

# global positions

*Kael Alford*  
*Rick Dingus*  
*Ronit Ilan*  
*Paho Mann*  
*Brent Phelps*  
*David Taylor*

## “The Photographer as Witness”

The photographers in this exhibition engage in different forms of documentation. Some have chosen to train their lens on situations with large global impact, while others have focused on more intimate issues. However, a common thread that runs through all of these works is the expression of the experiential and personal through documentation, particularly as it pertains to a long-term project or photo essay.

For **Kael Alford** being an unembedded photographer in Iraq meant that she was able to interact with the Iraqi landscape outside of the confines of the U.S. military, giving her the freedom to explore the war from a more personal perspective. In her artist statement Alford says, “While the individual experiences and situations depicted here are singular and very personal, these incidents are typical of things I witnessed enough times to know they were not isolated experiences.” This statement underscores the importance of the experiential in photography in that the photographer must bear witness in order to create the document. As such, the photographer’s relationship—physically, mentally, and emotionally—to the subject will undoubtedly affect the depiction. By calling attention to this reality in the above statement, Alford places responsibility upon the viewer to consider the notion of subjectivity as it pertains to the final image.

Like Alford, **David Taylor** has been documenting an issue of global concern with his investigation about the U.S./Mexico border. As Taylor explains, the primary function of his endeavor is to record the stone obelisks that comprise the original border, many of which are located in the rugged and remote terrain of the American Southwest. While on his journeys Taylor has also had the opportunity to interact with



February 24  
– March 24  
2012

Artist  
Reception

March 3rd  
Saturday  
6:30 - 8:30 pm

The  
University of  
Texas  
at  
Dallas



[View: north. 45° 45' 32" N -- 119° 37' 25" W]

[Clark] "October 19th Saturday 1805"  
"...I observed a great number of Lodges on the opposit Side at Some distance below and Several Indians on the opposit bank. . .others I Saw on a knob. . .at which place they delayed but a Short time before they returned to their Lodges as fast as they could run, I was fearfull that those people might not be informed of us, I deturmined to take the little Canoe. . .and proceed. . .to the Lodges, on my approach not one person was to be Seen except three men off in the plains,— and they Sheared off as I aproached. . .I landed in front of the five Lodges. . ."

the enteranc or Dores of the Lodges wer Shut. . .I approached one with a pipe in my hand entered a lodge which was the nearest to me found 32 persons men, women and a few children Setting permiscuesly in the Lodg, in the greatest agutation, Some crying and ringing there hands, others hanging their heads. I gave my hand to them all and made Signs of my friendly dispotion and offered the men my pipe to Smok and distributed a few Small articles which I had in my pockets,—this measure passified those distressed people verry much. . .They said we came from the clouds. . .and were not men. . ."

people on both sides of the border and capture images of life along the line. What is intriguing about the structure of Taylor's project is the opportunity to capture seemingly rare moments to which he has been made privy because of his travels. These "decisive moments," of which Henri Cartier-Bresson spoke, rely on a photographer's instincts to turn a spontaneous occurrence into a document. This is apparent in Taylor's photograph, *Serenade*, in which we see a woman singing to two U.S. Border Patrol officers. The emotion of the image is made all the more apparent by its placement amongst pictures of mundane government offices and daily activities. In this moment the personal experience of one photographer becomes an experience that we can all share.

The work of **Ronit Ilan** uses shared experience as a basis through which to examine her personal ties to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The effectiveness of Ilan's images relies upon the viewer having pre-existing knowledge of the conflict, which would have been gathered via various documentary formats (television, magazines, films, etc.). Her digital composites of image and text are evocative, yet still have an underlying thread of documentation in that they reference a very real time and place. Ilan's work also addresses the broader issues of personal and shared histories, and the way in which ongoing social and political issues are represented by successive generations of artists.

**Brett Phelps's** exploration of the Lewis and Clark trail raises a somewhat similar issue in its creative interpretation of already existing material and the manner in which he interacts with an important piece of history. The combination of contemporary photography with excerpts from the expedition journals results in a record that forges a connection between present and past, and attempts to bring together what we have become with where we came from. In addition, these images underscore the prominent role photography played in the settlement of the American West. Not only was the medium used as an exploratory tool by various government agencies and industries; it was used to capture the rapidly changing landscape and disappearing way of life of the Native Americans. Phelps's images perform a necessary social function by causing the viewer to reexamine the American landscape from historical, environmental and social perspectives.

