Notes from the Field: An Interview with Fred Ritchin

What possibilities for citizenship can be imagined given the highly visual world in which we currently live? Do the circulation and dissemination of visual imagery open avenues for dialogue, participation, communication, and understanding? In what follows, Nandi Dill interviews Fred Ritchin, professor of photography and imaging, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, exploring these and other questions about the changing nature of visual imagery and the various forms of citizenship made possible by it. The interview took place in October 2011.

Visual Citizenship and the Role of Social Media

Nandi Dill: Could you talk a little bit about your work, and how issues of citizenship may have fed into it?

Fred Ritchin: Right now social media have begun to take over. There is perceived to be less credibility in top-down media, especially among younger people, so social media have become the semi-authentic media of reference. What does that mean? Where does that take us? How does one utilize it all? To what extent is it narcissistic? To what extent does it actually have a social impact?

I was in France in the summer of 2011 to attend a conference. I listened to a blogger from Tunisia who worked as a computer programmer but who also photographed street protests before he was put into prison. He described a professional photographer as being somebody with an essentially different role . . . as someone who may wait for one of the demonstrators to be injured or killed and then takes and sells the picture, which allows the professional photographer a certain degree of success. (I do not mean to castigate all professionals by repeating this story, nor am I doing the story sufficient justice.) Whereas, as he explained it, the Tunisian blogger photographs without pausing to frame—because if he frames, he gets arrested or shot or put in prison—so he photographs very, very quickly. He doesn't want to be killed or have any of his fellow citizens killed. If somebody is wounded, the first thing is to pick them up and get them attention, not to make the picture. But if citizens were to photograph a demonstration—and let's say there are four hundred people at it—they might caption it with a significantly higher number of attendees as a way of convincing other people to join the revolution because it appears to be gaining success. The revolution is more important than the imagery. The imagery is simply a way to mobilize a democratic society. To me, this dynamic becomes an issue of citizenship.

A lot of what we have been seeing in mass media imagery has been mercantile, commercial, institutionalized, corporate, with a kind of better-than-thou

attitude—like those poor Tunisians or those poor Libyans or whatever it may be—as if we (in the West) live in this great place of achievement and democracy and prosperity and freedom and so on. I think what has changed—to our credit—is that we have realized that this stance doesn't make sense anymore and that in fact we can and have to learn from the Tunisians and the Egyptians and the Libyans how to resist and how to become citizens who take our roles seriously. Or, as empowered citizens (such as in the Occupy Wall Street movement), we can and have to learn that the cachet of photographing or being photographed is much less important than the achievement of a decent life for people. We have all kinds of rules here—some of them quite vague, largely unknown by the public—about nonengagement and impartiality and fairness and objectivity and so on for the photojournalist, but when you start to analyze them, you realize they can be as subjective as anybody else's rules, and at times quite manipulative. The social media people are saying, "We will be overtly, explicitly subjective. There are an awful lot of us, so you can look at events from various perspectives and compare them while making up your own mind." In social media there is less claim to any kind of hierarchy of importance: at this point there is no one image more significant than another image in explaining contemporary events.

We should ask ourselves, why did most iconic imagery basically disappear in the last decade in the press? There is a little bit of it left, like the Abu Ghraib hooded detainee or Neda Agha Soltan shot in Iran while demonstrating or the woman in the blue bra being abused by government forces in Cairo, but for the most part there is almost no iconic imagery that resonates widely here in the United States. If you have to name an iconic image of the American economic crisis in the 1930s you would have no problem: "Migrant Mother" (by Dorothea Lange), for example. But in contemporary times, there are no iconic images of the economic disequilibrium in the United States. The Vietnam War had its reference points—the Eddie Adams photograph of the man being executed on the street shot through the head, the girl burning from napalm, the Buddhist monk self-immolating. But in the longest war in American history in Afghanistan, what are the images that serve to focus society on what is happening there? There are none.

One of the factors is that social media make little attempt to prioritize or make hierarchies of images, hierarchies of importance, hierarchies of information—the forming of hierarchies may be seen as a form of paternalism, as taking the decision-making power away from people. CNN is not more important than we are or you are or my friend is. If you want to believe in something, that is fine; and if you don't want to believe in something, that is fine too . . . The old methodology of pointing the camera and isolating one thing and making it symbolic of a larger societal problem is largely anathema, much like the fact that the whole idea of a "front page" doesn't work anymore either.

