

UNDERSTANDING THINGS

By Ian Jeffrey

DOCUMENTARY CHOICES

Documentary is a broad term, and sometimes a portentous one. It often proposes that we are witnesses to its disclosures, and suggests that we are under an obligation to act, to do something about intolerable situations and to bring peace on earth. For the most part we are not in a position to do anything constructive, and are reminded that we are powerless and ineffectual. But there are other kinds of documentary and other ways of understanding it too. Some documentarists — not many admittedly — simply report on everyday work and life, and from their pictures we can learn how things are done. Empirical documentary enlightens us up to a point, but more importantly it accustoms us to a way of seeing. Look at a scene for long enough and you will begin to understand what goes on in it, and why things are carried out in the way they are. Photographs, that is to say, can introduce us to a practice of observation, and this is what Pedro Letria does in this set of images.

The images on show have something to do with work and with everyday life, but not a lot and certainly not enough to qualify the book as a survey with documentary credentials. Instead they introduce us to another kind of work more often associated with literature, and with poetry in particular. Poetry involves itself with possibilities in language and asks us to reflect on what we know, and the more subliminal that knowledge is the better the poem will be. Photographs invoke language, although usually in quite unproblematic ways, touching on the identity of things, on their use and placing. Visual poetics, as practised by some photographers, makes far more substantial demands on our analytical powers. Why this image, for instance, rather than that? Why this image at all, and if so why in this context or sequence? Nor is it simply a matter of finding a verbal equivalent for the image, for photographs are just as likely to resist as to welcome interpretation. Artlessness, as you see it in Niépce's early attempts on roofs or in Kodak's snapshots of nearly nothing from the 1890s, is itself a great stimulus to the poetic tendency.

SPACE AND TIME

If this book is to be understood as visual poetry how does it take effect? First of all it has to be admitted that there are certain preconditions in photography, concerning space and time in particular. Any photograph of a space, such as Niépce's rooftop scene, involves us in an act of orientation — it is a requirement. In some cases, where there is no ambiguity and where the space is clearly delineated, there are no problems and no anxieties but elsewhere, and especially in monochrome, we have to make an effort. Then

in detailed renderings of landscape we are asked when approximately the picture was taken, in which season and at which time of day — another requirement which we accept as a matter of routine when looking at landscape pictures especially. A third need, evident in front of mixed scenes with figures in a setting, is to know what is and has been going on. Time, space and events can be managed and inflected by the photographer but never completely, and it is this surplus which is particular to photography and which constitutes its nature. Try to expunge the surplus and you will be left with a studio work which will feature no more than the artist's intention. Give the surplus free rein and you will be left with pure contingency. The knack is to work somewhere in between, allowing the surplus to impinge and to make its own remarks without monopolising the conversation. Thus the artist negotiates with everything that is, asking for restraint and hoping for a hearing or just for an opportunity to make a remark.

A SERIES OF EMBLEMS

This is the state of affairs in which Pedro Letria operates. He opens his account with three photographs of greyhounds — in effect portraits. In Britain, where the pictures were taken, greyhounds are bred for racing, pursuing an electric hare around an oval track. Enthusiasts bet on the outcome of the races and after a short career the dogs are either retired or put down — as the English euphemism has it. These dogs have collars and discs, so they retain their identity in their retirement home — but the discs suggest that they are not exactly much loved domestic pets. The wooden wall around their compound is topped by security wires, perhaps to keep the dogs from escaping. The creatures themselves look very sensitive and delicate, and if you look carefully you can see the curious jointing on their front legs. In a note the photographer remarks on their being like contemporary bureaucratic specialists who lead working lives which are both intense and brief. If this is the photographer's intention then the pictures can be understood as emblems.