Similarly, **Paho Mann's** *Re-Inhabited Circle K* series trains a lens on the

constantly shifting face of America. Through his documentation of the reclamation of empty Circle K convenience stores in Arizona, Mann tells a larger story of the impact national business chains have on the physical and social landscape of the United States. The presence of big business often dictates the future success or failure of a neighborhood, with school zones, crime rates, subsidiary business and housing prices being affected by business infrastructure. Mann also addresses the circular nature of neighborhoods as storefronts and homes vacillate between occupied and unoccupied, with each new owner making changes to the already existing structures. As he states, "These buildings do not show a linear progression of the corporatization and homogenization of suburbia, but rather serve as evidence of a more circular system—a system driven by a delicate negotiation between same and different, between complicated sets of actions and choices that shape our built environment."

Another "delicate negotiation" runs through **Rick Dingus's** pictures of the shifting relationships between people and the natural world. Dingus's images document various locations throughout Tasmania, Australia and the North American Great Plains, focusing on sites where the human-environment balance is brought to the forefront, either through an attempt to educate in a traditional setting or because the effect on the natural landscape is so blatantly apparent. Adding to the investigatory aspect is Dingus's use of a handmade camera that combines a 35mm lens with medium format film, giving the images their distinctive vignetting, as if the viewer is peering at the scene through a microscope. Like Alford, Dingus is making his subjectivity as the image-maker readily apparent, even going so far as to leave the physical imprint of his camera upon the final image.

The physicality of Dingus's photographs underscores the fact that there is an inherent distance between the depicted subject and the viewer. Standing in that distance is the photographer, through whom the image is distilled. As viewers it is our job to understand how and why the photographer has constructed an image, and where we stand in relationship to that depiction. These six photographers demonstrate how imperative the personal and experiential is to the medium of photography, and the important role the image-maker plays, as their singular experiences become a collective truth in which we all share.

— Danielle Avram 2012





Rick Dingus, *Global Rescue Station (Old Growth Forest Scheduled for Clear Cutting.) The Styx Valley of the Giants, Tasmania, Australia, 2005-2007, 24" x 24"*, archival digital print

## “Photography as Navigation”

While navigating and mapping our shared spaces, these photographers participate in a shared dialogue involving environmental concerns, suburban sprawl, border issues, and regional conflicts. Artist Martha Rosler comments on the formerly privileged position of the photographic document, given the impact of digital technology and photography's place within contemporary art discourse:

*The tide of change poses its own particular threat to documentary, since "post-photographic" practice at a minimum can be said to have abandoned any interest in indexicality and, perhaps just as importantly, in the privileged viewpoint of "witness"—and therefore any embeddedness in a particular moment in time and space.<sup>1</sup>*

While documentary practice may appear to be waning, current imaging technologies amplify the potential impact of the visual record, through the fusion of image data with time stamp and location coordinates. Meanwhile, these six artists continue to share a love of the index, that stubborn trace or echo of the real.

The emphasis on event, as in **David Taylor's** *Fence Breach, NM*, allows us to consider passage, transit; under the illumination of headlights, the destruction appears as a mysterious nocturnal discovery. Taylor reveals the bureaucracy of border control in *Break Area (with paperwork), AZ*, underscored by the reference to color-coded alien wristbands—which stands in contrast to the physical reality, the interrupted barrier of the border fence. The ironic image of *Serenade, U.S./Mexico Border* portrays a Mexican woman wearing a long white dress with lace, and wrapped in a white shawl, singing to two officers serving in the U.S. Border Patrol. Taylor observes how we awkwardly remain neighbors, despite the markings along the landscape extending from Texas to California, that separate one nation from another.

**Paho Mann's** series reminds us of the nondescript fast-food drive throughs and quickie-mart shops that populate major intersections in most U.S. cities. We strive to tune out this semi-invisible clutter. Mann's photographs of *Re-inhabited Circle Ks* convenience stores in Arizona mark a retrieval of these banal locations for a new enterprise, one that is situ-

ated within the community, rather than dropped in place. The redesign of *Club Tattoo, Tempe, AZ, 2004*, represents a curious play on the corporate red color of Circle K; everything has been coated in red paint, the exterior walls, window frames, overhang, and even the parking spots—which affirm "Club Tattoo Only." Mann traverses the area surrounding Phoenix, supplying the viewer with a Google map documenting his progress, as well as the current status of these architectural structures. His typology of Circle K's includes those standing and those demolished, those recycled and those still unaccounted for. The artist invites the viewer to participate in the process of visual research and mapping through an interactive database—just as online vendors provide store locators.<sup>2</sup>

