

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

Review of the Exhibition *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing*

Author(s): Jessica Lana Houlihan

Email: jhouli@essex.ac.uk

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 97-101.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/157>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v3i1.157>

© Jessica Lana Houlihan

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Brief Encounters is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>.

In association with

Review of the Exhibition *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing*

Jessica Lana Houlihan

Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing, 22 June–2 September 2018, Barbican Art Gallery, London.

‘The camera is an instrument that teaches people to see without a camera’.¹ Dorothea Lange’s words reverberate throughout the Barbican exhibition, the first survey of her work ever to be displayed in the UK. Lange was a pioneer of documentary photography who used her craft to advocate for social justice, and has continued to garner acclaim for the personal, empathetic and often devastating nature of her work. The images she produced for the Farm Security Association (FSA) in many ways came to define the Dust Bowl years in the public imagination, and her most famous piece, *Migrant Mother* (1936), would later become one of the most recognisable photographs in American history.² *The Politics of Seeing* opens with the contention that Lange’s wider work has been largely ‘overshadowed’ by the notoriety of this particular image, and so seeks to ‘redress this imbalance and reposition Lange as a critical voice in twentieth-century photography’.³ It succeeds in doing just that; with the scope of work on display and its inter-dispersal of personal and cultural artefacts, the exhibition provides a rich and comprehensive narrativization of her life and career.

The curatorial choices are simple but effective, largely following the chronology of Lange’s working life. Expectedly, the rooms dedicated to the ‘Depression Years’ and the ‘American Exodus’ — Lange’s magnum opus — are a focal point, and there is even a small room dedicated to photographs from the *Migrant Mother* shoot. That said, it does a remarkable job of showcasing the merit of Lange’s wider corpus, and each room offers a differing glimpse at her genius while retaining her characteristic style.

¹ Dorothea Lange, cited in Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer’s Life* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000 [1978]), p. vii.

² *Migrant Mother* may have become Lange’s most recognisable image, but it is somewhat atypical in terms of her usual creative and working practice. It was taken following a rare striation from her schedule when, driving home after a long shoot, she happened across a sign for the Pea Pickers Camp at Nipomo. According to Linda Gordon, Lange abbreviated her usual conversations with her subjects. The image has been revered and frequently replicated as a symbol of American stoicism and ‘White Motherhood’, despite the fact that the subject, Florence Owens Thompson, was in fact of Cherokee heritage. For further discussion, see Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009), pp. 235-236.

³ Information placards from *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing* [exhibition] (Barbican Art Gallery, London: 22 June–2 September 2018).

There is an interestingly cyclical quality to the collection, which begins with a selection of her early — and largely unknown — work in a high-end San Francisco portrait studio. The devastating impact of the Great Depression would later compel Lange to turn her camera lens outward, to document increasing poverty, displacement and homelessness in California. The exhibition reveals how this political impetus continued to define her work; from her iconic photographs of migrant farmers in the Midwest, to black sharecroppers in the Deep South, and Japanese Americans held in internment camps during the Second World War. At its close, we see Lange return to capture ‘The New California’ of the 1950s, this time afflicted not by economic stagnation and decay, but by the ravages of expansionism and rising consumer culture.

The FSA photographers were commissioned by the Roosevelt administration to record conditions faced by farmers, and to thereby assist in the introduction of reform and relief programs. Lange’s decision to foreground the farming families themselves, (rather than present a more clinical documentary of the landscape), broke new ground, and her unflinching, close-up gaze revealed an ability to simultaneously convey the depths of both human dignity and despair. Whilst the human experience is almost always at the forefront of Lange’s work, she also displays a particular talent for capturing small, seemingly insignificant details and rendering them with a searing intensity. Such images include a broken windmill, mended stockings, and the work-worn hand of a labourer gently clasping a hat, among others.

We must pause for a moment here to consider the significance of the FSA project as a federal appointment. While the adage that ‘all art is political’ is one to which many scholars subscribe, we rarely see examples of artistic modes and practices being endorsed by, and utilised within, the political establishment. Indeed, in recent years we have become accustomed to a political culture that is increasingly hostile towards the arts, particularly in the US, where the Trump Administration has pledged to terminate all funding to the National Endowment for the Arts.⁴ Lange’s work therefore serves as an important reminder of the political capital of artistic representation, its potential to impact and shape social policy, and its ability to bridge the gap between lived experience and political abstraction. When

⁴ Americans for the Arts, ‘National Endowment for the Arts Update: Trump FY2018 Budget Proposal Calls for Elimination of NEA Funding’ <<https://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/arts-mobilization-center/national-endowment-for-the-arts-update-trump-fy2018-budget-proposal-calls-for-elimination-of-nea>> [accessed November 2018].

photographs from Lange's *Migrant Mother* shoot were published by the *San Francisco News*, for example, an estimated \$200,000 worth of donations were sent to the Pea Pickers Camp at Nipomo.⁵

