

An interview with
Anna Blackman of Photo Voice
Interviewer: Joanna Howard

PHOTO VOICE

Photo Voice is an U.K. based non-profit organisation that works on participatory documentary and photography projects around the world. Photo Voice provides a platform from which people who do not normally have the chance to represent themselves to a wider audience can tell their stories. In viewing their work, we share their vision. The work of these groups is promoted through the internet, exhibitions, print media and publications. Photo Voice's current projects include 'Street Vision', a photography project for street children in Vietnam, 'Positive Negatives', a collaborative project with Christian Aid for HIV positive women in the Congo and 'The Rose Project', training refugee children in Nepal in photography.

Since Vietnam began to open up to Western style capitalism, there has been an ever increasing number of children living rough on the streets of the major cities. They are often despised by other city dwellers.

The interview

What kind of projects are you involved in?

The first project that I did was a project in Vietnam working with street and working children teaching them photography as a means of expression and for raising awareness of street children in Ho Chi Minh City. That started in 1998 and has been going on for two years. Since we set up 'Photo Voice' at the beginning of this year I've been carrying on with that project, which is called Street Vision. This year I've been back to Vietnam to research a book on the street children projects and to continue to advise the projects and to see how they're going. I then came back to England and then went to America, where there was a Street Vision exhibition in Boston of 30 of the photographs from Street Vision, and this has raised quite a lot of money for the project back in Vietnam. Most recently I've been working in collaboration with Christian Aid in the Democratic Republic of Congo, working with a group of 15 women, primarily women living with HIV/AIDS. Again, this involves using photography as a means for them to express themselves, and to raise awareness of HIV and to try and combat the stigma that's attached to HIV in Kinshasa, in Africa and later in England as well when there will be an exhibition in December.

What do you think that the successes and failures of Street Vision have been?

It's been really successful – more than I ever imagined when I first went out. I just got a bit of money and had this concept for a University degree course, but it's really because of the way Street Vision has snowballed and the interest generated through exhibitions in Vietnam and from the children who've really enjoyed doing it, and the sponsorship that's come forward, it's just snowballed. I had no idea I'd be doing something similar two years later, so it's generally been a big success, though having said that, of course there are so many problems, like working with translators who sometimes get things right and sometimes get things wrong. The whole system of working within a culture you don't completely understand and with a government you don't completely understand is very hard, and the Vietnam Government hasn't made it easy a lot of times for the project to work.

What happened when you first gave your students in Vietnam a camera?

The first time I gave the street kids a camera – an automatic point and shoot camera – looking back on it, it was kind of inevitable – but we went out to do our first 'shoot' with street children in the centre of Saigon. They gravitated immediately towards the hundreds and hundreds of parked Honda motorbikes that you find everywhere in Vietnam (we were in this square outside the cathedral in the centre of Saigon) and so there were these street kids posing on the most expensive Chinese Hondas they could find. They just wanted pictures of themselves doing really exciting things, as they'd never seen pictures of themselves. And they wanted the photos to be something that was really far removed from their real life, so they were posing by these vehicles. I was watching this with general amusement, because the aim of this project was to document life on the streets, which is what it became, but I had to give them a lot of freedom just to take pictures that they wanted to take for their own personal use, to have, and to show their friends and to laugh over.

How do people react to the photos your students have taken?

It really depends on which project, but I'll give a couple of examples from Street Vision in Vietnam. The first exhibition was in a big Youth Culture house that a lot of people came to. There were some very individual reactions, but the overwhelming reaction was 'I cannot believe kids who live on the street took these pictures, I cannot believe they've only been learning for two months'. I think that's the strong thing about photography that it can be learnt very quickly and that everyone can take a picture that means something to their life and can be shared with other people to send them a message, and that came across quite strongly. But the main thing is that people couldn't believe that the photos were taken by street children, and somebody in Vietnam had actually given them the chance to learn and had belief in them that they could do something. It really proved what they were capable of. That was the best reaction – some people just looked at them out of general interest but what the exhibition has managed to do is to change local Vietnamese people's views of street children. Rather than being seen as a hindrance or incapable, or thieves, they started to see them as capable of something creative.

Pictures spark off something in people – they look at them and then they start to think more about the life of the people in the photos and that's the brilliant thing about photos; that they encourage you to ask more and more. Through that, people really get to understand more about their lives.

The reason we started to work on this was that we were doing research at university. It becomes so much easier to work with groups of people or to work with children when they have these photos to base their discussions on, and it becomes more animated, they talk more freely and forget themselves.

As for exhibitions, the one in America particularly was interesting. The main thing about Vietnam that everyone thinks is about the war, and when we held the exhibition it was the 25th anniversary of the end of the war. Many Americans are still hung up about the war and to actually show them photos taken by children who weren't even alive when the war happened, and the war doesn't even figure in their lives consciously, for Americans to see that other side of Vietnam, they found really interesting, and commented on quite a lot, as it was in stark contrast to a lot of the publicity about Vietnam going on at the time.

What is your favourite photograph that one of your students has taken?

One that has always stuck in my mind is from Vietnam. It's a picture a boy called Ching took and he's become a really

good photographer. It's a picture taken on a tarmacked playing field like a football ground in the middle of Saigon and it's of a friend of his, just standing in the middle of this football ground and the sun's going down. It's a beautiful time of day, and he's standing in a puddle of water from the monsoon rains, with his arms outstretched and balanced on one foot, like the Karate Kid pose, looking like he's about to take off. It's called 'Flying to Reach the Sun', and it struck me that it shows so beautifully that, although life is really hard for the street children, they have this freedom that they find really attractive and hard to leave and, in some cases, they've chosen that freedom over adults telling them what to do and they find it hard to leave. This photo shows that freedom, and the love that these kids for just roaming freely.

Figure 1 Flying to reach the sun



Photo: Ching, Vietnam

Another one from the project in the Congo, is a portrait that one of the women I was teaching there took, in black and white, of a Congolese woman. It's a full picture of her in a beautiful dress, and it shows this beautiful woman who has such strength, and looks like such a strong, bold, beautiful woman. The women I worked with are like that, they have HIV and they've been rejected by their families, but they are such strong, amazing women. Although it's only a portrait, for me it captures the dignity of those women.

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