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MEDIA



MIXING MEDIA

by Don Synder

Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas has published her documentary work in newspapers, magazines and books, each time opening herself to the possibility of misinterpretation.

Ever since the invention of the halftone plate, photographers and the media have existed in uneasy symbiosis. This curious relationship has assumed increasing importance with advances in printing and reproduction technologies: as photographic images become more readily available, we expect and depend on them in greater measure. Often if we understand a situation at all it is in part because someone was there with a camera; yet just as often the photographs we see have been selected, cropped, laid out, captioned, sequenced and distributed by someone other than the photographer.

This fact can be particularly important for photographers who cover political events. In an effort to hear a photographer's perspective on media presentation, *Photo Communique* contacted Susan Meiselas, whose work in Central America has earned her an international reputation, and asked her to discuss some of her experiences with the media.

Meiselas first went to Nicaragua in June of 1978 and almost immediately found herself in a situation which became a focus of public attention in North America and Europe. Prior to 1978 she had considered herself a documentary photographer rather than a photojournalist, with books and exhibitions being the major outlets for her work — in part because magazines showed little interest in her projects at the time. However, in Nicaragua, she said, "Suddenly I was thrust into a situation in which my work was used by magazines [even though] I wasn't shooting for magazines — I was shooting for history . . . I did get a sense of the purpose of magazine reporting, but the images were dispersed in the magazines that used them, and a year later I decided to collect them into a book." *Nicaragua: June 1978 - July 1979*, by Susan Meiselas and edited with Claire Rosenberg, was published by Pantheon Books in 1981. Meiselas spoke about some of her problems with the publishing process: she stressed that the book project became possible after her work received exposure in magazines, but that this did not win her editorial control over the book. "I was appalled by the cover design, in which I had no participation," she said, "but I was told, 'that's the cover.' My name was too large, which was inappropriate — I felt so secondary to the power of events and the people who were making that history. But [the publishing] world is about selling, and [Pantheon] evidently felt it was better to say, 'Girl photographer — American — finds revolution' in order to sell books. It was like a meat market . . . but it was important to me that people know about this place. It was important to publish the material, and they were the publishers interested."

Other compromises had to be made in publishing *Nicaragua* in order to reach the broadest possible audience and keep the book within a modest price range. Originally Meiselas had intended that images and text would be interwoven, but in order to publish the book at reasonable cost in three languages (English, French and Spanish) all the colour pages had to be printed at one

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REAGAN'S MANIFEST DESTINY

The president is playing dominoes
in Latin America and losing.

by T. D. Allman

ONE CANNOT but marvel at the perspicacity of the Department of State. Nearly two and a half years ago it sounded a warning that, had it only been heeded, might have saved tens of thousands of lives—and saved the United States, too, from a severe loss of influence and prestige in a strategically sensitive part of the world. An external conspiracy, the State Department revealed in February 1981, was threatening the whole of Central America.

One Central American republic was already the victim of "a well-coordinated, covert effort to bring about the overthrow of [its] established government and to impose in its place a . . . regime with no popular support."

Still another Central American nation had been "progressively transformed" into a base for "indirect armed aggression" against its neighbors.

And in yet a third republic, armed terrorists were on the loose—killing thousands, violating every norm of civilized behavior. What was their goal? Nothing less, the State Department concluded, than seizing complete control, "legitimizing their violence," and once all forces of decency had been terrorized into submission, "to foster the impression of overwhelming popular support."

But that was only the beginning of it. A master hand lurked behind, and linked, these disturbing events. A conspiratorial outside power, U.S. intelligence sources revealed, was playing a "direct tutelary role" in the "political unification, military direction and arming" of the agents of subversion, chaos, and terror.

"In short," the State Department concluded, *Cen-*
T. D. Allman's article on El Salvador, "Rising to Rebellion,"
appeared in Harper's in March 1981. His book on Central
America, Unmanifest Destiny, will be published next year.