The exhibition also includes federally commissioned photographs documenting the mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans in 1942. Following the attack on Pearl Harbour, and amid a climate of war hysteria and entrenched racial prejudice, Roosevelt established the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which oversaw the forced relocation of thousands of Japanese Americans. The WRA hired Lange, an ally of the Roosevelt administration, to document the implementation of this program. This was presumably intended as a safeguard against allegations of mistreatment, as well as an attempt to control the historical record. In this vein, Lange was given stringent guidelines to follow, particularly at the long-term concentration camp of Manzanar, wherein she was forbidden to photograph barbed wire, watch towers, or armed soldiers.⁶

Whereas Lange's work for the FSA revealed the plight of 'fellow Americans' and constituted a call for unity and support in a time of national crisis, her photographs for the WRA expose the conditionality and exclusions of this Americanism, and its reliance upon cruel policies of racial othering in pursuit of a cohesive nationalism. It is clear that Lange's photographic composition invited vehement critique of the programme, and radically rejected the ideological interests of the WRA. This rejection is apparent in her use of stark juxtapositions, including the image of an American flag flying above the desolate landscape of the Manzanar barracks, and her characteristic insistence on capturing the humanity of her subjects in the face of dehumanisation. As a result, the photographs were suppressed and censored for the duration of the war, and discretely filed in the National Archives without publication.⁷

As its title suggests, the collection also acknowledges the fraught politics of artistic representation within a documentary context. At various points in the exhibition we are reminded of Lange's own attempts to reconcile such concerns. Throughout her work she was discomforted by the disparity between her privileged position as a waged photographer, and the often-impooverished situation of her subjects. An

⁵ Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*, p. 237.

⁶ Linda Gordon, 'Dorothea Lange Photographs the Japanese American Internment', in *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*, ed. by Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okhiro (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), pp. 5-45 (p. 20).

⁷ Gordon, 'Dorothea Lange Photographs', pp. 5-6.

FSA expenses sheet is displayed alongside a personal account from Lange, and we bear witness to her disgust with fellow photographers for their consumption of expensive and elaborate meals, which often cost more than a week's worth of wages for the migrant workers. Moreover, implicit ethical questions are raised when works such as Lange's are subjected to artistic status, particularly given the circumstances in which such images were taken, and the suffering they depict.⁸ Lange is also self-reflective on this account: in one room, a 1965 two-part documentary film by Philip Greene, Robert Katz and Richard Moore is screened, wherein Lange articulates her belief in the 'responsibility of the photographer to the outside world' and the need for photographic beauty to be seen as 'a by-product rather than a goal'.⁹

Roy Striker, who headed up the FSA photography project, described the intent of the exhibition as being to 'introduce America to Americans'.¹⁰ Away from the mythic nostalgia and retrograde historicism that have come to define the Trump Era, the collective body of Lange's work on display at the Barbican presents us with a necessarily complicated picture of America, one revealing its embedded structures of racial and economic inequality, and emphasising such repercussive themes as migration, displacement, social injustice, and incarceration. Lange's vision, commitment, and, perhaps most importantly, her compassion, distinguished her contribution in the FSA, and helped define a new praxis in documentary photography. Yet, there is more than a legacy of compassion to be derived from her work in a contemporary context; there is also a rejection of apathy, a compulsion to challenge and rewrite prevailing narratives, and an affirmation of the power of art to enact radical political change.

⁸ This tension brought Lange's work under scrutiny in 1959, when Florence Owens Thompson complained about the publication of the *Migrant Mother* images after seeing them printed in *US Camera*. She claimed that Lange had failed to send her copies of the images as promised and had assured her that the photographs would never be published. Gordon suggests that these claims are understandable, but dubious, as Lange knew the images were in the public domain, and FSA protocol dictated that photographers should not record their subject's names. Thompson's complaint was later withdrawn, and her daughters went on to speak favourably of the images. For further discussion, see Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*, pp. 240-242.

⁹ *Under the Trees*, dir. by Philip Greene, Robert Katz and Richard Moore (KQED Film, 1965) <<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/191509>> [accessed 21 January 2019].

¹⁰ Roy Striker, cited in Gabriel Bauret, 'Testimony or Instrument of Propaganda: What is the Role of Photography', in *The Bitter Years: The Farm Security Administration Photographs Through the Eyes of Edward Steichen*, ed. by Françoise Poos (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), pp. 21-28 (p. 22).

Bibliography

- Americans for the Arts, 'National Endowment for the Arts Update: Trump FY2018 Budget Proposal Calls for Elimination of NEA Funding' <<https://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/arts-mobilization-center/national-endowment-for-the-arts-update-trump-fy2018-budget-proposal-calls-for-elimination-of-nea>> [accessed 1 November 2018]
- Bauret, Gabriel, 'Testimony or Instrument of Propaganda: What is the Role of Photography?', in *The Bitter Years: The Farm Security Administration Photographs Through the Eyes of Edward Steichen*, ed. by Françoise Poos (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), pp. 21-28
- Gordon, Linda, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009)
- , and Gary Y. Okhiro (eds.), *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006)
- Meltzer, Milton, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000 [1978])
- Under the Trees*, dir. by Philip Greene, Robert Katz and Richard Moore (KQED Film, 1965) <<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/191509>> [accessed 21 January 2019]

Copyright © Jessica Lana Houlihan 2019