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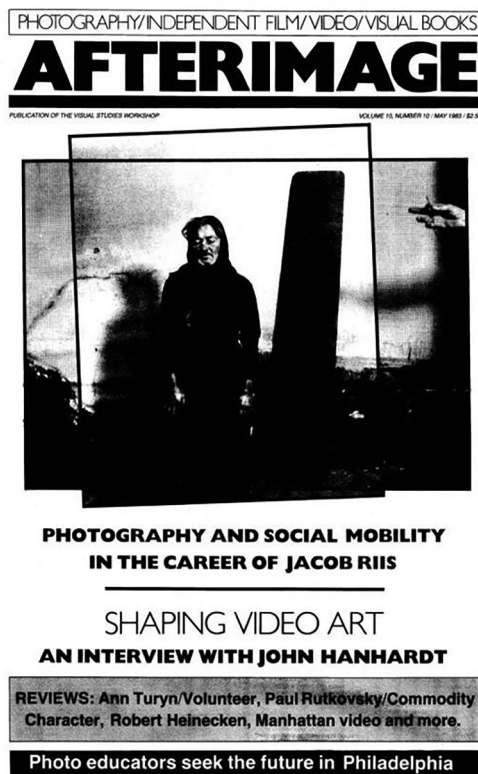
Back to the Future

Sally Stein

“Making Connections with the Camera: Photography and Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis”

Afterimage 10, no. 10 (May 1983): 9–16

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I cherish my copy of Sally Stein's essay on the life and work of Jacob Riis. I also recognize that this is an absurd sentiment—and not just because I don't own an "original." My copy is a bad copy or what some might call a "poor" copy.¹ It is a scan of a Xerox that I made by reducing, cutting, and pasting the tabloid-sized, newspaper-like journal pages into a format that would fit a copy machine. My copy is therefore not easy to read. Fortunately, my students don't seem to mind. Maybe they get it? Maybe they get that another essay on Riis's work wouldn't do—that it is necessary to read this essay, which has never been anthologized and, until recently, was not available as a "good" image.

Stein's essay is essential reading for students of American photography, though not solely because of the lessons it imparts about Riis or his photographs. It is essential because Stein's account of why the Danish carpenter-turned-journalist picked up a camera in the 1880s to record, if not produce, "the other half" is so deeply stitched into our critical histories of American documentary that not reading it would mean not being able to engage with those histories. I would go so far as to suggest that Stein's study of Riis's representation of the working classes as the "dangerous classes" in *How The Other Half Lives* (1890) gives that critical history its agenda. Simply put, Stein's insistence that Riis opted for photographs that "represented a unilateral power relationship" set the terms for the study of American documentary as a social form aligned with the state and its technologies of containment, including the urban reform measures that Riis's volume helped to inaugurate (14). The translation and expansion of Stein's definition of an act of representation that provided the middle classes with "a supremely privileged space in which to indulge [their] voyeuristic impulses" runs something like this: American documentary is a mode of work that reproduces the conditions of immiseration it seeks to represent (14).

Readers of this journal might know this definition or that I am paraphrasing a passage from Abigail Solomon-Godeau's foundational essay "Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography," which was first published in 1987. Her line about documentary's "double act of subjugation" is now gospel.² It is also attributed to Stein. "By refusing to reiterate the conventional pieties surrounding representations of the poor and marginal, and by bringing to light hidden agendas inscribed in such photography," Solomon-Godeau writes, "Stein reveals a secondary level of signification that radically questions a too-easy conflation of 'victim photography' with progressivism and reform."³ I single out this text, but the debt to Stein's writing is far from singular. I could cite numerous essays establishing Stein's account of Riis's work as the source for this (or a) definition of American documentary, as well as a springboard for writing a history of the social form's late-twentieth-century reinvention in the militant and oppositional practices of the 1970s. Notably, these discursive spaces emerged together. The emergence of a "new social documentary," as Grant Kester would call it in this

1. I am riffing on Hito Steyerl's analysis of the worn or worked copy in "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux Journal* 10 (November 2009), www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image.

2. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 176.

3. Solomon-Godeau, "Who is Speaking?," 176.

journal and with a nod to Stein's writing, required taking stock of its "earlier" or "old" form.⁴ It also, Kester notes, required the platform of journals like *Afterimage*.

Stein's essay sets this history in motion. But it does so, I would argue, despite itself. Stated differently, the writing of another history is possible, and this possibility is Stein's main concern. That Stein asks readers to consider the demands made on documentary becomes clear in the essay's closing pages, when she turns to *How the Other Half Lives*. Her account of Riis as a journalist who eventually added photography to his repertoire of techniques for assuaging the fears and stoking the fantasies of the middle classes closes with a careful dissection of the formal mechanics of Riis's frames—or at least the ones that he chose to include in that volume. The "rejects," Stein insists, are also important. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Stein notes, the working classes are not simply rendered dangerous and different. They are rendered "unconscious," if not inanimate (14). Working bodies are represented as if they are melting into the furniture or the floor. They are represented as if they are "other" than human. The Chinese "opium smokers" and "thieves" on "the Bend" are almost indivisible from the tables and chairs holding their heads and torsos. Likewise, the woman in the photograph reprinted on the cover of the May 1983 issue of *Afterimage* is as stiff, as "wooden," as the brace at her side. Cropping out the disembodied hand, as Riis did, almost makes this photograph into a double portrait. However, as Stein emphasizes, no one in the photographs that Riis chose to include in *How the Other Half Lives* is poised to "[return] the photographer's gaze" (13). This sign of agency or the presence of a person is refused, erased.

