

# Connectivity: An Interview with Susan Meiselas

**Drake Stutesman**

This interview took place on August 28, 2009, in New York. Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas is renowned for her war journalism, particularly for the pictures she took in Nicaragua in the seventies, which became some of the most famous images of that war.

Her website, [www.susanmeiselas.com](http://www.susanmeiselas.com), displays her work and history and is accompanied by her own spoken narration, a combination of words and pictures that, I think, well represents her almost philosophical sensibility. As she has had many interviews about her combat journalism and her mammoth project on a photographic lineage of Kurdistan, *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, this interview pursues her methods of approach and thinking. I gave her the questions beforehand, to which she refers in the interview, but we followed a conversational track. The two films we discussed the most were *Pictures from a Revolution* (US, 1991) and *Voyages* (UK, 1985). The former follows Meiselas when she returns to Nicaragua, ten years after the war, in an effort to find the people whose pictures she had taken. *Voyages* is a more experimental film, using still photos over which a camera passes back and forth and up and down. Both have a personal narration.

*Drake Stutesman:* Let's focus on what you haven't had an opportunity to talk about, or what really interests you. If you really want to dwell on something, let's dwell on it. I was looking at *Voyages* again this morning, which is a very fascinating small piece that has many dimensions to it. Let me just start and we'll see how we go. I'll just go down the questions as they were, but we can dwell on some or move to others as you want.

*Susan Meiselas:* Yes.

*Framework* 51, No. 1, Spring 2010, pp. 61–78.

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Figure 1. From *Pictures from a Revolution* by Susan Meiselas, Alfred Guzzetti, Richard P. Rogers, 1991.



Figure 2. From *Pictures from a Revolution* by Susan Meiselas, Alfred Guzzetti, Richard P. Rogers, 1991.

*DS:* You mix words with your images. In your book of photographs *Carnival Strippers*, shot between 1972 and 1975, you include written pieces where the women discuss their lives. In the films *Pictures from a Revolution* in 1991 and *Voyages* in 1985 and also in the book of photographs of a New York S&M club, *Pandora's Box*, they all use narration or the spoken word or have a confessional, autobiographical piece. They seem to be more than simply auxiliary; they seem to be almost equal to the picture. What does this mixture of words and images mean to you?

*SM:* I think that very early on, and principally this first project of *Carnival Strippers*, the sense of a photograph was a beginning point. It's interesting you say "text" or "words" and actually for me it was *sound*. It was their voices, their very words, the way they said things. So in fact the first representation of that work, *Carnival Strippers*, was in an installation form with the sound in an open space floating above and around the photographs. So it was that tension between what the photograph itself could tell or reveal and what people know about their lives that I would not have access to except through these exchanges. It becomes "words" when it's transformed into the medium of a book, though it began as an exhibition with sound, and actually I've exhibited it that way now and again since then. It's even better with the book being reprinted, because it allows for a sound track to be embedded in a CD in the back of the book. At the core, the project highlights my perceptions as I frame moments and then select them and sequence them, in contrast to those lives that are lived and that are complex, with their own deep understandings that they were willing to share.

*DS:* I have two questions about that. Do you think that the living voice and the photograph need to be together? Do you think one is, in a sense, "less than" without the other? Is that part of that relationship?

*SM:* In my own practice, there have been projects where there has been no voice or text, or maybe if text is there, then it is in the form of captions. I have certainly made things without voice. But, as you can see in my principal, personal work, which I would say is *Strippers, Nicaragua*, or a much more elaborate project, *Kurdistan*, there is a complementary role. So I wouldn't say that one is lesser. . . . It's maybe the degree of engagement through that work. I am now working, for example, on shorter essay multimedia forms where sound again comes in as a more central element. But of course I've made photographs that just stand alone and live alone and I'm intrigued by that, too, and by what the viewers are then forced to bring to it from their imagination, rather than responding to the image re-contextualized by either sound or text.

*DS:* This comes up thematically very often and you discuss this—the notion of motion—and life is about motion. A photograph is obviously a still moment.

There is a motion innate in speaking and in sentences. I wonder if that is part of what you, perhaps even unconsciously, want to draw into the picture. You talk about the place and the relationship to it, and yet that is already a relationship. Of course a relationship itself is a mobile thing. I wonder if part of what you're grappling with is how you bring motion into the picture; the whole notion of motion and livingness.