So where is the iconic? In monotheistic religions, it has to be abstract. It's invisible. You could argue that basically behind the image today is the looming invisible: so big, so embracing that we can't see it, but we know it is there. If one relies on the image, it can be contested. We could dispute each other's imagery; we are very good at doing that. We have lots of practice in advertising, government, celebrity, as well as in

Facebook, where we make ourselves look pretty or more handsome all the time. But we don't want to enter that wrestling match of contesting imagery.

ND: Why is that?
FR: Because the other guys with more institutional power will win. They are much better at it. They have more forces. They have think tanks. They are unrelenting. If you enter that kind of a battle, you will lose it; it is an unfair battle from the start. So what happens when you splinter "Image"? You make it so diverse that you can't put your finger on it. You can't say this is wrong because everything is wrong and everything is right. In doing so we try to have a larger share in the role of deciding what is actually going on. And in doing so we are left with lots of funny YouTube videos mocking the way things are without attempting to lead us to a better place. Through social media we become, in a sense, a party of the opposition but without a platform—somewhat like Occupy Wall Street.

The way I talk about this phenomenon in *After Photography* is by reference to the quantum universe versus the Newtonian universe.[1] The Newtonian universe is about cause and effect, so if you fix part of the process then the rest may be fine. In the quantum universe, there is a kind of "the cat is dead and the cat is alive" thing going on. It is true, the cat is dead and the cat is alive—we are in big trouble and we are not in big trouble—both are true. You could argue that Occupy Wall Street is a kind of quantum revolution as opposed to a Newtonian revolution. It is less deterministic and less specific in its goals; it promises less; it remains ambiguous; its sense of community is more amorphous . . . I think there is something wonderful about it conceptually in terms of empowering oneself as a citizen, because we are all as unstable and undefined as each other at this point in terms of our citizenship. It is the 99 percent. It is not the top 10 percent, or the 99. We are not saying (both correctly and incorrectly) that the bottom 3 percent is different from the top 97. We are thinking of nearly all of us as in this crazy mix of instabilities and unfairness.

Ethics and Politics

ND: It seems to me that you are pointing at different ethics, different ways to determine what counts underlying these different forms of citizenship and of journalism—whether we are talking about the man on the street or the more formalized institutions. How would you characterize these institutionalized and noninstitutionalized ways of documenting?
FR: [Henri] Cartier-Bresson said that photojournalism is keeping a journal with a camera, like a diary. You could argue that that is basically what is happening now. The Occupy Wall Street protesters are keeping a diary with their cameras. My experience is that if people look at a bunch of images, they don't necessarily believe them. But if the maker of the images or their subject or an eyewitness shows them the images, then the viewers are more likely to believe them because it is the power and the authority of the person who lived the event that is critical. The person is engaged, and others can relate through this person's life story so that the images are given some sort of authority. Just because I make a picture of you and the photograph says you

were here—well, first of all that is not important, and second of all that may not be true—I may manipulate the image so that it says something else.

When Osama bin Laden was killed, President Obama wouldn't release the image because, in part, people would not have believed it. So the cat is dead and the cat is alive. Osama bin Laden is both dead and alive. That is the kind of quantum universe that we are living in today. I find it really interesting, and I find it reflective of who we are at this point. We live in worlds simultaneously physical (what we call "real") and virtual. There is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. There is no idea that there is one democratic society that really works. There is a disillusionment with any utopian vision and, even more critically, with any practical vision that may be helpful in resolving specific problems.

So if you are keeping a journal with your camera, then that is what photojournalism is. There is a believability to it because we see what you eat, we see where you sleep, we see who are your friends—and we see all this and we build context from it. The images that you make have an authenticity to them because, in a sense, we know you a bit. Then we have this other group of images that both contradict and support your perspective—that is, if all the images support your point of view, then we are not going to believe it. That seems too much like propaganda. So there is this give and take, a sort of discussion rather than an automatic credibility. Is this effective in terms of being immediately practical? No. But is it effective in a kind of deeper spiritual way, as a form of dialogue? I think yes, because we have to ask ourselves who we are and what we want and who we are learning from. And eventually we are going to have to figure out a way to digest all of this and to act.

ND: Do you think that changing technologies—the fact that we all have access to cameras through our phones and that technology has somehow led to a kind of democratization—is opening up pathways to a kind of deeper, more inclusive citizenship?

FR: Several things. What is the difference between a cell phone camera and a camera? I ask the question here because I teach in the Department of Photography and Imaging. Suppose your fourteen-year-old sister has a cell phone camera, and she has got eight hundred pictures on Facebook, and suppose you are paying an enormous amount of money to be here and you have a camera. Why?

