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Private Moments, Public Relations: The Photography of Esther Bubley

In a 1948 photo essay called "America on Wheels," it is evident that in the immediate post-War years, civilian inter-city travel was still a rare and special event. The bus station is a field of fedoras, each as individually wrinkled, shaped, primped, and lived-in as a face. Nattily dressed men read their papers or talk, engaging that special hearing that enables intimate conversation in public spaces.

People dressed up to ride on a Greyhound. Even after boarding, they kept their furs wrapped around their shoulders, their draped and flowered hats sitting proudly or perkily atop their heads. But to relax the pose and retreat from the pageant, all you had to do was look out the window. Then you could be alone with your own thoughts.

Capturing them was a twenty-six-year-old photographer who had mastered the art of being invisible: Esther Bubley.

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In 1937-1938, while a student at Wisconsin's Superior State Teacher's College, first-generation American Esther Bubley avidly read *Life* and other photo magazines. She was captivated by Dorothea Lange's photos of the taut and weary faces of migrant laborers, by Walker Evans's images of the porches of Appalachian shacks, as worn and hunched as the families that sat on them, looking wearily into his camera lens.

She'd thought she wanted to be a painter or illustrator, but in the work of these photographers for the Farm Security Administration, Esther saw the opportunity to reveal others, to make their life stories compelling and real, and for this reticent young woman, that was a prospect far more attractive than revealing herself. So in 1940, at age nineteen, after a one-year photography program at the Minneapolis School of Design, she set out for New York City to be a freelance photographer.

Though Esther Bubley trailed the early giants of photojournalism at the start of her career—and, by the time she died in 1998, was significantly less famous than contemporaries like fashion photographer Richard Avedon—the arc of her career ultimately paralleled that of print photography itself. What began as a tool to help us literally see and understand the wider world has been increasingly applied to the mission of shaping opinion and selling products, to the point that today, it's no longer a given that what one sees in photographs is even real. Truth is now subordinate to purpose.

But this confluence of journalistic, artistic, and commercial objectives did not begin with digital images or even with the rise of glossy fashion magazines. In fact, it drove some of the great and almost iconic documentary-photography efforts of the twentieth century. In these projects, Esther Bubley—who was granted a degree of freedom that would alarm and appall most public relations professionals of today—displayed a quiet power to educate and reveal that transcended the very topical and increasingly commercial purpose to which her art was applied.

Influencing the Influencers

In 1942, Esther Bubley began her apprenticeship as a documentary photographer in the historical section of the Office of War Information (OWI), a division that had, until just a few months earlier, been a part of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). A New Deal initiative, the FSA's mission was to build popular support for the government's attempts to aid the poor. But the OWI—created in the immediate aftermath of the United States's formal entry into World War II—was chartered to support a different

Esther Bubley. *Bus Story.* 1947. Standard Oil Company (New Jersey).

Esther Bubley. *Bus Story.* 1947. Standard Oil Company (New Jersey).

propaganda effort. Though still led by legendary photo editor Roy Stryker, according to his team, the OWI was instructed to depict "shipyards, steel mills, aircraft plants, oil refineries, and always the happy American worker."[1] With the rationing of gasoline and tires, automobile travel declined and bus travel dramatically increased. It was here, in 1943, that Bubley did "Bus Story" (prequel to "America on Wheels"), in which the vehicles are more crowded, the passengers more uncomfortable, and many more of the men are in uniform.

But her tenure at the OWI was brief. Roy Stryker, chafing under the editorial constraints of his new job, was ready to move on, and when he left the OWI to lead a new commercial initiative, he took Bubley and several other talented photographers with him.

That initiative was the Standard Oil (New Jersey) Photo Project, which between 1943 and 1950 sponsored "the largest photographic documentation project ever undertaken in America by anyone other than the federal government."[2] With a mission to restore the shattered reputation of this energy giant, it might also be considered one of the largest public relations projects in American history to that point.