*SM:* When you say motion, then I think of emotion and engagement and the distance that people have to images. How do you bring people into the lives that you're hoping to reveal in some way or to share? Connectivity is part of what I'm seeking. I don't know if the motion is what's around the image that is being left out and I'm trying to compensate in some way or juxtapose that isolation and yet find some connectivity. I think the text helps in the bridging process.

*DS:* In *Voyages*, the film you made with Marc Karlin in 1985, you open with that idea, by stating "I'm starting at the end"—and this is obviously also a theme with time. Can you elaborate on what time is to you?

*SM:* I'll have to think about that because, of course, what's the beginning? The beginning is you've been somewhere, you land someplace, and then you begin again. I'm trying in that film to somehow show this process by deconstructing it. It's called *Voyages* because I see it in stages. A voyage sounds like it's singular, but this is "voyages" because there are multiple revisits in that year that I'm working in Nicaragua. It takes the frame of the book, which is June 1978–July 1979, and it revisits the stages of my entry, engagement, and even attempt to disconnect, as I would say now. I'm breaking it down into small cycles. You know that there is the visual panning across photographs because I am thinking of them as a fragment of an experience. I know the sound track for some people is quite confusing because there is Marc's voice reading letters of partial exchanges. This was before email, of course. I would maybe start with a letter and then we would have conversations, and then he would transcribe the dialogues between us. That was all woven into what became a sound track of his voice rereading those various fragments of thinking, while trying to capture looking back at this historical process that I wove my life through.

*DS:* To stay with *Voyages* for a moment: the camera rolls over the pictures. It is not always in the same direction and sometimes it will make a hairpin turn and move back, so it goes back and forth.

*SM:* It also does a very specific thing. Unlike working with an animation camera on a flat surface, it is working in space. And Marc's idea, which I think was quite brilliant, was to have the photographs installed in a space that was

dark and selectively lit. Then, the camera with a dolly tracked across them. Sometimes you see an image that is set back in space that of course then seems small. What can now be done with lots of aftereffects was all done with film and camera and space. It allowed us to create the feeling of things that are behind things, images that came from other images. I do think about the particular process of documentary photographers capturing motion in stills, freezing these moments from a moving stream of the event or of time. I, as the photographer, so often feel the inadequacy of the capacity of a frame, or even multiple frames, to capture the essence of that moment that I'm witnessing. In some ways, we are repeating the feeling of things moving, almost like you are moving in space and time as other things are moving around you and you freeze the moment. We are trying to give a feeling of just that—you see a fraction of something and then you make a frame, you have eliminated a number of things. It is very intuitive and the sense of inadequacy is very often what one is left with. "Did you get it?" as it were, and "Does the photograph work?" You asked me later about what makes a photograph work, but I guess we can address that later.

*DS:* You can talk about it now.

*SM:* These elements that you very intuitively are attempting to, I am going to say "capture"—I don't like the word "take"—a photograph. I think you are *making* photographs. When you're framing, you are bringing together as many elements to be at play, in juxtaposition to each other. Obviously there are formal concerns and content balanced in the essence of a particularly strong image. I think there is a coalescence. In Spanish, they often use the word *coyuntura*. This means things that come together in a particular way, a tension between things, or an ambiguity, or an emotionality. There isn't one kind of good photograph in my mind, but there is an interplay of these elements.

*DS:* Just to continue with *Voyages* for a minute, because I think that is very representative of your ideas and work in many ways, it sounds as if what you're describing is this intersect between the moving camera and the still picture. It is as if you're trying to draw out something further than what the still photograph does. For example, you've described the camera movement in the film, as it moves over still pictures, as moving across and back in space, visually drawing the image forward, and the film's structure, in part, as having a picture behind a picture. Is that something you felt the moving camera does, in conjunction with the still picture? That it was enhancing your sense of how a picture works, how a photojournalist works?

*SM:* In a way, I'm saying it's what Marc and I felt captured something about that process. Also, the process of memory, which is also fluid and associative, and not a straight line. The way in which one's mind works on parallel tracks.

