

Address at the Official Opening of MoP 4
Andrew Lamprecht

As I am sure we are all aware, the word photography derives from two Greek words meaning ‘writing with light’. Now the bit about ‘light’ seems straightforward enough. Light is, after all, integral to photography and its processes, even if so many of them take place in the dark (at least as far as traditional photography is concerned). But this root ‘writing’ seems altogether somewhat less obvious and unintuitive and worthy of further consideration.

I think it’s no co-incidence that documentary photography works so well with text. Whether it’s David Goldblatt’s work accompanying a text by Nadine Gordimer or an image by a member of the ‘Bang Bang Club’ next to a piece of newspaper journalism, documentary usually seems to be at home in the environment of words even if, as so often is the case, the images speak of that which words cannot express. In the cases of those who documented the atrocities as well as the banalities of Apartheid, and those who document the vengeful legacy of that system, it strikes me that what best describes what they do is – indeed – to write. A photograph here becomes a summons, an injunction, a call to activism, an indictment, or a testimony. In this sense then the photographer has written what the most capable wordsmith could never accomplish and presented it in a grammar that all who have eyes can read.

It is interesting that some key terms in photography borrow their usage from the vocabulary of writing: ‘to edit’ and ‘to compose’. (Perhaps ‘to frame’ hints at shared parentage with the visual arts too.)

The photographer, especially the documentary photographer, records. Rather than following the example of the stenographer who takes down verbatim what is heard, I see these photographers rather like the good note-taker, occasionally abridging, paraphrasing or deleting, all the better to get at the essence of what is being presented.

If all I have said is true of the documentary photographer then how much more so does it apply to those that take on the mantle ‘art photographer’? For in their case the same holds but here artistry is used either to refashion the direct public statement into a new text or to précis a verbose catalogue to its essence and so reveal that which would otherwise have been drowned in a sea of excess. Perhaps it is this writerliness that gives photography its unique power as well as its charm. Just as the words in a dictionary can be endlessly rearranged to make meaning or – indeed – nonsense; so too can photography elucidate or confound.

It may be worth remembering that in 1979 the French photographer Lucien Clergue (someone who pre-eminently brought ‘art photography’ and ‘documentary’ seamlessly together) was uniquely awarded a doctorate (cum laude) from the University of Provence, Marseilles, for a wordless dissertation that consisted only of photographic images. His supervisor, the great theorist Roland Barthes, argued that his dissertation ‘The Language of the Sands’ was indeed ‘written in light’ and therefore needed no further substantiating text. Alas, Barthes died in the following year, shortly after completing his masterpiece on the subject of photography, *Camera Lucida*, and his progressive example appears never to have been repeated.

What we are dealing with then is the literature of light: not just narrative, but text and its substance made real through illumination. And with that illumination the shedding of light on places that have hitherto been dark or into spaces which we have dared not look, fearing them. This is photography's genius: forcing us to read the signs that photographers have seen in the lens and exposed to our view; the writing that they have compiled and arranged and brought to our attention. Once read, they cannot be unread; we cannot say 'I did not know'.

I guess what I am arguing then is for us to approach the photographs around us less in the all-too-familiar (and all too easy) mode of 'images' but rather as 'literature in light': grand narratives, brief anecdotes, sublime poems, dramatic dramas and yes, even, as daylight horror stories. This is not to add a new (and doubtlessly less desired) label on the photographers here: that of author; but rather to show that photography (perhaps solely among the visual expressions known to us) adapts to as much as it resists classifications that may be fostered upon it. Of course photography **can** be art but, I would argue, it is always a sort of writing, not automatic but controlled and mastered by the specialist to great effect, be that effect pleasure or pain.

But pleasure it undoubtedly is when we have a gathering such as this; surrounded not just by great photographs but also by the great photographers who have come here to celebrate this launch.

Thus, although this event marks the opening of the 4th Month of Photography as a whole let me move on to say a few words about the three exhibitions presented to us tonight.

'Then and Now', collected by the Senior Curator for the Centre for curating the Archive at UCT, Paul Weinberg, offers a chronicle or even 'national history' of South Africa's transition to Democracy. Here we have the annals of inter-nicene warfare that should never have had to take place; of colonization; of oppression and ultimate victory and reconciliation. Even so, the scars left are visible, even as the dance of joy and freedom begins.

Following the old chroniclers I think some of these photographers may well preface their writings with a formula like this: 'Though at times it pains me to do so, here I give an account as faithful as my skill allows of all that I saw and heard of those times; both good and bad.'

Nonetheless this is a chronicle that offers rich promise for the future as well as dire warnings against those who choose not to take heed of them. And how dare we fail to read when written with such skill and composure: a model for generations to come. And as is appropriate to this theme, here we find a beautiful dedication to those who have passed on in service of this great endeavor.

From the masters of their craft we move to those just setting out on their journey in 'Emergence and Emergency' which is curated by Jenny Altschuler. Here the script is different, even as it draws at times upon the style and subject of 'Then and Now'. Here the chief concerns seem to be directed at stereotyping, othering, self-othering, identity and race as well as the ever-looming legacy of the accusatory landscape. Perhaps in these youthful jottings we see a freedom from the desire to convince us that what we see is real and rather a recognition of construction and misconstrual in everyday life.

The nature of photographic writing is analyzed in 'Construct' curated by Heidi Erdmann. This script may at first seem a bit puzzling after what has gone before, but as our eyes adjust to it we can see that it is, perhaps, akin to mirror writing. The photograph is made to write back to itself. The self-conscious fictionality of much of the work here and the imaginative use of new strategies and techniques cause us to question the very fundamentals of what I have been arguing for so far: that photography is writing with light. But I think that what we are seeing here is the deft bending of our assumptions of the medium and in some ways I feel that this exhibition, with its seeming embrace of fictionality and construct, is gently brushing against the canonicity of 'Then and Now', just as Walter Benjamin said that he wished to brush against the grain of history. And yet for all this all three exhibitions are intrinsically tied to their place of origin and the history of that place. The same refrains repeat, the same combinations of letters, forms and space. All are contained within the same margins and rule.

And so then what I would propose is happening when we look around these three exhibitions and the broader context of the Month of Photography is not an assemblage of images but rather an interweaving of scripts traced out in light and all that light brings with it. And what is that? May I suggest you look at the photographers' works on display and read the writings on the wall.