

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 12, 2006

Drowning in pictures

Filed under: [media](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:04 pm

With the recent fifth anniversary of 9/11, much has been made of this being the most documented event in history. David Friend's book "*Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11*," puts a spotlight on this onslaught of images. Friend suggests we should "take a small measure of comfort in knowing that there were thousands among us who had the poise and wherewithal to pick up cameras so that the world might witness and respond."

Two writers I admire question Friend's enthusiasm. In a [Wall Street Journal editorial](#), Richard B. Woodward writes, "The proper response to the glut of information gathered by these machines seems less clear with every anniversary. Is it helpful or even healthy to re-experience a national trauma." And in a [New York Times piece](#), Garrison Keillor writes, "in the end the images become common and one turns to words to find the reality."

While there isn't much to be done to change this tidal wave of pictures, I think it is worthwhile to consider one's role in the deluge. But perhaps this is like the wannabe parent considering overpopulation. The big picture is just too big when all you want to do is make babies.

*For more on the subject, check out [Gallery Hopper](#)

4 Comments

1. Interesting article [here](#) on how constantly revisiting 9/11 is "doing Osama's work for him".

Comment by [Dan Sumption](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [6:24 am](#)

2. It occurred to me after reading your post on the subject that this is a "tragedy of the commons" problem. The individual impulse of each photographer to record the event, a worthy impulse, is out of balance with the group need to minimize image saturation. It's a lot to ask an individual to refrain their own picture making, or, worse, leave it to the "professionals".

Comment by [Todd W.](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [8:00 am](#)

3. Absolutely Todd. And in cases like Katrina, I think the local amateur pictures are more significant than the outsider professional pictures. I know I didn't want to descend on New Orleans to make some more well-framed but uninformed pictures. 9/11 was a special case because all of the pros live there.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [8:10 am](#)

4. I think it is very important that images of these events are made, and made in great numbers, by ordinary people, and by ordinary I mean no sleight. The argument of enough is enough should only apply to those making a profit – media, really – which isn't then to say that professionals should stay clear, just that.... ah, hell, what am I trying to say here?

As historical lesson, no matter the politics attached, it is important to have the memory of such incidents fresh in the minds of all. We can't learn from history if it is hushed, buried, sanitized, etc. Frankly, the side that demands sensitivity from photographers, that seeks to do away with the imagery and focus on the healing, is really looking for help in forgetting the horrors, and that, in my opinion is as misguided as those who exploit events like WTC to goad the nation into a fight it neither needs nor can justify.

Comment by [Craig Nelson](#) — September 21, 2006 @ [9:46 am](#)