One idea sets off associatively another, and maybe we were just experimenting in this way in trying to get at something else. Interestingly, the film was criticized for that very reason. People wanted to see the photographs and couldn't understand my being willing to re-crop them in this way. And it's true that as a photographer, I would not have wanted them truly re-cropped. But the fluidity of it seemed to be like a memory dance, which was what I was thinking the film was really about. It was larger than my concern about the specific image being represented; they were only part of the process of what the film was trying to bring together, or provoke in some way. We wanted to move the elements we were drawing out, and conceptually go beyond them.

*DS:* How would you say that *Voyages* and *Pictures from a Revolution* are different? *Voyages* has this sort of interesting exploration through space and time, and I would say *Pictures from a Revolution* is more about layering time and history and people. They seem almost like philosophical tracts, and I mean that very literally. Would you say that is true?

*SM:* I think in a sense they are philosophical and they come at different junctures. They're actually made within the same decade of my work, but *Voyages* is the middle point when I have finished the Nicaragua book. Marc sees the book while I'm still trying to understand what it even means to have made a book of this experience. The initiative begins there, from the book as a fixed form, and in some ways I feel unsatisfied that it can't grapple with the many issues around it. For example, my own subjective experience feels inappropriate to frame within the book. My choice is a very modest signature in the beginning; I don't write an introduction, I don't explain how I got there. Only in the reprint has that material been included in the back of the book, which is now the reprint timed with the thirtieth anniversary of the triumph. When we reprinted the book, as a facsimile of the original book, we added *Pictures from a Revolution* and another film, *Reframing History*, which was done on the twenty-fifth anniversary, when I brought the photos back to Nicaragua as murals and placed them again in the landscape where they had originally been taken. There is also a small Q&A insert, which really tries to contextualize the experience of the project over time. But when I was making the book, it didn't feel appropriate to bring myself into the "why's" or the "how's." It was really about this place at that time in history.

*DS:* This might be an odd question, but do you think a book traps a photograph in a sense?

*SM:* Yes, in a way, it does trap it, and that is part of what I love about the new reprint. It allows a book, which is a fixed form, to be extended in time so it, in fact, has a twenty-five-year timeframe to consider, or reconsider, the original work in multi-dimensional ways. So if you ask about the philosophic nature

of *Pictures from a Revolution*, it was conceived at the ten-year mark after those initial photographs had been made. I'm still fascinated by, curious about, and almost desperate to understand the impact of time. We begin the film six months before the tenth anniversary of the Triumph over Somoza, when I'm wondering what has happened to the people in my photographs. It was as simple a question as that which launched the search to find them and understand what the photographs meant in time to them as well.

*DS:* So in a sense, *Voyages* seems an exploration of your subjectivity and *Pictures from a Revolution* is an exploration of the subjectivity of the people whose photographs you took?

*SM:* Yes, except that *Pictures [from a Revolution]* also brings my reflections and the bond we experienced. It pursues the way in which a photograph is a crossing between a photographer and a moment in the life of someone in a picture. So I go back to this idea of a relationship. A photograph is a relationship. I recognize that it is a curious kind of relationship that we've had, by the nature of the fact that I made those photographs in sometimes an accidental, or an incidental, way. It's coincidental that we happen to be in that space at that moment in time. I make this image that I then select, reproduce, etcetera, and it has a life of its own afterward. So I'm revisiting all of that process, the intersection as a photographer with the subject and with time, which changes how we both see and understand what the photograph means.

*DS:* *Pictures* is a film about your return to Nicaragua after ten years. The film follows your attempt to track down the people whose pictures you took a decade before. What would the project of that return have been without actually filming it and making it into a film? How different would that have been?

*SM:* I basically brought my camera when we went back to find people, and initially I made a few portraits and they were completely of no interest to me. It wasn't about that. It was about memory and reflections; it was not really about just how things looked different because time has played a role with them.

*DS:* Do you know the work of Chris Marker?

*SM:* Vaguely. I don't really have training either as a photographer or certainly as a filmmaker. On the other hand, I've had certain practical exposure. I worked as an assistant film editor to Fred Wiseman when I was taking my first class, and only class, in photography. I was torn between the two mediums right from the beginning. Strangely, one couldn't study both at Harvard at that time. So I was a graduate student and I had to make a choice. I ended up actually taking a class in photography for the first semester and then working

with Fred throughout that year on his film *Basic Training*. So that was my resolve of the dilemma that was posed to avoid making the choice. But then in my own life, I sort of ricocheted between them, and also my partner was a filmmaker so I certainly feel that film was part of my lived experience. But not in a studied way. It's very different to really study as a filmmaker.

