

Introduction

John F. Bukowczyk

In 1976, Bruce Harkness, a college kid from semirural Brighton, Michigan, discovered America. Of course, when Bruce, as a photography student, began wandering the streets of Detroit with his camera, Detroit—and, more particularly, his urban piece of it—was not lost, except insofar as all of America’s Rust Belt cities and neighborhoods were lost in the late twentieth century. But for Bruce, new to the city and to its streetscapes, it was a New World, and there he also discovered his socially conscious—some now would say “woke”—artistic self that became and has remained the heart and soul of his work in documentary photography.

Bruce was born in 1953, the fourth son of a Canadian-born father, a tradesman of decidedly progressive political sensibilities, and a Hoosier mother who was, as Bruce described her, “smart and strong-willed.” Bruce’s nondescript, exurban, small-town upbringing perhaps attuned him to an appreciation for his natural surroundings, and natural elements, in understated ways, run through many of Bruce’s photographs. It is hard to divine what influences endowed him with a natural sympathy for ordinary people, heroic and dignified amid their own private, anonymous, personal struggles. Bruce attributed it to just something in his nature.

After short stints at Michigan State University and Oakland Community College, Bruce enrolled at the Center for Creative

Studies—College of Art and Design (CCS) in 1974,¹ and study there channeled his social and artistic sensibilities. Under the mentorship of several CCS faculty,² Bruce encountered the work of Jacob Riis, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, Diane Arbus, Roy DeCarava, and the Farm Security Administration photographers and developed an interest in social documentary and urban street photography. “I was not apprehensive about exploring the city on my own during those years,” Bruce remarked. It was during this time that he engaged in two years of intermittent photographic work at the Niagara Apartments, a run-down apartment building in the Cass Corridor that was a last stop for many down-and-out Detroiters who made up a portion of that Rust Belt city’s destitute underclass.³

Bruce graduated from CCS in 1978. In 1981, uninterested in either commercial photography or photojournalism and without a clear career direction, he entered the MFA program in photography at Wayne State University. During the first year in the program and upon the suggestion of Nick Valenti,⁴ a student colleague, Bruce and Valenti photographed in the Poletown area of Detroit, that portion of Detroit’s old east side that was selected for demolition to make room for the new Central Industrial Park, which would house General Motors’ new Cadillac assembly (Poletown) plant.⁵ Bruce made ninety visits to the area

between February and November 1981, documenting homes, street scenes, and the process of demolition. In 1982, Bruce photographed in the Woodbridge area of the city and along Grand River Avenue heading downtown, west of the Wayne State campus, where Bruce was now living. This combined work became the basis for Bruce's final review in the Wayne State MFA program, and he was awarded the degree in 1982.

From 1983 to 1986, Bruce served as a part-time instructor of photography at Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn, Michigan, teaching introductory courses in black-and-white photography, his specialty, and also working as a black-and-white darkroom technician in several Detroit commercial photography studios. During this time, Bruce met Bill Schwab, who later became the photographer for the City of Dearborn. After Schwab left the city job (after five years) and Bruce had moved from Detroit to Dearborn, Bruce was appointed to the same position, one he held for twenty years, until 2010, when he retired.

It was while Bruce was still living in Detroit that I met him. I was then an assistant professor of history at Wayne State University and was advising a doctoral student whose daughter, photographer Carla Anderson, had attended CCS with Bruce. Through Carla, we became acquainted. As a specialist in Polish American history working on a study of Poletown,⁶ I was interested in Bruce's Poletown work, so we teamed up to mount an exhibition of Bruce's photographs at the Purdy/Kresge Library on the Wayne State campus in 1986.⁷ Shortly thereafter I proposed to Bruce that we collaborate on a large oral history and documentary photography project on Detroit's east side. From 1987 to 1990, under the auspices of what we called the Urban Interiors Project, Bruce photographed neighborhood residents in their homes and we both conducted interviews with them.⁸

Since the 1970s, Bruce has shown work from these and other smaller photographic studies at numerous venues throughout metropolitan Detroit, including in several one-person shows. But after he started working full-time in 1990, there was little time left for urban street photography. Nonetheless, Bruce did produce a vast body of "official work" during these years while in the employ of the City of Dearborn and has continued to take pictures on his own, including in Detroit's Brush

