

It Hurts to Look

Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics

by David Levi Strauss. Published by Aperture, 2003. 224 pp., \$29.95

Reviewed by Jack Massing

The essays of David Levi Strauss explore some of the most difficult of human conditions, as recorded in hard-hitting photographic images. The images and Strauss's words are enough, at the least, to move anyone to deeper thought and, at the most, to inspire some level of political action. Written between 1986 and 2002, the 18 essays are culled from exhibition catalogs for artists including Francesca Woodman, Miguel Rio Branco, and Hannah Villager, and from magazine articles written for *The Nation*, *Camerawork*, *Aperture*, and *Artforum*, among others. Also represented are collaborations with visual artists including Alfredo Jaar, Jim Goldberg, and Bobby Neel Adams.

Essays on photography and politics have never been more important than they are today. Evidence of some sort is at the center of most political decisions, and problems arise when that evidence is politicized and used as a weapon instead of a treatment for the better health of the political body. *Between the Eyes* is about reading photographs and understanding the interpretation of their truth.

Pain permeates each of Strauss's essays, whether his subject is the falling of the World Trade towers, the disturbing photographs of Sebastião Salgado, the pervasive landmine problem in Cambodia, runaway teens, or the tragic suicide of the talented young photographer Francesca Woodman. Strauss's compassion for the story within the image cuts through politics and opens up the wounds of the individuals affected in and by the photographs that he discusses. In the essay "A Sea of Grievs Is Not a Proscenium: The Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar," there is the powerful story of Gutete Emerita, a Tutsi woman who bore witness to a brutal act of genocide carried out by the Hutu, at her church during Sunday mass. The slaughter of 400 people included her husband and two young sons. Emerita somehow escaped with her daughter. Her eyes are the subject of Jaar's "The Eyes of Gutete Emerita" (1996), a work that serves as the frontispiece for the dust



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Isabella, a landmine victim in Tica, Mozambique, with her children. Photograph by Bobby Neel Adams.

jacket of this book. Strauss writes that his first encounter with this artwork made him physically ill; he still has lingering nausea when remembering it.

As John Berger writes in his introduction, "Any tyranny's manipulation of the media is an index of its fears," summing up in a single sentence the difficulty of making simple political decisions. We all have some fear and we all manipulate others to some extent. Berger goes on: "I am talking about the pain of living in the present world," effectively describing the overriding tone of the book. No matter who is in power at any time anywhere in the world, there seems to be thoughtless violence and pain.

The book's opening quote from Wim Wenders's *The Act of Seeing* reinforces this:

The most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words, what you show people, day in and day out, is political... And the most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change.

Strauss is as careful a thinker and as serious a viewer of images and their disposition in media and culture as anyone writing today. The information age is both the advantage and the burden that Strauss has over the pantheon of critical thinkers who came before him. On one hand, the endless digital resource of the Internet aids his research and gives him the chance to gorge his eyes on images scattered throughout the world. On the other hand, the media boom, with its plethora of periodicals and books, aided and abetted by the Web, makes it difficult for any one person to stand out and be heard. Luckily for us, Strauss's mind is precise and thoughtful. His ability to seek out and expose humanity's most horrific images is perhaps the reason he generally works at night, in the protective embrace of darkness and silence. At night, Strauss has the time and attention to sift through the pain of the world. Time to reflect on the images that are magically rendered by the photographic process and the ability to analyze and understand what is being spoken by those images. Time to ask his readers about their politics and how their

empathy may change when they confront the inevitable onslaught of compelling photographic evidence in the future.

We are the same cruel barbarians now that inhabited the planet thousands of years ago, and we are here to stay. We will not change. We have the photographs to prove it. The growing documentation of conflict, crime, and brutality has been made possible by ever-smaller camera equipment and faster technology. Today we have live coverage and instant reports of the world's pain as it happens. Photography has replaced our collective memory. Painting, illustration, and writing prior to the dawn of photography had their effects, but they are nothing compared to the widespread distribution of easily reproduced and easily shared photographic images. David Levi Strauss's is a hand that writes very well, and with his gifted fist, he punches you right in the nose. ■