*DS*: Can you describe what effect Wiseman has had on your work?

*SM*: I remember Fred's *Titicut Follies* [US, 1967]. It has an intimacy and a graphic price to it. It's uncomfortable—the role of the outsider in that community, but it's engaging at the same time. It's disturbing that such brutality is occurring and hidden, except through the exposure by the camera. So there was kinship for me. And it was very early, before I knew that photography was the path I would follow. I think it probably played a role in shaping that early consciousness of what I was drawn to and a medium that is so powerful.

*DS*: The reason I mention Chris Marker is because he made a film called *Sans Soleil*. In watching *Voyages*, in a weird way it is very reminiscent. I think it's a film that would fascinate you because he uses a narrator who is a female voice but it's a male third person that is being described. "He did this" or "he did that," and it's all about time and memory and moving through spaces of locations and people. It's really an extraordinary film, and that's why I asked you about him particularly.

*SM*: What year was that film made?

*DS*: I think *Sans Soleil* was probably 1983.

*SM*: I may have seen *Sans Soleil*. I have some sort of vague sense about it, but my guess is that Marc Karlin certainly would have seen it because I think he was interested in Marker. When we were doing the writing and dialogue for *Voyages*, Channel 4 did not want my voice, which I was always startled by, having already worked with *Strippers*. I assumed Marc was going to use the sound that we recorded for these conversations. But he didn't record them in a way that would be good broadcast quality. So then in fact when he re-transcribed the sections he wanted from the original sound, he had an English actress read the text and I was absolutely horrified. In fact, that is the sound track that it went out with on Channel 4 and I hated it and finally convinced him to go back to the scratch sound track, which was the only other solution I found acceptable, if it wasn't going to be my original voice. In other words, I didn't want to reread my words as if they had been spoken, which at the time seemed a falsity. So, I protested and we then made the final film that now circulates with Marc's voice. And actually, it only really circulates through the Museum of Modern Art; there isn't really another life to this film, sadly.



DS: Very sad.

SM: The other relational point might be that *Pictures from a Revolution*, unlike *Voyages*, is coming from many, many hours of interrogation-style interviews with my partners, Dick Rogers and Alfred Guzzetti. That sound track actually has quite an interesting emotionality within my narrative, which is interwoven with other interviews. I think that the strength of that film does come from the very fact that you're hearing me not knowing the answer to what it is I'm searching for. I think it's a very important element in the way the sound works in the film.

DS: I think it's incredibly effective. It's remarkable. It really works, I think, for many reasons, it makes you connect and disconnect, because it's his voice and then there is a "her," and there is an "I." I think it works extremely well.

SM: Now you're talking about *Voyages*.

DS: Yes, I mean in *Voyages*.

SM: Yes, and I think equally, in a different way, in *Pictures*, there is a whole issue in film about how sound is delivered. It's very critical. The way these narratives function with the emotionality, or the tension with Marc's voice that is also in the blandness. Some people found it too cold because they knew me. When the film was first broadcast, they were outraged that it was a British voice, which made no sense for an American photographer. I felt that it should have had the documentary proof of her voice. "Truth" I'm using in quotes, but it should be relational to the experience in a different way.

DS: It's interesting that sound is of such great concern to you. Can you talk a little bit more about what sound means to you?

SM: I don't know if I have so much more to say about it. I just think a lot about the difference between sound and text and objects without either. Maybe I can put it more clearly with *Strippers*. Just reading the text next to a photograph of an excerpt of sound—which I edited without changing the structure of a sentence—the emotionality of the sound of that same text is just dramatically different. That's part of what I like about this reprint of *Strippers* with a CD collaged sound track. You don't have all of the sound that is transcribed as text in the book, but you have an overlapping of elements. I do think the whole persona that is delivered through sound is significantly different.

DS: Very true. Sorry to keep harping on *Voyages*, but in it you talk about learning a new vocabulary, and I was wondering what you thought is the nature of that vocabulary. What is it made of? Do you have any way of describing that?

*SM:* I don't remember the context in which I'm actually saying that. I just don't remember what I'm saying that I'm responding with that idea or what I must have meant at that time.