Emblems — from the Greek word for a moveable ornament or a thing put on — are quite rare in photography, which has always been disposed towards symbols because of their more intuited nature. But if the dogs really are to be thought of as emblems then the whole formula has to be changed. Emblems are, of course, archaic, mostly associated with the seventeenth century, and seen as entailing no more than a simple conjunction of image and meaning. In reality emblematic images contain two or three images juxtaposed along with a motto; and they are deliberately hard to work out, the better to stimulate reflection. Sometimes, in a seventeenth century emblem room, series of interconnecting pictures were installed, bearing on such themes as mortality, greed, pride and vanity. To read such pictures it was important to know something about the iconographic nature of the bees, ants and hawks which recur, and to have some foreknowledge of the themes. To interpret a series of emblems profitably a reader would have to draw on a wide cultural and ethical background. So, one of the effects of using emblems in photography would be to reinstate intentions and to give these intentions a solid cultural legitimacy.

The problem with the symbolist alternative, as you see it in the photography of the 1950s and '60s, is that it was strenuous. A photographer practising poetic reportage had ideally to intuit the state of a particular society and to give that intuition shape. It was a nearly impossible task which might entail years on the road and require sustained good judgement if you were to avoid specifics on the one hand and vacuities on the other. Fundamentally it was a reactive aesthetic whose exponents had to conduct searches always uncertain of what they might find. Audiences too could only intuit the rightness and relevance of photographers' finds in that period.

One consequence of the set of dogs which open the series is that they alert us to the possibility of an emblematic reading of everything which follows. Pedro Letria supports the idea quite openly from time to time. After the dogs he investigates a mortuary in the Lisbon Institute of Legal Medicine. It is hard to imagine most photographers gaining access to such a place but he succeeded because he told the authorities that he was 'doing a project on the end of things'. Maybe they understood his request theologically as having something to do with 'the last things': death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Detailed pictures of a mortuary might be interesting sociologically, but probably not; introduce the idea of 'death', though, stripped of its specifics and we will become very interested indeed, especially in the context of Judgement and of options in the hereafter. Death in all its aspects will give us enough food for thought regarding the conduct of life, and it will also accustom us to thinking of the remaining pictures in terms of themes and of how they might be interpreted in the culture at large.

Once that idea of the emblem has been established almost any image becomes permissible, for the conceptual framework is in place. Why on earth, for example, should the series include a picture of an injured football player on a treatment table in a dressing room at Braga. That quasi-medical furniture along with Dexion shelving and other temporary fittings — such as the trolleys in the mortuary — have a place in contemporary iconographic schemes, at least from the time of the painter Francis Bacon. But it is only possible to guess at such schemes for they change shape and contents imperceptibly. Perhaps this and another picture of the edge of the ground at a Benfica v. Porto match represent a search for symptoms. The photographer notes that under new arrangements at the Benfica stadium metal fences and moats have been dispensed with and that fans are now fined if they trespass on the pitch. In any other more empirical context I would just pass on to look idly at other pictures but here, with the emblematic sanction in place, there is no choice but to stop and to consult the taxonomy.

Pedro Letria's procedure is to invoke expectations and then to cite outcomes. The Benfica stadium picture refers to what we know of football whereas the disconsolate casualty in Braga represents an outcome. The mortuary photographs in Lisbon represent one of the greatest outcomes of all in unbearably graphic detail, which invites us to consider death in general rather than to persist with the pathologists. Sometimes the interplay around expectation is quite elaborate. In one picture he meets three men in an Indian police station, one of them being a chief of police to whom he had been asked by a friend to take a gift of Panatellas, in return for a service rendered. The chief of police checked the donor's name in his prison records and then remarked that he was himself

new to the job. It is a believable story, for the grateful donor might have been a prisoner- and policemen, like the rest of us, change jobs.

Facing the group portrait in the police station is an even more puzzling scene from Diu in India. Would anyone conscious of the possibilities of photography bring such a picture back from a long journey and print it? He notes that the image above the door is an embodiment of Portugal and that the woman to the right, whom he described as a 'a lady in waiting', invited him in and spoke Portuguese. There was a breeze through the house, moving the curtains as you can see — a sort of minor epiphany. Thus although he invokes India and Portugal, both great ideas in their way, it is the chance meeting which matters — no more consequential, in the long run, than that breeze which lifts the curtains. You could, if you tried, find words for both of these events, and even draw lessons from them. The encounter with the chief of police implies that life goes on much as before, even with new personnel; and the encounter with 'the lady in waiting' remarks on the pleasure of speaking your language to someone who understands it. This is exactly the kind of ethical terrain in which emblems customarily operate; and it is also the habitat of wisdom literature, whose maxims and observations so often point to the solace to be had from appreciating what actually happens- the 'courtesy' of the police chief, for example.