HARPER'S/SEPTEMBER 1983

time, and the text printed separately. "I had to reconceive the text as a thing unto itself, with the [reduced] black and white pictures as a reference. Somehow, artistically, I couldn't put it all together, but I had to be willing to experiment. With *Carnival Strippers* [published in 1976 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux] it had been even worse. The designer was exploitative and the typeset was garish; it made fun of people and wasn't as respectful as the images. I remember picking up the dummy and being horrified, and was told it was already set. These are experiences you learn from, and try to avoid later."

Meiselas pointed out that having a Spanish edition of the *Nicaragua* book at moderate cost did have some tangible benefits: 2,500 copies were distributed, largely through the University of Central America in Costa Rica, and the book was eventually cir-

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Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

become "a textbook case of indidion." Would this campaign to subegion from the Panama Canal to uthern border," as President Read it, be permitted to triumph? Or to destabilize our hemisphere" be ver is clear. A well-coordinated, campaign of subversion against Nicaragua has created the risk of al war. Honduras, once the scene periment in constitutional rule, has

progressively become a base for outside military interference in its neighbors' internal affairs. More than 30,000 human beings have been murdered in El Salvador. Nor do Central America's afflictions end there. Costa Rica, the region's only real democracy, has also become the scene of armed subversion of one of its neighbors. Guatemala, Central America's most populous, powerful, and potentially explosive nation, has suffered its own terror campaign, which has killed thousands, and has also undergone a coup d'état.

Why did the State Department's warning go un-

heeded? As the last two years have shown, the State Department got the plot right but the main character wrong. The Soviet Union, for instance, was identified as playing "the central role" in fostering terrorism, subversion, and aggression in Central America, and the report itself was entitled "Communist Interference in El Salvador." Had the word "American" been substituted for "Communist," the report would in fact have provided a penetrating analysis of what has happened since. As a result of U.S. interference, Central America is in chaos, and much of the rest of the hemisphere opposes what

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culated throughout Central America, often being passed hand to hand. She said that her experiences with *Nicaragua* were useful when preparing *El Salvador*, a book which she edited: "This time the publisher said, 'I trust what you want to do — we will find a way to publish it,' and we decided everything." Even apparently small decisions were significant, according to Meiselas. She described the widespread political terrorism in El Salvador, and spoke about the dangers faced by those who worked on the book: "With *El Salvador* it was important to make a statement, but there was a genuine risk of physical harm to the photographers involved. We spent long hours discussing whether or not we should put our names in the book — it was important that the images be seen, and therefore [we felt] we should have the courage to sign the work, that we as witness gave the images greater force Only about twenty-five

From *Harper's*, September, 1983

percent of the images had been previously reproduced, and when we put the pictures together the editing was done in New York and I took down a Xerox [of the edited material]. It was scary going to the airport for fear someone would find it The night the photographers got together, we literally had to hide under the table and do the layout on the floor."

El Salvador, published by the Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative in an English edition of 12,500 and distributed by W. W. Norton, sold out within a year.* The images in the book now

* For a review of *El Salvador* see Photo Communique (Summer 1984).



Les insurgés de
Matagalpa ont tenu ces
barricades quatre
jours durant. Ce n'est
qu'après les bombardements par
l'aviation qu'ils ont capitulé.
Bilan : 38 morts et
200 blessés.

Face à
Somoza le "parrain"
du Nicaragua

LA REVOLUTION DES FO



FOULARDS

Tous, du gavroche des rues au paysan, ils ont adopté le foulard des hommes du commandant « Cero » le chef de l'opposition « sandiniste » qui, il y a deux semaines, a réussi la plus formidable entreprise de libération de prisonniers politiques : 200 otages, dont 60 parlementaires, en pleine capitale du Nicaragua. Pour le pays, uni dans la grève générale, ce foulard devient, comme le béret du Che Guevara, le symbole de la lutte contre la dictature qui règne depuis 44 ans, et de père en fils. Ecœuré par la rapacité folle des Somoza l'archevêque de Managua a béni les drapeaux dressés sur les barricades.

travel as an exhibition which has had approximately sixty showings to date, including the International Center of Photography in New York, the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and numerous other colleges, schools and public libraries. "That range has been wonderful," Meiselas said. "The images began in newspapers and magazines and have traveled a long life since then." She believes that a good photograph has a life-span that exceeds any single usage, and conceded that the way an image might first be used is not necessarily ideal. She added that photographers have a responsibility to find as many ways as possible to distribute their work. "I feel that the issue for photographers is how far do you take your own images — how urgent do you feel that is? If a magazine pays me and the work goes on in another form, that is good — that's when the relationship between photographers and the media is best."