*DS:* Well, it was an interesting use of the word "vocabulary"; that's what I picked up on. And again, I think it is all part of that theme of trying to find ways in which you grasp the interaction of what is still and what is moving, and the photograph, and your distance.

*SM:* I do think about photographs as a kind of vocabulary, but not in a stylist sense. I think the risk with photography is that you find a way to mediate one experience through a set of images, and they have different kinds of vocabularies in relation to that—the rendering has a different kind of vocabulary. Whether you're working in black and white, or you're working with color, part of my thinking then was maybe the discovery of color and how it functioned, as well as its problematic nature. You don't want something to become overly aestheticized with composition or formal elements. I don't know exactly what I meant when I said I'm searching for a new vocabulary, but I think if you look at the work previously, *Strippers* is in black and white, so one of the significant things about *Nicaragua* is that I'm working with a new medium: color.

*DS:* You talk about being unable to place the image, and you have talked about that a lot. So I don't know if you want to discuss that now, but in the context of what we're talking about, I don't know if there is anything more you would like to add.

*SM:* My practice led me to reflect on the different kinds of contexts and meanings as a result of the placement of image. In other words, when an image lives in a magazine which is its first site of appearance and then moves to a book, or it may be revisited in film form, or now, there are a whole set of new relationships through the web and blog links, with the multiplicity of forms that are evolving. They all cause me to try to understand how the image itself changes as it is challenged by some of these contexts. Obviously in a magazine, when there are headlines and context written by others, it's one thing. When it's resequenced in a book by me, it's a very particular narrative that I'm building. That's kind of what I'm talking about, how to place an image and how to rethink them.

*DS:* Do you like the multiplicity that is happening now? Is that more exciting? Is it chaotic?

*SM:* It's both. It can be chaotic and it can be disturbing, decontextualized when I'm mostly trying to recontextualize photographs as fragments. I don't think just the traditional argument about copyright is the important one, but

this lack of referential and respect for the origin of images is concerning to me. Or the ways in which photographs aren't appropriately acknowledged, attributed, etcetera. People don't even know anymore where they came from—the histories or the people they document.

*DS:* With your wide sense of an image, is it something that you feel you can work more fruitfully with all this multiplicity?

*SM:* I definitely have chosen to be in the world of multiplicity. I am not living with pictures under my bed that only I get to see. Every time there is a new placement, let's say, of an image, it opens up possibilities of new thinking. So I'm excited by that, and there is a dimension of it that is exciting anyway. But I can also see where it's problematic. But maybe we can leave it there.

*DS:* Sure. Let's go back to what you were saying about memory. Do you think memory needs images? Is that the nature of memory?

*SM:* Well, I know my memory works differently when I have images. In any number of ways, I also do not always remember beyond the image, how I came to make that image. It takes work to even re-stitch all the details—I don't keep elaborate diaries, which I often regret but I don't make the time for, that would help re-stitch my memory. But I definitely find photographs useful in that role of reconnecting me to a moment in time and what I would have felt at that moment.

*DS:* Do you think that's something, as the human mind works, that is really intrinsic to our ways of feeling our way through memory, coping with memory, loving memory?

*SM:* Yes, I guess, and the way to know that would be to understand the way memory works for a culture that has not had visual media as part of its own documenting process. You know, a family that doesn't have photographs or family albums. And then to really explore memory and how the mind holds on, and what it holds on to.

*DS:* Well, even without photographs, all cultures respond to color and shape and sound, of course. Our cultures are built on those, I would say those three things especially. So even without a picture, we are always experiencing the world in terms of picturisms, as it were.

*SM:* Yes, and that's very much in the present tense. I don't know what work has been done in trying to record the ways in which people remember things without images. Obviously, there is the storytelling capacity of a culture and oral history of stories that get passed on. That's a different kind of

remembering than we're talking about. I don't think I have enough to say about that beyond what we've touched on. I'm definitely interested in the ways that photographs play a role in memory and provoke memory that people would like to negate or erase. Obviously this includes the work I have done about the disappeared and the violence in Latin America. That's a major aspect of what it means to have a document as evidence of an act that others would deny or prefer didn't exist.