Park area, in the Zone Coffee House near the former Dearborn City Hall, and in various blues venues in and around Detroit. Bruce's photographs in the Arab American community in Greater Detroit appeared in exhibitions at the National Museum of American History (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, DC (1995), and at the Michigan State University Museum in East Lansing (1998).⁹ In addition to supplying individual photographs for various publications, Bruce also provided all of the photographs for two book projects. The first of these was Lois Johnson and Margaret Thomas's *Detroit's Eastern Market: A Farmers Market Shopping and Cooking Guide*.¹⁰ The second was L. Glenn O'Kray's *Before Fair Lane: Historic Houses from Henry Ford's Hometown, Dearborn, Michigan (1832–1916)*, which won a Historical Society of Michigan State History Award in 2018. The photos in both books, but especially those in *Detroit's Eastern Market*, were still street photography of a sort. But wandering the streets and snapping photographs Bruce has, for the most part, left behind.¹¹

Some may accuse documentary photographers of being exploiters. They take and commodify images of their subjects, turning subjects into objects and in the process stealing their privacy and portions of their lives. The moral ambiguities in the relationship between photographer and subject/object, particularly when that photographer sometimes befriends his subjects while claiming a social consciousness, create perplexing moral and ethical dilemmas. What to shoot? With what level of participation and acquiescence on the part of the subject? How to present—or disseminate—the images? These dilemmas extend to social scientist collaborators, exhibition organizers, archival curators, and book editors and publishers when they collaborate with contemporary documentarians. In collaborating with photographers, they too may be accused of becoming exploiters of the living, while their work focusing on the past can exploit the lives and memories only of the dead.

These issues become all the more complicated in America, with its history of racial inequality, when the subjects are African American, as many are in Bruce's work, and the photographers and interpreters are white. In many ways, though, Bruce's work is the empathetic product of a guileless curiosity. The images Bruce made were less taken than

given through the open and generous cooperation of subjects who allowed themselves to be photographed, who seemed to intuit, just as Bruce himself showed he believed, that the central imperative of multiculturalism is showing an interest in other cultures and in crossing cultural borders and racial boundaries.

In the end, the work of documentarians and their associated collaborators and facilitators aspires to more fundamentally humane goals that transcend the dynamics of race and class. Documentary photographs give voice to the voiceless. They record and thereby ennoble the wonderful, ordinary human lives simply lived for their own sake. They freeze in time places and people that the passage of time and the engines of change remake or efface. They are a record of our collective days, our society, and our civilization, in which all things are ephemeral. For the subjects photographed, the photos affirm: We were here. For the photographer, too, the photographs say: I was here. The often anonymous photographer must be eternally respectful of and grateful to the individuals photographed, whose collaboration enables these existential assertions.

The arrangement of the photographs in a collection such as this also is fraught with methodological and ethical issues. Although the final decision on all content was Bruce's, he and I together selected the photographs for this volume based upon several considerations, including classic artistic criteria like technical aspects of the photographs, composition, content, and balance of subject matter. We reviewed the body of Bruce's work and went through successive cuts, finally selecting photographs that one or both of us simply liked (or, for Bruce, images that held special resonance or meaning). We were mindful, though, that what we judged a "good" or "compelling" image may really be just a photograph that fits the template of what a documentary photograph is *supposed* to look like.

We also decided to organize the photographs into sections, arranged in roughly chronological order, thus grouping photographs from the larger studies or projects—Cass Corridor (12–35), Poletown (36–65), Urban Interiors (72–131), Brush Park (132–137), Detroit blues (142–145), Concert of Colors (146–151), and Zone Coffee House (152–159)—with miscellaneous images from Bruce's career placed between these more discrete sections. Within each section, we have tried to keep related subjects

together, although we have sought to pair photographs on facing pages with an eye toward composition and visual balance.