Our daily use of global positioning devices fosters our reflection on **Brent Phelps's** pilgrimage along the Lewis and Clark Trail, extending from the Midwest to the Pacific Northwest. Phelps pairs each photograph with an excerpt from the journals of Lewis and Clark, entries that correspond to the longitude and latitude of the original site that Phelps revisits. Whereas Lewis and Clark encountered a wilderness in 1805, Phelps questions our current relationship to the American landscape, in light of the transformations that have occurred 200 years later. Phelps reminds us, in these selected quotes from Lewis and Clark, that these lands were already inhabited before they arrived: the Indians they encountered "said we came from the clouds..and were not men..." In the photograph paired with this quote, *Onions, Bombing Range Boundary, Boardman, Oregon, December 20, 2002 [View: north. 45° 45' 32" N 119° 37' 25" W]*, clouds fill the sky to form a blanket of overcast. *Onions* reveals a panorama comprised of an open blacktop highway, littered with white onions—a wry acknowledgement that this site has become a bombing range. In lieu of the celestial newcomers arriving from above, or of a rich environment that could support a community, we observe remnants evoking desolation and emptiness.

**Rick Dingus** also travels through the west, but in this case he documents Texas to South Dakota, expanding his exploration to Tasmania, Australia. The prominent red lettered sign in *Global Rescue Station (Old Growth Forest Scheduled for Clear Cutting.) The Styx Valley of the Giants, Tasmania, Australia*, evokes refugees and Red Cross volunteers, found at the site of natural disasters. The artist considers the relationship between two continents,



A bride leaves a beauty salon with her face covered. She will not show herself until she reaches the privacy of a family gathering. The Mahdi Army has threatened beauty salon owners who advertise using pictures of women without their hair covered. Mahdi Army fighters police neighborhood streets, enforcing strict moral codes.

— Kael Alford, *The U.S. War in Iraq 2003-2004*

## artist talk: Kael Alford

March 20, Tuesday  
1:30 pm  
Visual Arts Building  
AS 1.105

producing grand vistas of terrain, including a hydroelectric dam, a flooded copper mine, and an open pit, while rethinking our collective view of landscape. Rick Dingus reframes his scenes, or perhaps frames them twice. The vignetting produced by the small image circle of the camera lens foregrounds the presence of the optical apparatus, functioning as a distancing device, prompting our conscious realization of our position in relation to the scene, specifically the fragility of our environment.

**Ronit Ilan** removes information from her documents of Israel, providing us with silhouettes, fragments representing military checkpoints, vulnerable populations, and the heightened state of security near the border between Israel and the Palestinian territories. Her inclusion of text prompts a sense of wondering: how do we reflect on such a complex history of conflict? What is the relationship of the artist to this geography? By extension, what is our role, as observers of a larger global debate that spills beyond the borders that separate Israelis and Palestinians? Simple words like "defense" or "coexist" reverberate when placed into this glowing yellow-orange landscape. The warm colors suggest the sand-filled desert of the Middle East, but also serve as a sign of caution.

**Kael Alford's** documentary practice has involved her return to Iraq to locate individuals whom she met eight years earlier. She photographed in Shoala in 2003, producing stark descriptions of civilian deaths, includ-

ing those of children. Through her travel to Iraq in 2011, she has been able to document some of the same communities that she encountered in 2003, producing a sobering view of the impact of violence on Iraqi families, and hopeful evidence of their survival. The visual focal point for a family portrait taken in 2011 becomes the pink dress worn by an adopted daughter—who lost her birth parents during a bombing raid.<sup>3</sup> Alford's images of Iraq suggest that we collectively know little about the inhabitants of this country, despite our exposure to hours of media broadcasts on the Iraq War. Her detailed descriptions of the situations she documents in her photographs demonstrate her desire to share her knowledge of the everyday experiences of Iraqis.

These artists share with us their insights, by not only describing the physical characteristics of a place, but also by providing an understanding of the complex nature of contested borders, transformed landscapes, and an awareness of a world in flux.

— Marilyn Waligore 2012

<sup>1</sup> Rosler, Martha. "Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?" *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006. 211.

<sup>2</sup> Mann, Paho. "Re-inhabited Circle Ks." pahomann.com. Paho Mann, 2011. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Alford, Kael. Personal Interview. 8 Dec. 2011.

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Ronit Ilan, *Coexistence*, 2011, 24" x 36", archival digital print