in the first place; to try and understand people and the world a little better.

Through my research into what projects other photographers, both past and present, have done, I was forced to clarify in my own mind who has influenced me and why. I also learned how important the history of photography is and how that history has influenced the way that photography is perceived today, particularly within documentary photography. As indicated throughout this thesis, documentary photography is a tradition that is steeped in many controversies. As a working photographer it is very important not only to know and understand my own past but the past of the medium itself so I can intelligently move forward.

I also learned about really looking at the photographs themselves, and working to understand the ideas they convey. The photographs within a project should be strong
enough to stand alone as they will ultimately make a stronger whole. This project also
gave me the time to understand the individual strengths that I bring to my work. The
most important of which is my determination not to take advantage of someone for the
sake of making my own name, or art, or whatever I may think I need at the time. Nothing
is worth the cost of someone’s trust or dignity. Ultimately, the respect I have for my
subjects must be manifest in images which honor the trust that lies at the core of the
documentary exchange.
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