*DS:* "In a picture, there is a whole lot missing"—that's your quote. Obviously, this is something you have to deal with, but the photograph can parse memory too, as much as enhance it, provoke it, stimulate it.

*SM:* Yes, absolutely. And that's why I think so often photographs are used as a kind of trigger. They're a trigger, they're not complete. They're part of the ricochet that can curve within memory flow, as it were.

*DS:* Do you worry that it can also censor memory because it can capture it and in so doing frame out, as we've all done? You look at a picture or you write something about something, and it actually makes it stationary, as it were, it keeps it within the parameters of what that is.

*SM:* That's funny. Now I have an installation in Bogotá, where I have five photographs from the Nicaraguan insurrection, with film clips from *Pictures from a Revolution*, which are very short, three to four minutes. They are portraits of the people in the photographs that are above. It brought back a conversation in which when the film first came out, people really wanted to remember the photographs as objects and not think about the people in them. So there is a way in which I'm reframing the memory of that photograph, by bringing in the excerpt of that specific person who speaks and therefore in some way challenges the photograph.

*DS:* Well, that is definitely something that you've talked a lot about—the dehumanizing, or the humanizing, and where your placement is as the photographer. And what is your power, in a sense. You've talked also about what it is to know a subject, or a place, or a person.

*SM:* It's sort of an acknowledgment of how little I might know, as much as I might try. I think it's more in the spirit of that. I think I'm still dealing with the surface of things, and I'm doing a lot of learning that's around the moments I may also capture and images that I'm working all the time to understand, to know what I see or what I might be able to capture.

*DS:* Do you feel yourself as a conduit? Is that what you hope?

*SM:* Well, conduit is a little narrow because literally a conduit is tubing. That is a little too direct. But a catalyst, maybe. The connectivity role is there for sure.

*DS:* Do you think a picture can retain inherent lifeness? Or does it have to become something else?

*SM:* I think that's what's interesting about iconic images. They feel very present for us, even though they may only be moments from a long ago past. Even looking at my pictures this week in Bogotá, those five photographs really hold their presence. It was hard for people to think that they were made thirty years ago. That timeframe doesn't match the feeling in the photographs. The intensity that the protagonist felt is still present. It doesn't feel like the past tense; it feels like it could be happening now.

*DS:* You also talked about the perfect description of a photograph and, in a sense, the photographer is travel, trespass, and leaving. Do you feel that you are left in a constantly active world?

*SM:* Yes, and that's the cycle. And rather than regret the leaving, I have learned to live with the leaving, knowing that I can return. So it creates a circle, rather than a line with point A to B. This returning is cyclical.

*DS:* It's like loops through time, in a sense. I guess it sounds as if you feel that your constant returning re-humanizes the picture because you bring your person to that picture.

*SM:* Yes, the person or bringing one's body back is very meaningful. I think I learned that very early. Even in *Strippers*, because the photographs are made over three summers. In that first summer, the randomness of when the time was over, the shows were over, summer was over, and the feeling that whatever I had wasn't adequate. I felt I had to explore it further, or more deeply. And then returning the second summer, and being welcomed back in a significantly deeper way. So the body returns is kind of memory tissue to me. I know it will be meaningful, I don't know where it will lead me, but I know it's an act that I need to pursue in some way, and I have in a number of different projects, though not in all of my work, obviously. There are pictures one makes and one leaves behind in an archive, literally, that are buried there and not necessary to revisit.

*DS:* Or at least someone else may revisit it.

*SM:* Yes, someone else might.

*DS:* I mean the body would be perhaps your most major focus. The flesh and blood of the body, the livingness of the body, its wear and tear, and its life.

*SM:* Yes, and in our body, we carry our memory. Our bodies are profoundly carrying our memory and not just in the form of our scars and our skin, which has to be sensitized, but at the same time be very protective.

*DS:* Yes, it's the organic living in time, it's the thing that carries us around.

*SM:* It carries us around and it also marks our experience.

*DS:* Right, it enters us.

*SM:* Or we see the markings of our experience on it, or in it.

*DS:* Also, you're interested in what is done to the body, and how people use or abuse the body, and how the body survives. In *Pandora's Box*, you look at the relationships in an S&M club.

*SM:* Yes, and also the work in *Domestic Violence* [1991] was very much about that.

*DS:* In what way? Can you describe that?

