

How to live or in the tradition of women redefining the world:  
Notes on AL SOL: photographs from Mexico, Cameroon, and Nicaragua by Stella Johnson.

If it can be said that a good story continues off the page then a photograph can extend beyond the frame.

But if it is also true that humans transpose interior landscape for exterior, then the act of looking at a photograph is a re-reading of the photographer's subjectivity through one's own subjectivity.

It starts with who is behind the camera, when and why does she click the shutter. Here, the photographer is an investigator, a detective in search of evidence. Not evidence of crime, evidence of possibility in the largest sense, possibility (or its opposite) magnified. Except in the case of Stella Johnson, the magnifying glass is a camera.

The camera is the medium through which the detective transacts her investigation. She chooses to ask before taking. She begins by inquiring delicately if she may photograph. This takes time. Time allows familiarity, familiarity begets intimacy, intimacy begets trust, trust begets friendship. Gradually she is absorbed into household, community,

What right does a white woman from Massachusetts have to travel to Mexico, Nicaragua, Cameroon, to photograph people who live without running water or electricity? Every right, if respect and recording of the tiniest fragments of daily life are the motives.

Stella Johnson's 2004 collaboration with an anthropologist (Dr. Lourdes Arizpe of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) on the project *Intangible Heritage in Mexico* exploited the photographer's methodology in service of documenting non-institutional culture. Here is where the glove fits.

At a time when indigenous culture has eroded to the degree that intangible cultural heritage is safeguarded by Unesco, Johnson has simultaneously arrived at a practice whose intent matches need.

Let us not generalize about personal sacrifice or lack thereof, about capturing the moment, about camps of photography, about first and third world. Stella Johnson has, in a tradition of women redefining the world for themselves, found a way to comment on fragments of daily life that points in a direction of possibility. And let that deceptively understated achievement reveal its own magnitude and self respect.

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