At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Standard Oil was the world's leading producer and distributor of petroleum products. While even then Americans perceived the oil industry as corrupt, by 1943 their view of this particular company was especially contemptuous. In 1942, U.S. Senate hearings revealed that a secret deal between Standard Oil and Germany's I.G. Farbenindustrie had contributed to the critical rubber shortage that was now facing the nation and impeding the war effort. Hostility was especially prominent among what pollster Elmo Roper referred to as "thought leaders," the affluent professionals, academics, and business people whose views were believed to shape those of the general public. And since these "influentials" were thought to be more cognizant of the arts than the public as a whole, what better way to win their hearts and minds than through their aesthetic sensibilities?

So the company embarked on a project to create a documentary photographic record of the oil industry in all of its facets, to show the human face of the industry in a way that would elicit the interest and sympathy of the American public, with the photos to be made available to researchers, publishers, corporations, museums, and anyone else who might find them valuable.

For the seven years that this project was funded, Stryker's belief that "there's a drop of oil in everything" gave his photographers license to travel broadly and shoot at will. "You're not just photographing for Standard Oil," Roy Stryker had told Esther, John Vachon, and Edwin Rosskam when he first recruited them for the project. "You're photographing America. You're recording history. Everything is in flux. You will see things that won't be around again."

For Esther, having broken into the world of professional photography by shooting glassware and china for *Vogue*'s Christmas Gifts issue at a studio just a few blocks away, these were inspiring words. But while she dutifully shot the main streets, shop fronts, and signs that so intrigued some of her colleagues in their ability to amplify time and place, it was faces and the skewed geometry of people together that intrigued her.

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In Tomball, Texas—a town dominated by the Humble Oil Company, a Standard Oil subsidiary—Esther planted herself for six weeks. And in the comprehensive portrait of a town that she produced, we see not the aspirational images of today's commercial photography, but real people in the unguarded moment.

In one photo of Tomball ranch workers, the fence posts seen between the bottom two rungs stretch out towards the horizon; the terrain beyond them is flat and seemingly endless. But clustering together, this tableau of men at the ready dominates the landscape. We don't know if they are spectators or just gathering on a break, but it almost doesn't matter. What we do know from the balls of their feet resting lightly on the sturdy wood and the line of their hats almost at the apparent height of the clouds is that they are falling in, once again ready to take on the world.

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In 1950, on the oil-fueled ferry from Malmö to Copenhagen, a glum child bracketed by two adults stares into Esther's camera lens under the glowing, elevated watch of the Queen. But only the pointy profiled man near the border of

Esther Bubley. *Oil Town, U.S.A., Tomball, Texas.* 1945. Standard Oil Company (New Jersey).

Esther Bubley. *Malmö to Copenhagen Ferry.* 1952. Standard Oil Company (New Jersey).

the shot is looking at anyone; each member of the troika is actively engaged only with her own thoughts and sensations.

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These private moments in public places did not represent public relations as we know it today. Rather, as Roy Stryker said about the residents of Tomball when they saw Bubley's contact sheets, "They didn't realize she was there, she wasn't invading them, she was sort of floating around. And all of a sudden they saw themselves, not unpleasantly, yet with her discernment . . . and they said, 'My God, it's interesting.'"[3]

Whether at the individual or societal level, enabling people to almost accidentally see themselves—like the unplanned glimpse of one's own reflection in a store window—was the mission of every Stryker-run program that employed Esther Bubley. It was also the goal of John G. Morris, photo editor at *Ladies Home Journal*, who came to rely on Esther as a freelancer.

130,000,000 Neighbors

"Money, sex, adjustments to marriage and children, daily toil, are of uncommon interest to us all because they are common to us all," noted iconoclastic editor Bruce Gould who, along with his wife, Beatrice Blackmar Gould, took over as editors of the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1935. "No two readers meet their problems in the same way, and individual response provides infinite plot and subplot."[4]

Based on that premise, in 1940 they launched a section of the magazine called "How America Lives." Each month this feature focused on an American family that was struggling with ordinary challenges, depicting them through words and photos.