*SM:* Well, what we just talked about—the markings of the body. I'm looking then at the evidential nature of the violence upon women, but psychologically I am very in tune from even the *Strippers* work and the kind of violence they experienced. It wasn't just visible, though some of it is on their bodies. In one of the first photographs I make in *Strippers*, you see her fingernails chewed down to the bone and there's a scar on her belly from a caesarean and black and blue marks on her thighs. It's the opening photograph of *Strippers*, so it definitely shows a body as a landscape of memory.

*DS:* And reality.

*SM:* Yes.

*DS:* Just to segue into women as having perhaps a different kind of eye. I mean women are treated differently in society, our lives are complex economically, and with child-rearing, status, prejudice, all of these things. You have talked about the fact that a woman like yourself might bring greater sympathy to a subject. Do you think that there is a different type of artistic perception that a woman brings to a subject?

*SM:* You know, I'm always cautious about this kind of question. I find it very difficult to evaluate, frankly, and obviously, being a woman, it is what my experience is. I can see the differences in terms of process, whether it's talking about strategies of invisibility or mediation. But I just don't know how to evaluate the objects—you know, the things that get made and whether or not they have feminine consciousness. I'm not sure I can see feminine consciousness counter to what a male might have rendered. It's too specific to me to understand my own work, to understand its relationship to a larger group of women's work even when I'm in the field with other women. You know, how do you evaluate that aspect of our differences?

*DS:* Right, that makes sense. And certainly a political consciousness is a political consciousness.

*SM:* Yes, it's specific to an individual, but for multiple reasons. It's not just gender-related. Obviously, my life has been impacted both by the subjects I've chosen and the times in which I've lived.

*DS:* Yes, very, very evidently. Which writers do you think have influenced you the most?

*SM:* I stumble on that question, because I can think of writers whose work has directly paralleled mine. Two, for example: one is the anthropologist James Clifford, who I think I read very late, because he wasn't writing when I was in college. But as I came to read him later, I realized how well he was articulating some of the experiences I'd had in terms of being an outsider to a community, particularly. And also John Berger, and probably not the best known of his work, but *A Seventh Man*, and his search for ways to render a narrative with his partner Jean Mohr as a photographer. I think I was very impacted by his effort to find different means to account for his experience, or to render the experience and his concern about immigrants and immigration to Europe, in fact. So, you know, those are two examples for different reasons. They think about the dilemmas of my practice, and the kinds of contradictions I might be trying to work on, or want to work through.

*DS:* Those are interesting. And what about filmmakers? Does anyone come to mind?

*SM:* Not to the particular films I've made.

*DS:* Or just in general. An aesthetic, an interest, something that draws you?

*SM:* Well, as I said, Fred Wiseman's work was really important to me initially as a photographer, not as a filmmaker. And similarly, Danny Lyon's photographs

and films were of interest to me. It's not really what I've done with film, I guess. I'm sure there are others, but they're not coming to me immediately.

*DS:* As long as we're on that subject, are there painters that grabbed you in a very intense way?

*SM:* I look a lot at painting, but influences are a hard question, because I've of course been impacted by lots of work that I've seen. Not because I find kinship to it, but because it forces me—for example, Cindy Sherman's work which is so much about self and symbolic in sexual ways. I'm completely opposite. I mean, when we talk about using our bodies, I use my body to put myself places and be and endure through the act of witnessing. I think differently than the way she uses her body to describe herself in her early black-and-white mimicking of cinematic stills, or in her much later work. She uses her body in a decisively distinct and different way from mine. She brings us into her body to look at her body, and if anything I am ignoring my body. It's the means by which I move and engage, but it's not what I want to look at.

*DS:* But it intrigues you how she uses her body?

*SM:* Yeah, I'm just saying when her work came, it put the question to me and made me think about that. There are other people who, like John Szarkowski, write a lot about “mirrors” and “windows” and people who look inward and outward.

*DS:* Just to pick up on your point about James Clifford and what you talked about on leaving and returning. You've worked a lot abroad and therefore naturally you are automatically a foreigner. How did you experience 9/11 when you were taking photographs in your home and your city? Is there a major difference at all?

