

December 18, 1985

Mr. Peter Howe
Picture Editor
New York Times
229 West 43rd Street
New York, N.Y. 10036

Dear Peter,

It was good to have a chance to meet with you yesterday to show you the photographs my wife and I recently brought out of South Africa. As we discussed, I am writing to give you more of a frame of reference for the ICP exhibition prints Phyllis and I left with you.

At the request of the Carnegie Corporation, we spent two months in South Africa this fall helping to organize the exhibition and book, South Africa: The Cordoned Heart. The pictures were edited from a much larger body of work prepared for the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa. We travelled extensively throughout South Africa and had the chance to meet and record interviews with each of the twenty South African photographers in the survey. We also came to understand the extraordinary significance of this photographic survey in South Africa as well as the special role of the photographer in that society.

These twenty South Africa Photographers, twelve white and eight non-white, worked together to take a systematic look, for the first time in South African history, at some of the tremendous problems facing their country. As opposed to the often peripheral role of photographers to important events in this country, these South African photographers are playing a central role to events shaping their future.

South African photographers have been involved for many years in combat work, serving as crucial witnesses to the actual events, without TV cameras in some instances. Their evidence of these confrontations and street fights is important. But even more important in South Africa has been the real investigation of the lives of ordinary South African people. In a country where the government has consistently tried to divide and separate people, the creation of a multi-ethnic, multi-language national identity - not just a set of group identities - is vital. To begin to conceptualize this community, South Africans must have a sense of one another, be able to visualize one another. The work of the photographers in the Carnegie Inquiry is a vital step in that direction.

In South Africa there are only a few people thinking seriously about long-range issues, about the kind of society that might emerge out of the current stalemate. We tend to imagine there are many South Africans thinking about the future in this way, but there are not. In fact there were only a few people in American society of the 1770's

playing that crucial role. It is vitally important to have an impact on that small group of South Africans.

The leadership of the movement (the cooperatives, the unions, the United Democratic Front) is doing that crucial thinking and planning for a new, multi-racial South Africa. These leaders like, respect and, in fact, rely on the South African photographers I came to know. Through their pictures of the movement, the photographers are recording their own history, a history that simply would otherwise never be known. Their pictures are made both as a record as well as to help sustain and give hope to the people being photographed.

In a very real way, (as in the current UDF treason trial) this photographic record makes the people in the movement more vulnerable to the government. There exists a record of their activities, pictures and film that can be confiscated and examined. In spite of this risk, all of the new cooperative groups want a record to be made, a history to be recorded. Through the photographers, they have a sense that somebody will know, that the people will remember them and their fight. As the pass laws and group areas act seriously limit the ability to move throughout the country, the sense that one can reach out to others in South Africa is constantly limited. Photography serves as a kind of validation of who these people in the "movement" really are.

As you see, the pictures we have brought back are not the now familiar dramatic images of the battle in the streets. From the perspective of the photographers, the battle in the streets is not only not the whole story, is not even the real story we should be seeing. The battle in the streets is evidence of changes that will come, but the real and important questions to be asked are about the shape those changes are going to take. "Is there going to be a violent revolution?" is one question to ask, but one should also ask, "What is going to be the shape of the society that will emerge?" Whatever happens, whether changes come quickly or over time, South Africans and concerned outsiders must know what the real life of the country is. These photographs are an attempt by South Africans to document and define the communities that make up most of their country.

The white photographers have made a break with their communities and, in most cases with their families, by identifying with and photographing people in the opposition. But they have made the far bigger break of seeing. Every day they are looking at conditions even their families don't admit exist. It really is estranging, profoundly alienating, for these white photographers to take the step of seeing in a country where most whites refuse to see. This willingness to see also brings with it a measure of confusion and bewilderment I noticed among practically all the white South Africans I met in the opposition. No matter how opposed these whites are to the system, they are forced every day to live in a way that is abhorrent to them. In South Africa it is simply impossible for whites to escape the role the government places them in.

For the black photographers, there are also serious difficulties. Most have wives and children and all have families concerned about their safety. Often the black photographer's parents are politically conservative and when the photographers refuse requests to back off from documentary work, they become estranged from their parents. There is also an important debate among black (and white) photographers about the way one should portray blacks in South Africa. There is a great deal of pressure within the movement to show blacks always in a positive light, to use cameras primarily as a propoganda weapon. There is much discussion and concern among photographers on this issue and on the traditional role of the "objective" journalist.

To be a photographer in South Africa is to wear a badge, which is the camera around your neck. That badge says, "I am a witness." Other people are just there, but the photographers are witnesses. The witness is crucial in that country. The act of witnessing carries with it a particular vulnerablity but also elicits a special responsiveness from the people being photographed. The people are not only willing to reveal themselves visually to the photographers, but they are constantly coming up to the photographers and saying, "Let me tell you my story!" By agreeing to serve the role of the witness, the photographers are taking on a lot. Their job is to see clearly and when they do see all too clearly, they feel the awful weight and responsibility of of their vision. They must struggle to make sense of it all.

I propose an article for the Times Magazine that shows South Africa through the eyes and words of these witnesses. The article would explain the significance of these pictures, the role of the photographer in South African society, and in a very personal way, show the struggle of these photographers to make sense of their own lives and the life of their country.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alex Harris, Director,
Center for Documentary Photography

p.s. enclosed also is the jacket copy for South Africa: The Cordoned Heart