"The first level of compromise," Meiselas continued, "is how many magazines can you work for that are as committed as you? It's rare: the *Carnival Strippers* images were never published in America, but in Europe the material was of interest. European maga-

zines create space for images in ways that American magazines don't."

Meiselas also talked about the relationship between publishing and exhibiting photographs. With the Nicaragua work she found that she "couldn't accept the notion of the images as art . . . I'm still uncomfortable with the idea of even a good friend saying, 'I would like that picture.' Shows did not seem necessary — it's happened; the book is a better document. With the El Salvador work, things are still in crisis [there], and exhibiting the work serves a different purpose. The idea is to make the work as accessible as possible. It could have been a very different kind of show at Castelli [Gallery] — five-by-seven-foot radical chic prints — but that wasn't the point."

Although Meiselas resisted showing the Nicaragua photographs in an art exhibition context, she did produce an exhibition of the work that dealt specifically with the issue of photographs and the media. Shown at the Side Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, as *Demasking: The Making of "History" / The Making of a*

El Salvador: The State of Siege

By Richard J. Meislin

In a conference room behind the high gray walls, heavy steel latticework and thick bullet-proof glass of the United States Embassy in San Salvador, one of the highest-ranking members of the diplomatic mission is offering his view of the facts of life to a group of American visitors. The delegation, which includes a Congressman, two entertainers active in human-rights causes and several others concerned about American policy, is angry; they have seen and spoken to political prisoners who say they've been tortured. Salvadoran officials who say they are doing their best and refugees who say little but suffer a lot. The diplomat is tired. This is the 17th delegation the embassy has shepherded through the Salvadoran labyrinth during the past few weeks. "The semiannual procertification flying circus and bootstrapping," another embassy official calls it.

"We take as a given that this country is a horror," the beleaguered diplomat tells his visitors. "There are things here which are frightening and appalling to any sensitive human being. And those of us who work in this environment and see our friends killed, murdered, tortured by one group or another are not insensitive to these things."

The diplomat asks not to be identified by name for "security reasons" — a reasonable request, even for someone who works in an urban fortress, lives in a home guarded by a Salvadoran carrying a semiautomatic rifle and commutes between the two in an armored car. In El Salvador, silence and safety still go hand in hand.

As the diplomat speaks, officials at the State Department in Washington, some 2,000 miles away, are feverishly putting the final touches on a report that will certify El Salvador's progress in improving human rights and in meeting the other conditions set by Congress for six more months of United States military aid. "The situation is not perfect," the 67-page

Richard J. Meislin, a New York Times correspondent based in Miami, covers the Caribbean and Central America.



A mother and daughter killed in a clash between Government and guerrilla forces share a common (above). Prison inmates (left) tell of being tortured; they display scars they say were caused by hys-

Book, and at Camerawork in London as *Nicaragua: Mediation*: Meiselas, the show also traveled to the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany. The exhibit compared, on three levels, tear sheets from magazines; framed photographs from her Nicaragua work; and tear sheets from the book, out-take photographs of similar situations or examples of other ways the photographs were used. Meiselas cited, for example, a photograph from *Nicaragua* in which three masked youths are practicing throwing contact bombs. The image was published by *The New York Times* in July, 1978; it appeared in the book; and it also was used by the Nicaraguans as a tourist poster. Meiselas feels that tracing the various uses to which an image is put helps a viewer understand "the book, the events, and the reappropriation of images back into Nicaraguan culture The show is about the struggle to clarify choices, the complexity of every decision." There are other examples in the exhibit of the way in which images evolve: the photograph of a Sandinista throwing a Molotov cocktail (in *Nicaragua*) was used on a poster as a symbol of the revolution, on a matchbox, on a stamp, and it ap-

e Continues



report will say when it reaches Congress two days later, on Jan. 21, "and the progress was not as great as desired, but it is progress nonetheless."