*SM:* Well, I think it's interesting—the word “foreigner” or “outsider.” And it was my memory muscle, literally, and we've been talking about the body that carries the memory of what to do. So probably my immediate reaction to 9/11 and the fact that I moved very quickly toward it, as others ran away, was that lived history of looking at terrible things, moments or societies that are in crisis. What struck me mostly was the little that I was able to capture of it. I was struck by the fact that we were eliminated from the site very quickly, and unlike in a foreign country where we would have made demands on the military or the government or whoever was preventing us, we were unable to effectively change the policy of, I guess, Giuliani and the police, who very effectively after the first twenty-four hours limited our ability to witness what had happened. So my memory is a mix of my instant response, and then being forced out of Ground Zero, along with many others. And trying to then



make sense of the signs as those days evolved. There were patterns even from my own past—Plaza de Mayo and the mothers carrying signs of the disappeared, which reappeared on our streets as images of people who were lost or died or we were searching for. So that was kind of interesting to me, focusing on those parallel experiences.

*DS:* Sometimes memory makes parallels in order to make sense of something that is terribly estranging. Do you think maybe that is part of what was happening?

*SM:* So you're asking if the people who put out the photographs knew the photographs of—

*DS:* No, I mean for you, as you were making resemblances in the 9/11 experience to other experiences you had even though it was different in many ways. Just to go back to memory, those parallels can sometimes be put in place to make sense of something that is very overwhelming.

*SM:* What's tricky about the question is that I wasn't manufacturing. This is the difference of conceptual art or people that work with reenactment and such. I was responding to what I was seeing. I might have been more drawn to that aspect of what was happening through memory because of that historical reference I carried.

*DS:* I guess it's almost specious in a way because one just is and there it is.

*SM:* Yes, there it is and you either see it as significant or not. That's another aspect of it, and part of creating the significance is perhaps a response from historical memory of those images.

*DS:* Is it important to you to have made a difference in history, or in social change, with your photographs?

*SM:* I think what matters most is that I've made a few photographs that are meaningful to the people in them. Perhaps historically, they become valuable to a larger community and that feels meaningful to have contributed in some way.

*DS:* You joined Magnum in the 1970s after *Carnival Strippers*, and I think you were twenty-seven, is that right?

*SM:* Yes, I was twenty-seven when I joined, but I became twenty-eight quickly. It was in June, which is my birthday.

*DS:* And there are only five women currently at the agency.

*SM:* No, there are more than five. Actually, there are seven women who are currently in Magnum and there are two who are in our collection, because they are considered members if we represent their work. We really think of nine women in Magnum, but yes, there are seven active women. And Eve [Arnold] is active even though she is in a nursing home and is in her early nineties. But we think of her as part of our membership still; she has not become a contributor to our collection. Upon her death, her status would change but the feeling is that her presence is still felt among most of our members. And she continues to sign prints.

*DS:* I wanted to ask you about Eve Arnold because of course we met through her film, *Behind the Veil*. What do you think we owe to her as a photographer, just in general and not necessarily as a pioneer woman in Magnum?

*SM:* The “owe” is a little heavy, but I don’t think of her in isolation in this way. I think of a number of women who were explorers with the medium; the camera led them into the world, be it in film or with a still camera. And their choice was to share in whatever way they could what they found in those places and times. So I feel connected to her in that way. It’s a modest role. I think I follow Eve in the sense that we’re not as hooked on ourselves as those who we are coming to know, or hoping to know. So in that sense, there’s kinship. I’m just not comfortable with the notion of “owing” her, and I think everyone has to find their own way to make sense of themselves in time. The camera is an excuse, it gives you this excuse. The question of the privilege of being “other than” is what you do with it, and in what way you contribute, which is what we just talked about. So, I don’t think this is really something that is going to be useable for you, but it is maybe something you could write about as an introduction to this Q&A, you can write about how we met through this coincidence, which was that Eve was not able to represent herself at the showing of the film. And I certainly felt kinship with her to be there with the audience in some way.

*DS:* Is there anything more you would like to talk about that you’re working on? You talked about the Bogotá photographs?

*SM:* That just happens to be on exhibit now. Not really, I think I’m taking time after this show at the ICP and a new catalogue revisiting thirty years of work. I’m seeing what the next steps will be; there are a number of things I’m thinking about.

*DS:* That was fabulous. Thanks very much.

*Drake Stutesman is the editor of Framework.*