The sheer diversity of the 250 families featured from the start of the series until the Goulds's resignation in 1962 suggests that they achieved the breadth they were aiming for. They told the stories of a wealthy Chicago meat-packing

Esther Bubley. *The Roods' Promised Land*. From "How America Lives," *Ladies Home Journal*, April, 1948.

Esther Bubley. *The Roods' Promised Land.* From "How America Lives," *Ladies Home Journal,* April, 1948.

tycoon, of a post-war family of four living in a three-room Manhattan apartment while saving for their longed-for suburban home, of a black sharecropper raising seventeen children on an annual income of $26 a year, of lonely wives and widows taking in washing to pay the bills, of disabled veterans and alcoholics and parents of children with life-threatening illnesses. And they told these stories not as cautionary tales or rallying cries for Christian values, but as sympathetic documentaries accessorized by practical tips like how to live within an annual budget of $5,220, do over a room with paint and slipcovers for $219, or dress like "a lady" with a $200 wardrobe.

"Each of us ought to know all his 130,000,000 neighbors in our American democracy," wrote J. C. Furnas when introducing this series, and this lofty sentiment was, in some respects, a commercial retooling of the progressive impulse that fueled the photojournalists who had come of age a decade earlier. Esther Bubley's uncanny ability to make herself invisible and reveal her subjects made her an ideal photographer for "How America Lives." In 1948, on the recommendation of Roy Stryker, John Morris sent her to photograph the Roods, a farm family in Wahoo, Nebraska, working to pay off a forty-year mortgage on their 120 acres in six years. She interviewed, she listened, and she watched, even before taking the first shot, as is evident in her notebook entries for the first few days of this assignment:

Beating rug	Gardening	Canning
Washing windows	Painting screen door	Piano lesson
On ladder	Defrosting refrig	Waxing floor
Cooking	Canning	Painting sashes
Hanging out wash	Making aprons	Waxing floor
Sewing	Mending	Taking children out
Dishes	Feeding the birds	Baking
Ironing	Dressing child	Bathing baby
Cooking meal	Putting child to bed (story)	Changing baby
Scrubbing porch	Vacuuming	

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The photos that were ultimately published showed only some of this domestic activity, but the endless work is reflected in the gaunt frames and ropy hands of Mr. and Mrs. Rood. While

Esther Bubley. *A Mind of Her Own.* From "Profiles of Youth," *Ladies Home Journal*, April, 1950.

some of these images appear to be more posed than those in her later work, the clear-eyed respect Esther felt for her subjects is on display even in this collection.

Unlike the migrant families shown in Dorothea Lange's Depression-era images, The Roods are neither deprived nor hopeless. They are working hard and making it, but Esther resists any temptation to make them poster children for the post-war economic boom or the simple virtues of rural life. They are living within themselves, as organic to their environment as the shadows cast by the corn-picker in which they sit and eat lunch.

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This project was the first of many from *Ladies Home Journal*, and one of a string of nearly continuous assignments over the course of the next five years. Her pocket calendars from this period show back-to-back weeks of daily assignments, expenses ("hot dog – 1.00, strawberry shortcake – 3.00, cab to Penn – 2.63") and a frenetic pace:

Get passport pix taken
Birth certificate statted
Call belley
Call landlord
Print more samples for Vogue and Harpers style
Do Tex's bit and Killen story
Do eyestopper girls
Find out about U.N. and ELA
Get in touch with Vogue
Get in touch with Davis

Individual pages are crammed with a mélange of logistics, notes, and overheard conversations, climaxing on one exhausted day in 1951 in which she simply instructs herself to *"Call millions of people."*

Ironically, during the next five years, Bubley was the only female photographer for a magazine with the Gould-authored slogan: "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman." But according to her friend and agent, Sally Forbes, she did not see herself as any sort of feminist pioneer, and though she thoroughly enjoyed her solo trips to all regions of the world, did not think of herself as a particularly bold woman, let alone a maverick. Her gaze was steadily directed outward.

Esther Bubley. *A Mind of Her Own*. From "Profiles of Youth," *Ladies Home Journal*, April, 1950.