In San Salvador, the diplomat and his visitors assume this will be the outcome — it has happened twice before — and the diplomat offers an explanation in advance: "The criterion is not whether you come up with the bare minimum standards of social justice in the country, but has there been some progress toward that goal. And the question is really, 'All right, so there has been some progress. So what?'"

The certification process's increasingly tenuous connection to the realities of El Salvador is raising new questions in Congress and even within the Reagan Administration it-

Despite conditions attached to U.S. aid, human-rights abuses continue in El Salvador.

self. The feeling, variously, is that it is not bringing about the desired improvements in El Salvador, is continuing to provide aid to a Government whose actions are at least questionable, or is diverting attention from the deeper questions facing the United States in its policies toward El Salvador and the rest of Central America.

Recent talks with American diplomats and Congressmen found an increasingly urgent desire for a cogent political strategy to complement, or even replace, United States military support for the Salvadoran Government, yet nothing seems to be immediately forthcoming. Talks with the provisional President, Alvaro Alfredo Magaña Borja, other Salvadoran officials and political prisoners in their cells help indicate why this is so difficult to attain.

The aid and advice provided by the

DECEMBER 26, 1983 • \$1.00
The use and abuse of J.F.K., by Henry Fairlie
BASHING THE STRAINS, SORT OUT • ROGER SHATTUCK, STRAVINSKY'S BODY • GROUP RIGHTS & WRONGS

THE NEW REPUBLIC

The Truth About The Death Squads by Christopher Dickey



The New Republic, December 26, 1983: "I can't do better than that — I was scared shitless making that image, and this made the whole thing worthwhile."

peared all over the streets of Managua, in reversed form, as a wall stencil. "What happens to the image is extraordinarily interesting," Meiselas said, stressing that she sees a significant difference between the misuse of an image by the media and this kind of adaptive re-use, in which an image is integrated back into the situation it describes. (She expressed little concern about the "borrowing" and reversal of one of her images by the Nicaraguans, but more than once during the interview spoke of her objections to intentional media distortion, no matter what the form.)

Meiselas has encountered many different situations in her experience with magazines, both positive and negative. She discussed a story that appeared in *Time* in February 1981, which used a strong, factual image whose impact was weakened by an ambiguous text: "The pictures are captioned in one way, the story is written in another — who knows what the reader understands? I wanted to say, 'Wait — *this happened* — this is not pretending'; why was the text like this? [To give another example] *Business Week* ran a photograph of kids [in Nicaragua] holding milk and meat in a food line, with a caption about food rationing. The picture was made in 1979 when free milk and meat were distributed after the revolution. In 1983 it was used and captioned in [this] story about rationing, despite the caption on the back of the picture. *Magnum* called *Business Week*, but they said, 'It doesn't matter'; and if you ask a lawyer, [he] will say you have no case. *Magnum* sometimes

From *The New York Times Magazine*, February 20, 1983



These three photographs from the book *Nicaragua* were displayed by a gallery as a triptych. While Meiselas may not have intended that this piece take on an independence as a work of art, separate from the context of the book, the triptych presentation does point to allegorical and visual connections within the images: As Meiselas points out, "the Nicaragua picture on page fourteen especially shows what Americans don't know about the situation — yes, most of these images are about death and yes we want you to look at them."

makes mistakes, and I know that there is a risk that a picture will be misused, but if I didn't take the risk what would I do?"

"Some magazines do things well," Meiselas said, "but I don't think the 'best spread' is always the issue. One makes a lot of discoveries with the pictures [in circulation]; they take on a life of their own and become important to people for reasons I can't even imagine. With the media using my work, there is a kind of rebounding — it integrates me into a bigger world, on many levels;

