

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 13, 2006

1/500th of a second

Filed under: [Magnum, media](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:40 pm



© Thomas Hoepker

Richard Woodward pointed me to the [brewing controversy](#) surrounding this 9/11 picture by Thomas Hoepker of Magnum. The controversy was triggered by this [Frank Rich editorial](#). I emailed Thomas to get his opinion. He said he is giving it time (wise) and will probably write something for Slate.

For me this just reveals, once again, the biggest problem with photography. Photographs aren't good at telling stories. Stories require a beginning, middle and end. They require the progression of time. Photographs stop time. They are frozen. Mute. As viewers of the picture, we have no idea what those people on the waterfront are talking about.

So what are photographs good at? While they can't tell stories, they are brilliant at suggesting stories. Photographs are successful in advertising because they help suggest that if we buy X we will have the perfect lifestyle. And photographs are successful as propaganda because they can function as proof for whatever agenda someone wants to suggest.

I have no idea what is going on in that picture. And I'm pretty suspicious of anyone using it as proof of anything. You can't tell provide context in 1/500th of a second.

10 Comments

1. "While they can't tell stories, they are brilliant at suggesting stories." Well said, Alec.

Yeah, it was a sunny day. The water didn't stop being blue. The leaves didn't stop being green. People didn't stop riding bicycles, wearing sunglasses or sitting by the river. They didn't stop going outside or talking with friends and strangers.

The plume of smoke suggests/tells enough of a story.

And I can almost guarantee that these people had one of the saddest sunny days they will ever have.

Comment by [Christian](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [4:17 pm](#)

2. you've just basically indicted photojournalism. but you also seem enamored of it. this reminds me of a sebastio salgado image ... one of his famous muddy mine photos where a guy is climbing up a steep pit wall and a disembodied hand enters the frame in such a way that it looks like someone offering help, but if you see the entire image it's just the person in front of him hand flung out in mid page. i don't know how one reconciles this particular issue. i've never been able to and reading susan sontag's take on it left me feeling completely battered as a photojournalistic wannabe. but somehow in my gut i feel they do tell a story, just not a very specific one. the image above may tell us something about the many contradictions of our condition. or not.

Comment by [steph](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [5:00 pm](#)

3. i meant pace, not page. sorry.

Comment by [steph](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [5:00 pm](#)

4. Great essay, very truthful.

It is not very hard to guess what they are talking about at that moment, but somehow we wish they were not talk about what we think they should talk about it, because a picture like that give us an opportunity to blame.

Comment by [S](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [5:16 pm](#)

5. I am enamoured of photojournalism. I just think that pictures alone are very limited in what they can do. The inclusion of text or narration can help. This is why things like Magnum in Motion are meaningful:

<http://inmotion.magnumphotos.com/>

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [5:53 pm](#)

6. Certainly it says a lot about how non-new yorkers don't understand that we ride bicycles instead of drive cars, move along, it's not that strange...Had you photographed me on that day you would have seen me astride an expensive mountainbike (privelegeded!) at the Brooklyn promenade (too picturesque!) with everyone else completely not knowing what to do or say or think, but like new yorkers, willing to talk to anyone and listen. And perhaps that is the most foreign thing to those outside of the city who might see this picture and not understand-you can have conversations with strangers about important things and you don't shy away, you pay attention. But the image is very ambiguous, it is beaucolic, postcard-like, almost a lifestyle ad in collision with an enourmous tragedy. The picture "says" nothing, but does lead you to think. It also reminds me how beautiful that morining was, in a string of beautiful days, unbelievable light, and of my optimism in 2001 regarding my life and work. Yesterday almost had that light here in NY, a little more haze perhaps, close, but so far away.

Comment by [Robert Wright](#) — September 13, 2006 @ [9:46 pm](#)

7. Unreal that any court in the world would except photography as evidence. From those traffic cams to crime scene investigation, simple visual literacy would tell you all photographs unknowingly or not as crafted fictions and all too easy to dispute.

Comment by [Brian](#) — September 14, 2006 @ [7:53 am](#)

8. [...] In response to the Frank Rich/Thomas Hoepker controversy, one of the 'young' New Yorkers in the picture wrote to Slate: "A more honest conclusion might start by acknowledging just how easily a photograph can be manipulated, especially in the advancement of one's own biases or in the service of one's own career." [...]

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9. [...] One question for Thomas Hoepker The Thomas Hoepker photo debate is running wild now. Another one of the subjects of the photo has come forward. Read about it here (scroll to the bottom of the page). It turns out she is a photographer too. What are the odds? (I think this might be her work). But I don't see much need for this to go on and on. I think Thomas Hoepker was forthcoming in his response on Slate. His piece just left me with one question. In an email to Hoepker, I asked, 'Why do you think the picture was published 15 times in Germany? Do think the picture was used to propagate some idea of America' [...]

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10. A fascinating replay of this is taking place on conversation surrounding Spencer Platt's [world press winning photo](#) of young Lebanese in war torn Beirut.

Comment by [rob](#) — March 17, 2007 @ [7:29 am](#)