"How America Lives" laced exposure with empathy, added generous helpings of practicality and patriotism, and resulted in a comforting broth. But Esther shot images that were anything but bland.

"Bubley had the ability to make people forget she was even around; her pictures achieved incredible intimacy,"[5] noted John Morris. Perhaps nowhere is that intimacy more apparent than in "A Mind of her Own." Published in 1950, this was one of her seven contributions to a series that, in typical *Journal* fashion, profiled individual American teenagers who exemplified the dangers of juvenile delinquency, the risks of ignorance, and the benefits of informed, enlightened mothering.

Eighteen-year-old Joanne Holt, subject of this article, is a handful. The story's text tells us that she is flirtatious, uninterested in school, and uncooperative at home.

The pictures tell us so much more. Petulant, verging on tears, Joanne closes her eyes against her parents' loving exasperation, overwhelmed by the power of those two sets of eyes on her in the deceptively cheery glow of the kitchen light.

But the only thing more unbearable than her parents' gaze is having them turn away from her. Joanne's desperate frustration is palpable; we can almost hear her wail.

Over the course of her fifty-year career, Esther Bubley's work was often financed by large public relations projects and by commercial magazines like *Ladies Home Journal*, whose mission was to entertain, inform, and celebrate an emergent post-war generation of consumers. Whether it was Standard Oil of New Jersey trying to restore its tainted reputation, the Pittsburgh Photographic Library (another Roy Stryker project), established to promote Pittsburgh's post-war resurgence, or Pepsi-Cola International seeking to advance "understanding and friendship among individuals and nations"[6] as it concurrently opened eighteen new bottling plants on six continents, each of Bubley's sponsors had an agenda a little more self-serving than simply revealing the world to its citizens.

But in these projects, as in all her work, Esther refused to make her subjects exemplars or spokespeople for any cause, political or commercial. As guarded as she was about her

own life—Roy Stryker once described her as "a camera lens sticking out through a small opening in a brick wall"—she was quite simply and profoundly interested in the lives around her. It wasn't just her vision that was alert; her diaries are full of snippets of overheard conversation and astute observations, as in this description of the drivers she listened to when shooting "America on Wheels":

> "I talked to one bus [driver] and have listened in to conversations by several. I don't think they talk about anything but women. Bus drivers, at least Greyhound, are all wolves with a capital W. One driver, who escaped before I could get his picture, was showing a letter from a girl who was cussing him out. She said he was not even a wolf. Just a snake."

. . . or this solitary entry from a shoot she did while on an advertising assignment in the employ of Irish International Airlines: *"There is something that the Irish do, a sucking in of breath, which identifies them. Why?"*

Looking at the unguarded, unvarnished, and always respectful photographs she took while funded by corporate sponsors, it's hard to imagine that an ulterior motive—what the "father" of public relations, Edward Bernays, referred to as "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses"[7]—ever even occurred to her.

Instead, Esther Bubley was the woman who wrote, "I feel that accurate depictions of life can be educational, instructive, and also provide aesthetic pleasure."[8]

Such straightforwardness, such lack of agenda, seems almost like naïveté in today's managed culture, at least until we see her pictures. And then, even sixty years after they were taken, we are stopped in our tracks, stunned by the privilege of seeing a stranger's interior life and indebted to the quiet woman who revealed it.

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Notes

[1] Steven W. Plattner, *Roy Stryker: U.S.A., 1943-1950* (Austin: U Texas P, 1983) 14.
[2] Ibid., 11.
[3] Roy Stryker to Richard Doud, October 17, 1963, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
[4] Bruce Gould and Beatrice Blackmar Gould, *American Story* (New York: Harper, 1968).
[5] John G. Morris, *Get the Picture, A Personal History of Photojournalism* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2002) 108.
[6] Sidny M. Maran to Ed Hannigan, Editor, *U.S. Camera*, September 17, 1956. Esther Bubley Archive.
[7] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda.*
[8] Untitled typescript, Esther Bubley Archive, as quoted in Bonnie Yochelson with Tracy A. Schmid, *Esther Bubley: On Assignment* (New York: Aperture, 2005) 5.