TEKST EN FOTO'S: SUSAN MEISELAS

STRIPPEN OP DE KERMIS

De stripteashow als reizende kermisattractie is een seizoengebonden fenomeen, dat men kan aantreffen in Amerika; vooral in landstreek met een concentratie van kleine oederzettingen en boerengedachten en een bevolking die hunkert naar afleiding. Vrouwen variërend in leeftijd van 17 tot 25 jaar, geplukt van de straat, getrouwd uit slecht betalende bordelen en nachtschubs, afwel ontsluit uit kleurige, kleinburgerlijke gezinnen. Voor een bedrag dat van zo'n 40 gulden tot pakweg vijf geeltjes kan oplopen toeren ze de nieuwsgierigen hun volvette, uitgezakte, ubeel schamele lichaam. Hun basis is een soort van uithoofde vrachtwagen, waarin wordt geslagen, gegriet en gewerkt, net zolang tot het seizoen is afgelopen, het publiek zich terugtrekt in zijn woonsteden voor een vaaie winterslaap en de vrouwen teruggaan naar

waarvandaan zij zijn gekomen. Susan Meiselas, samensteller van het boek *Striptease Kermis*, trek drie zomers met de groep mee en sprak met de vrouwen die strippen, hun bazin en „moeder“, de reclamemakers en het publiek. Dank zij het feit dat Susan Meiselas drie seizoenen lang naast en met de vrouwen van de kermis heeft geleefd, is ze erin geslaagd een raak portret te schetsen: de brude aspecten die het striptease tot schouwspel maken verichten om voortgang. Het ene is de afsluiting, die de kijker dreigt te overmannen. Het andere is het eergevoel, waarvan de vrouwen zijn vervuld.



JOE, RECLAMEMAKER

„Als jullie ze willen ausraken, ga gerust je gang. Maar heb het hart niet in je lijf het touwel op te komen om een van de meisjes te grijpen, als je begript wat ik bedoel. Je bent hier niet om te knokken, maar om te kijken. Er staan trouwens tussen een paar mannen die jullie laatste tatzekend verstaan en als jullie per se knokken willen... Omhels hen maar, maar doe het niet opdringerig, want daar zijn ze niet van gebouwd. Het gaat er hier niet om een mond te versieren. Nuemand gaat hier trouwen met mijn meiden versieren. U kunt natuurlijk best proberen een van mijn meisjes te versieren voor een nacht voor zeg maar 125 gulden, maar je moet wel van heel goede huize komen, wil je daar in-trappen. Mijn meiden zijn echt lekker. Ze zijn niet om maar de versten de besten.“

when the images take on their own life and become part of other people's lives, they bring me into those lives."

Meiselas takes the issue of being brought into others' lives very seriously. She talked with considerable feeling about being in Nicaragua in July of last year, at a time when the United States had just appropriated \$100 million for aid to the Contras. On her sense of frustration in the face of this kind of circumstance she said, "I felt unable to photograph, and this paralyzation was very real — framing something to make a photograph was almost like a death watch. In 1978," she continued, "putting the images together into a book made the experiences and the events coherent. In 1986 making a frame was almost as if I was documenting a people's fate. I didn't want to be there to be witness to that; it was also an acknowledgment of my own failure, and the failure of photography to make a difference."