I think a major difference is connection. The cell phone camera is immediately connected. You can immediately send the image in multiple ways. I think that what we are really talking about is a desire for and a need for connection, so that the image produced by a cell phone camera, though technically a photograph, is really about reaching out to somebody in some kind of way, or just saying here I am. Are you there? Yes, here I am. Good. The information in it is usually simplified because in using the cell phone camera most people put what is important in the middle of the image and then what is on the sides just happens to be there. Whereas with a camera you might have three or four points of interest and it is all about form and connection, and the whole thing has a different architecture to it—intraconnectedness as opposed to the cell phone's interconnectedness. So the social media image is about the potential for immediate communication, almost like when you would touch somebody, squeeze

their shoulder and say, "Hey, how are you doing, I am here, okay?" And, in the same vein, it is a way to assert that your life is interesting, at times even exciting, as corroborated by the image world.

When we did the *Front Page* exhibition (as part of the Aperture Gallery's exhibition *What Matters Now? Proposals for a New Front Page*), I was ranting and raving about how is it possible that four hundred Americans have the same wealth as 50 percent of the country?[2] It is unbelievable. I think that according to the CIA Factbook even Russia and Yemen have a more equitable income distribution than we do at this point as a country. Twenty percent of Americans own 84 percent of the wealth. When you compare the median wealth of white families and black families, the disparity is twenty times, and eighteen times in the case of Hispanic families. Since they started keeping these statistics in 1984, the country has never been so unequal. Why didn't we know that, and if we knew it, what would we have done about it? If the answer to the second question is that democracy doesn't work and there is nothing to do about such disparity, that would be really quite serious, because the whole idea of citizenship then wouldn't mean anything. What are you a citizen of, if there is nothing to do about anything? It doesn't make any sense at all. But constructing a front page together allows people to focus on things that are important—to me the point of a front page is to tell people things as they develop so at least some of the bad outcomes might be prevented and the good can be maximized. So if we had known that there was a growing disparity of wealth ten years ago, what laws did we need to pass so it wouldn't get so bad? What if we had thought about that fact on our front page twenty years ago, and the disparities would have never grown so extreme?

Similarly, to me war photography is a last resort: prevention-of-war photography is what we should be doing—a photography of peace. We should ask ourselves: what should we do to prevent a war from happening or to prevent global warming or to prevent any terrible things from happening, not wait for the apocalypse so as to make dramatic photographs of it.

ND: And how could a front page be preventive?
FR: Well, take the example of global warming: twenty years ago we could have shown that Wall Street at some point would be flooded due to climate change, which many scientists predict, and we could have dated the picture 2080, or whenever it is that the scientist thinks that will happen. We say: if you don't want this to happen, then we have to pass laws and change both individual and institutional behaviors. So you show a future photograph of Wall Street.[3]

ND: You mean an altered image?
FR: Exactly. Or in the case of conflicts, you show the injustices or the unfairness behind them, and you say this is going to lead to a disastrous outcome, this is going to be really serious. Take economic inequality. We have to do something about it because, like the CIA Factbook says, societies that are as unequal as the U.S. tend to experience financial instability and even revolution. If we don't want things to further deteriorate, we have to do something about it. Instead of creating the Farm Security Administration (FSA) after the Depression happened, create the FSA before it

happens. We say, look at all these people being foreclosed in Florida or California or wherever, and then look at all the banks making all this money. Put it out there before it gets to be a crisis—that is what the press should be doing. Of course it is impossible to do it all the time, and you don't always know about a looming crisis, but you try. A front page—like the one in the exhibition—would bring to people's attention six stories or eight stories a week, a month, or whatever period of time makes sense. The Pew Research Center reported that only something like 3 percent of people, older people as I remember, knew about Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in the beginning, and it wasn't until the protesters started getting arrested that more and more people became aware of OWS. But it took weeks. Now the movement is as well known as the Tea Party, but it should have been on the front page much sooner. Who decides this? Why don't we as a collective have more input? . . . In order to report more comprehensively, as we thought about it in the front page project, you need the subjects' point of view, not just the witness's point of view. You need multiple points of view. You need context, all kinds of context. You need history. You need chronology. You need mapping. You need explanation of terms. You need comparison with other cultures. You need a teacher's guide or multiple teachers' guides. You need discussion forums. You also need a sense of ownership by the readers. And you need a transparent code of ethics that everybody knows about so that they know how the information is acquired.

As a reader, I need to know that I am also a collaborator and an author. If I know anything about the subject, it is almost required of me to chime in and correct misperceptions, because documenting our lives is not a one-way street. It has to be a multiple-way street at this point. Whoever the witnesses are, the professionals are, the semi-professionals are, or the amateurs are, or a hybrid of all—they need to be open enough to make such reporting almost open-source so that anybody who has other ideas can express them without, of course, overloading us with so much information that we cannot digest it all. To keep down the overload we also need transparent filters that are easy for anyone to use.