This passage of the text is stunning, and not only for its precision, its brevity, but because it is about Riis's ineptitude as a photographer. Stein ends her analysis of the photographic mechanics of subjection with the following statement: "A critical reading of the use of photography in *How the Other Half Lives* does not in the last analysis depend upon the intentionality of photographic technique. Riis, after all, was the first to admit that he was 'no good' as a photographer" (14). Few acknowledging their debt to Stein's essay quote this line—and the reasons might be obvious. It seems to concern aesthetics, not politics. Or it offers a qualification that historians of photography writing in the 1980s might have insisted was unnecessary, even retrograde or modernist. If postmodernists, including Solomon-Godeau, had killed off the author or the hand, why would it matter if Riis was "good" at photography?

For Stein, though, it is the crux of the matter, as Alexander Alland suspected and railed against in his vitriolic response to Stein's essay. In not one but two letters to the editor, Alland, the scholar who "discovered" Riis's archive and transformed his photographs into exhibition-quality prints, maligns Stein's characterization of Riis as "no good" as a photographer—or, for that matter, as a person. Counting Riis as a champion of the working classes and a "Master," Alland insists that Stein's essay "runs the gamut from the ridiculous to slime."⁵ The title given to his first letter by the journal's editors is "Ridiculous to Sublime," but slime, or mudslinging, is surely what Alland meant. Alland's

4. Grant Kester, "Toward a New Social Documentary," *Afterimage* 14, no. 8 (March 1987): 10.

5. Alexander Alland, "Ridiculous to Sublime," *Afterimage* 11, no. 3 (October 1983): 2; and Alexander Alland, "Working-Class Hero!," *Afterimage* 11, no. 5 (December 1983): 2.



Chinese Opium Joint (c. 1890) by Richard Hoe Lawrence, with Henry G. Piffard and Jacob A. Riis; courtesy the Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

rage is exciting, even a pleasure to read. It is a reminder of the contentious debates that ensued—that *Afterimage* made space for—as photography’s place in mass culture, not just the museum, came to be or needed to be recognized, again.

It also elucidates Stein’s charge—or the difference between Alland’s insistence that Riis is a “good” photographer and Stein’s suggestion that Riis is not a photographer *at all*. This is her point. It is also her opening gambit. Stein opens “Making Connections with the Camera” by accounting for the fact that Riis was not deemed a photographer until the 1940s, when Alland “discovered” his photographs. Riis, Stein notes, never presented himself as a photographer. He also hired photographers who could make “good” photographs. Likewise, his biographer “all but ignored his photographic work as one of his civic virtues” (9). “Thus far,” Stein insists,

the incorporation of Riis within the history of photography has been more than a little problematic. Perhaps the *attempt should be abandoned altogether*, for Riis’s work, combining writing and photography, seems more usefully analyzed in its totality as part of a literary tradition of the urban picturesque (10; emphasis added).

This is what Stein does. The bulk of “Making Connections with a Camera” is not about photography. It is about journalism, or about who can be made to belong—to the page, to America, to history. More to the point, it is about how belonging is made.

Riis's admission that he is "no good" allows Stein to take stock of how the history of American photography has been written such that the inclusion of Riis became a necessity. It was necessary for Riis to be a photographer, Stein suggests, so that there was a precedent for the work of the Farm Security Administration or, more pointedly, for the work of Lewis Hine. The need to conflate the work of Hine and Riis, Stein concludes, is a sign that there is a problem with established histories of photography. Her point is not simply that Hine, unlike Riis, did champion the working classes. It is that the need for "continuity" determines photography's history—or who gets to belong to it. In one of her more damning statements—damning, notably, not toward Riis but toward historians of photography—Stein explains that "the formulation of a set of historical relations asserting a community of interest and continuity of progress implicitly placed a premium on further discoveries which could fill in the gaps, cementing the construction of a coherent lineage" (9).

It is this statement that makes Stein's essay essential reading, and it is why I hold onto my copy. It acknowledges the politics of making a syllabus, of insisting on the centrality of certain texts—or "photographers"—and not others. More to the point: it makes plain that building a field of study, be it the history of photography or American documentary, means asking questions about how history is written, as well as who is doing the writing. It is never just about inclusion—of photographers, subjects, or hands. Highlighting John Szarkowski's decision to include the cropped-out hand when he reprinted the photograph of the "wooden" woman in *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (1973) is just one of the ways Stein attends to the complexities of presence and absence shaping photography and the writing of its histories. The challenge, Stein insists, is not simply to recognize the need to produce narratives of continuity or rupture. It is to recognize the willingness to let them count *as* history.

Stein's essay makes possible the writing of a history of documentary other than the one we have or that her essay initiated. It is one that switches out debates about identity or the politics of representations for those about how history has been written, so that the former concerns don't dominate or, more to the point, are not taken as historical. They aren't. This is also, as I see it, Stein's point, and the promise of her essay. It offers another beginning—and another future. Instead of starting with Riis and his photographs, with the conflation of documentary and photography, Stein asks: shouldn't we start with the assumption that the history of a cultural form is "self-contained"? (9). Getting back to this future might dislodge historical documentary from the state and the politics of containment. It doesn't *necessarily* belong there. This is just one story. Cultural forms are overdetermined, not "new" or "old," "rich" or "poor." Refusing those categories, that politics, is what makes art mobile, social. Or, at least, this is the promise of Stein's copy. ■

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