Within these rather commonplace parameters, we nonetheless encountered issues of selection and presentation that underscore the subtleties of subjectivity, bias, and perspective in photography as a representational medium. For example, in a book of Detroit photographs, we included the image of a burning car on a street at night (photo 71), tempting the racialized associations such images may invoke in white viewers who recall the Detroit riot—the urban insurrection—of 1967. Here we aim to challenge viewers to examine their preconceptions and prejudices, as the image is in fact one of a car set ablaze by a crowd of likely white suburban revelers following the victory of the Detroit Tigers in the 1984 World Series. Likewise, in juxtaposing images of a street-worn Black man (photo 34) and a young white girl (photo 35), we perhaps entice dark speculations and racially charged surmises about a man who in fact was only candid and open with Bruce, whom he did not know, and who seemed, at worst, just down on his luck.

We alternatively might have paired the young white girl (photo 35) with a young Black boy (photo 68), as both figures, positioned on staircases, could be thought of as parallel images. Or the young Black boy (photo 68) and the older Black woman (photo 57), whose poses make these into parallel images of a different sort. But we pointedly rejected these pairings so as to avoid suggesting the "universality" or "commonality" of the human experience, irrespective of race, gender, or age. To the contrary, we believe in the situation and context specificity of such photographed moments in time and also that in America the dynamics of race and class are pervasive and, in a social and economic sense, determinative.

I am deeply grateful to Bruce Harkness for agreeing to assemble his work in this book and then for inviting me to edit it. I met Bruce when we both were young, when we both believed that right beats might and that anything was possible. My now almost forty-year association with him has been one of the most valuable chance discoveries of my own seventy-plus years of life. Alas, I no longer think that the good will triumph or that there is an infinite number of sunrises and tomorrows. Bruce still believes.

NOTES

- 1 Until 1975 it was still the Art School of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts. In 2001 it became the College for Creative Studies.
- 2 The faculty included Walter Farynk, George Phillips, William Rauhauser, Richard Timm, and Robert Vigiletti.
- 3 Selections from Bruce's work at the Niagara Apartments were published in the *Detroit Free Press Sunday Magazine*, November 12, 1978, 22–23, 26–27, 30–31.
- 4 Valenti later became head of the Department of Photography at the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College.
- 5 For the background and context of the Central Industrial Park redevelopment project, see John J. Bukowczyk, "Decline and Fall of a Detroit Neighborhood: Poletown vs. G.M. and the City of Detroit," *Washington and Lee Law Review* 41 (Winter 1984): 49–76.
- 6 See *Poletown: Urban Change in Industrial Detroit: The Making of Detroit's East Side, 1850–1990*, historical monograph prepared for the Community and Economic Development Department, City of Detroit (1991).
- 7 Bruce subsequently donated a large selection of prints from the project to Wayne State University's Walter P. Reuther Library. Samples of Bruce's work from the Niagara Apartments and Poletown were later selected for inclusion in *Detroit Images: Photographs of the Renaissance City* (Wayne State University Press, 1989), a photographic volume organized by me and CCS faculty member Douglas Aikenhead.
- 8 Another spin-off of the Urban Interiors Project was a series of workshops, conducted in Detroit schools in 1989, organized around the twin themes of family and community. The Families of the City Project, also grant funded, produced two booklets, posing the questions "What is a family?" and "What is a community?" The project director of this Urban Interiors Project spin-off was associate professor Nora Faires of the University of Michigan-Flint, my then partner and collaborator. See Nora Faires, with photographs by Bruce Harkness, "What Is a Community? Taking Documentary Photographs of Urban Americans into the Middle School Classroom," *OAH Magazine of History* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1996): 73–77.
- 9 Some of these images were published in Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock, eds., *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Wayne State University Press, 2000).
- 10 Lois Johnson and Margaret Thomas's *Detroit's Eastern Market: A Farmers Market Shopping and Cooking Guide* (Johnson Book Print & Binding, 1999; Painted Turtle Books, 2005; Wayne State University Press, 2016) has gone through three editions.
- 11 In 2001, Bruce married Barbara Krol, and the two reside together in Dearborn. Bruce retired from full-time employment in 2010 but continues to freelance and exhibit his photographs in Detroit and suburban locations.