This idea of a front page really fascinates me. It would also be an effective model for documentaries. You know how there is food and also a "slow food" movement? Well, maybe this could be the "slow documentary movement."

ND: It seems like the front page project could run counter to the idea that this front page and that other front page are a kind of immediate witnessing . . . The evidentiary standard is that someone was there, that they saw this thing and that this is what is happening now.

FR: Right. That would be like shaking the hand of the person—the potential reader/collaborator—to invite them into the discussion, perhaps to interest them with a single image, but we know that the image alone is insufficient and needs further context. The promise of the Web, and digital media in general, given their enormous capacity for information, is that we don't just titillate and move on—we have to be able to provide more nuance, more complexity, at least for those with a preexisting

interest, or even more importantly for those who, confronted with new information, *become* interested.

The Future of the Image

ND: You are thinking about the future of documentary photography and how the digital revolution affects citizenship, and how it is to some extent a practical task. How do we envision a type of document that would reflect the changes that have taken place in terms of what kind of evidence now counts? And how can evidence affect the future as opposed to simply recording the past?

FR: Let's look at it this way: in America we play football. We try to get from one end of the field to the other. In lots of other countries they play soccer, where you kick the ball sideways or backwards much of the time. I think what we are trying to do now is like playing soccer, but there is no goal. If there is a goal, we are going to reach it from somewhere on the field, and nobody is going to control when or where we get to the goal until eventually, after much trial and error, we begin to agree on a focus, a resolve, and that will be our goal.

At many levels I don't think photography exists anymore as the essential societal reference point that it was before. I think that visual media exist, and they are overwhelming, but to isolate photography as separate from other visual media is an older perspective now. Do my Facebook images represent me or am I my Facebook images? Are they me? What's our relationship? The images and the person increasingly share a space, and I think that has to do with playing soccer and I think it has to do with Occupy Wall Street. The representational space is less distinct from us. To a certain extent we don't want it to be distinct—we are content with living at least part of our lives as image and within image. It is actually safer to share our existence with images because images are, compared to us, immortal. Images don't worry about global warming. Images don't need to eat. But simultaneously we are us, and we are in an alliance right now with image, because image actually can have more power than almost anything, including guns.

So your image, my image, we are out there in the image world somewhere. Image doesn't have the same hierarchy and priorities, and we don't bring the same baggage to it. It represents somewhat of a new territory and a new opening of possibilities. It doesn't define us the same way. It amplifies us. It also diminishes us.

I think this is what we are talking about now in terms of citizenship. Voting isn't the central issue for many. It is *being* that is the issue, and being recognized for one's own importance. So if you are part of the 99 percent, you are affirming that you exist. That is already extraordinary, to *exist,* to be counted, and whether you exist on Second Life, on Broadway, in your family, or elsewhere, you exist, and you try to represent yourself on your own terms.

Out of these hybrid existences we have to construct new ways of recognizing each other, of forming structures that reflect our existence outside of conventional boundaries, so that we can actually move forward in powerful ways. If there is an emergency, if there is something that has to be dealt with, we have to figure out how to deal with it as a group. I think somewhere under all of this we are trying, consciously and

unconsciously, to construct new forms, because we are not convinced by the old forms anymore.

ND: Is that the world that you are preparing your students for?

FR: Well, I side with the Tunisian blogger. You know, it is more important to have a sane, happy life than to make a good image. I think a well-crafted image is important, but it has often been an excuse not to deal with what is out there or in there, in yourself. If it is a way to deal with what is in yourself, that is fine, or out there, that is fine as well. But I think we get a little fetishistic and we forget that what we are engaged in really is a conversation. Making images, or being in media, is mediating. It is about a conversation between what is out there, ourselves, ourselves and other people, ourselves and the past, the future, and so on. It should not only be a dialogue among images.

What I am trying to prepare students for is how to navigate all that and how to decide what you want from it all, if possible, and how you can affect the larger ways in which media evolve, not only by making your own pictures—although that in itself is obviously also quite important—but by creating new media strategies. Take the shift to a digital camera—it is not just more efficient; there is a whole galaxy of changes implicit in the digital approach. But we don't want to look at it as profoundly different, because it is not in the interest of manufacturing, of advertising, of commerce, of consumption, of all of those things—why look long-range? But we have to look deeply and into the future, and I think that we in the university are not doing enough to try to anticipate these changes, to try to create the future that we want for ourselves using the new technologies, while also using evolving technologies as brakes for some of our worst excesses.