Meiselas *Panorama* July 1977

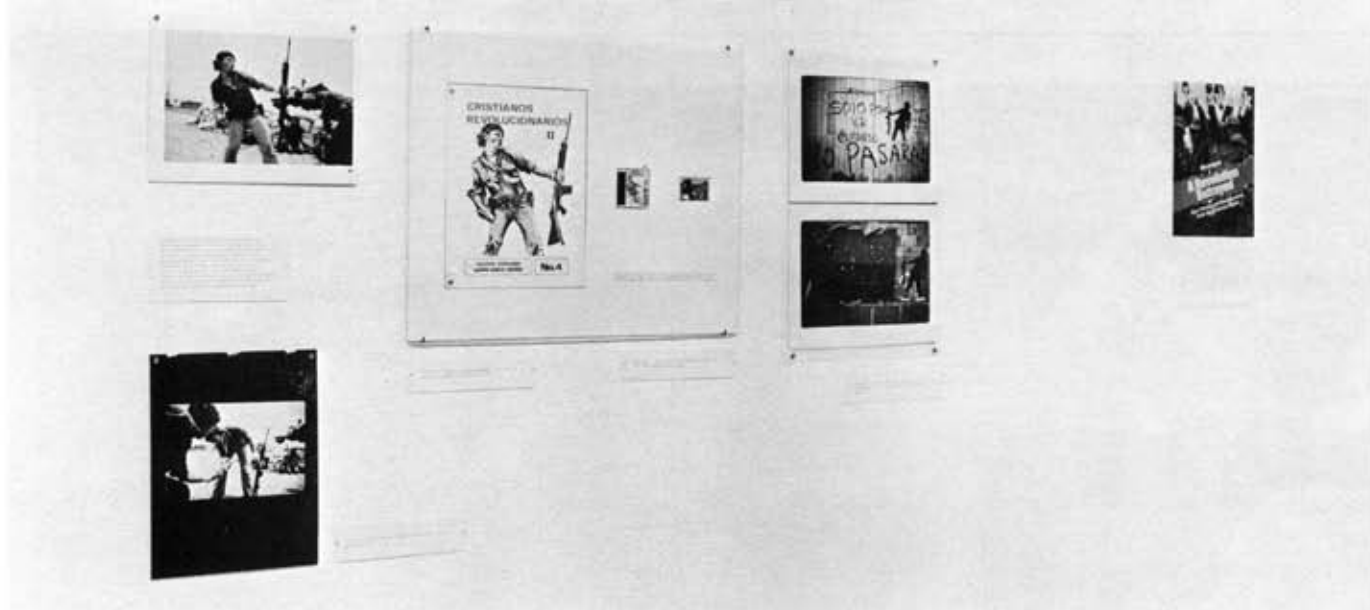
Panorama, July 1977: "The first level of compromise is how many magazines can you work for that are as committed as you? It's rare: the *Carnival Strippers* images were never

published in America, but in Europe the material was of interest. European magazines create space for images in ways that American magazines don't."

Passionate about photography and committed to the idea that photographs must be used by the media in order to communicate effectively, Meiselas is nonetheless remarkably sanguine about this usage. She gives credit where it is due and points out that some magazines (*Rainoma*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Paris Match*, *Harper's*) have done extraordinary service to her photographs. Pulling out a cover of *The New Republic* ("The Truth About The Death Squads," December 26, 1983), and referring again to the risks photographers had to take in El Salvador, she said, simply: "I

can't do better than that — I was scared shitless making that image, and this made the whole thing worthwhile."

Finally, Meiselas acknowledges that the process of communication is incompletely understood and that the sense of urgency to communicate is what really matters. While she feels the most meaningful experience for a photographer would involve the entire process, from the making of an image through to the making of a book or picture story — in which "you have to try in so many different ways to reach so many different kinds of people" — she admits that the ways photographs are used are sometimes good, frequently imperfect, and occasionally distorted. Meiselas indicates a willingness to accept this fact as part of the communication process. And, she says, photographs themselves are not absolutes with fixed meanings; they are responses to events, situations or circumstances, and vary accordingly: "My images are characteristic of this period in my life, and that place in its time; and my ideas about them come from the living of these experiences."



above:
Installation view of
*Demasking: The Making of
"History"/The Making of a
Book*, an exhibition that
explored the use of
Meiselas' images in the
media, and also the
conditions of production for
her book, *Nicaragua*.
Various "versions" of
images from the book were
presented, pointing to the
ways that Meiselas' photographs have been

used by Western media and
also how they have been
reintegrated into the
Nicaraguan culture they
depict. Here, the image of a
Sandinista throwing a
Molotov cocktail was used
as a symbol of the
revolution, on a matchbox,
on a stamp, and it appeared
throughout the streets of
Managua, in reversed form,
as a wall stencil. Courtesy
Museum Folkwang, Essen,
Germany.

below:
From Meiselas' exhibition
*Demasking: The Making of
"History"/The Making of a
Book*, the top row consists
of spreads from *Geo*
magazine's charter issue,
January 1979. *Geo*'s feature
on Meiselas' photos from
Nicaragua was to be titled
"Waiting for the Revolution"
but as events in the country
became more heated, the
piece was called
"Nicaragua: A People

Aflame." The second row
shows images from
Meiselas' book *Nicaragua*,
and the third row, out-takes
which were not published in
the book. The result of the
three layers is an
exploration of the shifting
contexts of representation,
from the initial editing
process to the production of
images and text. Courtesy
Museum Folkwang, Essen,
Germany.

