



By **Zehra Naqvi**

'With photography, however we encounter something new and strange: in Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in art.' -Walter Benjamin.

Photography unlike other artistic mediums has a strong relation to reality. Paintings, sculptures and installations are usually considered products of the artistic imagination that provide space for dialogue and questioning, while photographs are considered a mirror or a reflection of the world and are often used as evidence in courts and as depictions of certain events in newspapers and magazines. They are seen more as a substitute for the actual object or person depicted in them rather than a constructed image influenced by the hand on the shutter. The above quote elaborates this link between reality and photography where the photographer as the creator of an image is forgotten and all that remains is an imprint of a moment that existed in

time and that has been immortalized by art.

The exhibition at Tate Modern, titled *New Documentary Forms* questions and intervenes this perception of the photographic medium stating that 'the documentary value of a photograph is implicitly based on its claim to objectivity, which may depend on the choice of subject matter, the perspective from which it was taken, and the context in which it is shown or reproduced,' and thus questions the impartiality of the camera. The exhibition, which will continue till 31st of March 2012, presents works by Mitch Epstein, Luc Delahaye, Akram Zaatari, Guy Tillim and Boris Mikhailov.

Luc Delahaye used to work as a photojournalist and war photographer, however now as an artist he subtly critiques the images reminiscent of those often found in the media using a large format; single-plate view camera as opposed to the digital cameras used by most photojournalists. This camera only produces a single image of his subject matter as opposed to the multitudes of photographs taken by journalists who then print only those that capture the perfect moment. For Delahaye this perfect moment does not exist an image of a barren landscape shadowed by a huge black cloud is as effective as a photo of refugee children playing amidst a mound of wreckage. The large size his works reveals details that would otherwise be lost when printed in a newspaper.

Guy Tillim is another photojournalist turned artist who focuses on capturing trivial moments, which are usually considered to banal to be photographed by most journalists. The works include documentation of protests and other politically driven events that usually attract a lot of media attention, however the images produced by numerous photographers who capture these events are usually quite similar, and tend to limit the ways of perceiving and thinking about such events. Although this kind of image production is also challenged by the advent of new forms of media including blogs and facebook, which provides an opposing narrative to the ones found on major news channels and magazines.

Akram Zaatari questions the role of photographs as documentations of history by exhibiting works captured by Hashim el Madani, a studio photographer in Lebanon. These portraits are not of famous personalities but of ordinary people who are often ignored when documenting the past of a nation. Some people were asked to act out their fantasies in front of the camera while others were told to pose in a certain way by the photographer. It was interesting to note slight references to the times these people lived in and the social convention of their society by looking at their choice of poses, props and attire when being photographed. However the photos directed by the Hashim el Madani often produced a stereotypical representation of the people, like the portrait of the boy who was told to stand in certain way because the photographer thought he had female mannerisms. Works where the choice was left to the people were far more interesting.

Mitch Epstein is an American photographer whose series *American Power* tries to explore the connotations and meanings of the term. His photographs adopt a fictional quality, which draw attention to the artist as the creator of an image. Boris Mikhailov's tries to achieve the same, his photos document the everyday life of people in Ukraine during the Soviet era. They are carefully arranged and painted upon by the artist to reveal himself and the unobjective nature of his medium which.

The exhibition raises a lot of pertinent questions, which becomes extremely relevant in the present times when we are confronted with a multitude influx of images, where everything is documented, and cameras are used in multiple ways as surveillance, preservers of memory, artistic depiction etc... It then becomes integral to constantly question these images in front of us and to be aware of the politics of looking and image making.