The Web has been around since the early 1990s, and design-wise it is hardly progressive. Spiritually, it is terribly lacking. It creates connections very well, but individual screens lack a visual presence—why don't we apply good design? The issue of the decline of journalism has been around for quite a long time now as well, but what are we coming up with? We have citizen journalism, we have a few ideas, but we could do a lot more. Yes, the iPhone is great, other gadgets are great, but they must be pushed in the directions in which we want our civilizations to grow. The automobile is great. You can easily say the automobile is great, but look as well at climate change and the automobile's contributions to it.

Now we have enough understanding of media and their impact—after all, isn't that what many of us study at the university—to at least be more fully informed about what they might do to us and what we should do about it, including issues of citizenship. What really works? What are the changes needed? It used to be, "Oh, I am in a picture with so and so; I'm special," but I can Photoshop you in any picture with anybody you want—so what is the point? One can argue that Photoshop has terribly diminished photographic credibility, just as it has opened up lots of new and productive ways of using imaging that we should be aggressively pursuing.

ND: It seems to me that many changes you are talking about could leak into academia. Should we choose to accept these changes, or should we choose to turn out World Press, or award-winning, photos?

FR: When I show World Press prize-winning photos to my students, they usually have no feeling for the pictures. They think the pictures are from another planet. The images have nothing to do with their lives. They just seem completely exotic to them. I think what we are trying to turn out from the university, in part, is people who could create what is needed for the future. So the idea is to understand the processes at work and understand the thinking behind them and have some sense of yourself, and your friends, and what you and other people need and want, then to know what you need to create. If it is not more World Press prize-winning photos, then what is it that would be better to explore and explain our lives?

For example, the history of photography is almost never told from the point of view of the subject. It is usually told from the point of view of the creator of the image, and we celebrate the photographer's vision. You know, they went to war or they did this or did that. Great. But did what they photographed change the world? Did it help any of the people in the pictures, or people like them? If you wrote that history from the subject's viewpoint, it is a different kind of history. That is part of visual citizenship. Probably the biggest part is to engage the subject, to collaborate with both subject and reader, so the medium can be used to push for a better life for everybody.

There is also a danger that if one just becomes completely concerned with the point of view of the subject—like asking the subject to approve every photograph—that may neither be good for the subject nor for helping the rest of us to understand what is going on. There has to be a dialogue about all of these things. For example, pictures of famine in Africa are often racist, simplistic images, an old argument within NGOs having been that more people give money when they see this kind of imagery, so it is said to be good for the subjects of the photographs. Well, you have to be pretty clear on your ethical guidelines, and at the end of the day is it really helpful to continue a photography of victimization? Obviously not.

In her book *The Crisis Caravan*, Linda Polman writes that in Sierra Leone, at the end of a guerilla war, some of its leaders had asked to be chauffeurs or workers for NGOs because they still wanted to have good jobs in peacetime.[4] They were asked, "Why did you cut off all those people's hands with machetes—what did you do that for?" And they said, "We did it for you. We knew that those cameras needed those pictures; otherwise, we wouldn't get any aid or attention. So we did it for you."

You have to be really clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it. As a media person you also have to realize that your subjects often know a great deal about how to manipulate media and how to use them for their own goals. You see over and over again the duping of the outsider by the insider who knows how the media machine works; celebrities and politicians have been good at this for a long time, and now others have learned as well.

I think we sometimes make a huge error to think that media professionals are always smarter about media than their subjects. We make another huge error to think that we can't learn from the people we are depicting, as we are now trying to learn from the achievements and difficulties of the Arab Spring. We have to learn from them; they may have a more visceral sense of democracy's importance at this point

than we do. If we are a global university, we have to be learning from others. We are not just the teachers, we have to be the students in a big, big way.

NOTES

1. Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: Norton, 2008).

2. *What Matters Now? A Proposal for a New Front Page* was an interactive exhibit conceptualized by Fred Ritchin and hosted by the Aperture Gallery in September 2011. The exhibit involved crowd-sourcing images and ideas and combined those with the curatorial expertise of six visual image specialists in order to create and imagine a "New Front Page." More information on the exhibit can be found at http://www.aperture.org/2011/09/what-matters-now-proposals-for-a-new-front-page (accessed March 24, 2013).

3. This interview was conducted much before Hurricane Sandy gave new urgency to the issue of global warming.

4. Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid*, trans. Liz Waters (New York: Metropolitan, 2010).