The emblem format, deploying phased disclosures, allows the photographer to tell the kind of elusive stories which he relishes. Take the Congo, for example, which he visited in 2005. The Congo has for a long time been associated with misfortune and travelling in it correspondents might come across the kind of adventures re-told by Ryszard Kapuscinski in *The Soccer War* (1990). The Congo of legend is a starting point open to us all, but the account given here bears no relation to these expectations. There is, for instance, the relatively tidy office of a lumber company in Bandundu Province (to the east of Kinshasa). Nearby a trio of maintenance engineers operate some ancient milling equipment. They look studious, even professorial, and overleaf milled wood stands in neat piles. This is hardly the Congo we expect, and maybe not even the one which Pedro Letria had in mind when he set out, for in a note he remarks on 'the urgency of being in a context where the extreme of depravity, plundering and suffering had succeeded to previously unknown and unhindered levels'.

In one picture from the lumber-mill wage clerks bundle up banknotes at a table, in a scene which reminds him of Cézanne's card players. Then at a hospital in the town of Nioki, also in Bandundu province, he takes even more elegant pictures of hospital staff in their settings, one of which even makes him think of Flemish painting — Vermeer in particular, I would say. With reference to Nioki he mentions 'colonial memories', as if he can't lay the 'real' Congo aside. What the pictures say, however, is something different: that the aesthetic of Cézanne, Vermeer and the rest, lodged deep in consciousness, cannot be denied. The Congo pictures stage a contradiction: what we know on hearsay on the one side, and on the other what is there to be seen, even if it is to be mediated by the best aesthetic models available.

The emblem format, introduced at the outset and often re-visited, insists on naming and the weighing of likely and possible meanings. There is one almost inexplicable picture of four people seated on a river bank in the Algarve facing Spain (on the river Guadiana, it must be). The two men to the left wear caps and concentrate on a picnic arranged on the stone parapet; two younger people sit slightly apart, perhaps in conversation. Henri Cartier-Bresson once took a famous picture of a picnic on the banks of the river Marne, with two men, two women and two boats, and there may be a connection. If the four here are on the major river looking towards Spain they are also on a boundary line, and there are such lines in nearby pictures: two plastic strips in red and white at a police pistol range, the partly supervised boundary at the Benfica football pitch and a chalk line, off stage, which the murderer in the decorated bedroom is not allowed to cross. Boundaries, both real and imagined, are worth thinking about for we are often up against them. Why then does Pedro Letria pair the Algarve picnic with a portrait of Álvaro Cunhal, the veteran Portuguese communist? He appears as an individual, and in this respect is differentiated from the four on the riverbank who may represent youth and a more prudent middle age. Thus the photographer may be making distinctions and devising a scheme: another idea which has to be entertained.

Shown in other contexts these pictures might not be so insistent, but after the introductory sets there is no avoiding the search for meaning. The search may not always be conclusive, but it does result both in a scrutiny of the picture and of the mind beholding. The possibilities have to be considered. The dead eels in the Algarve are beginning to smell, I wouldn't wonder, and they are watery creatures too, in contrast to the desiccated gorilla displayed on the shelf. The gorilla has been preserved, and the eels are well on the way to decay. The gorilla is a mammal, from the Latin term for a milk-secreting breast, and eels are rather harder to classify, for they are not exactly fish. There is enough material everywhere to remind us of all those schemes by which we make sense of things; or we are reminded that such schemes exist. In Bosnia, for instance, in the Serb sector you will come across a surgery managed by a Bulgarian doctor. The Madonna and Child on the wall are a reminder that it is an Orthodox Christian sector; and the roasted pig opposite is a remark on the dietary differences between Christians and Moslems. Or it may just be the photographer's way of noting a transition from theology to cultural practice, from the world of beliefs to that of touch and taste.

In the history of the medium there is nothing quite like Mármore, nothing with its epistemological range. It is true that it is to some degree a report on the state of the world, but it is to an even greater degree an invitation to us to try to understand just how to relate to everything that is.