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The Real Things: Photographing Scenes of the 1960s

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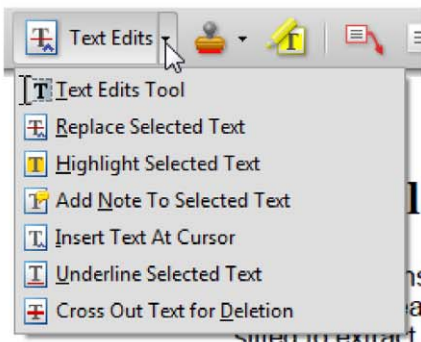
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REVIEW ESSAY

The real things: photographing scenes of the 1960s

Howard L. Bingham's  *Black Panthers 1968*, by Steve Crist and Howard L. Bingham, Pasadena, AMMO Books, 2010, 208 pp., US\$19.95, ISBN 193442966X

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Larry Burrows *Vietnam*, by Larry Burrows, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, 244 pp., \$US50.00, ISBN 037541102X

10

Across the great divide: a photo chronicle of the counterculture, by Roberta Price, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2010, 108 pp., US\$34.95, ISBN 0826349579

15

I and eye: pictures of my generation, by Peter Simon, Carly Simon, and Stephen Davis, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 2001, 206 pp., US\$16.02, ISBN 0821226452

A photograph is always a silence packed with what we cannot hear. Mutely, it testifies to the existence of a particular moment, one that has been cut from its place in the fabric of time and space and handed to us without comment or context. It withholds from us its before and its after – the time that led up to this moment, the time that surrounds this moment, the time that came just after this moment. We gaze into it, seeing an amazingly detailed account of all that met the eye of the photographer in the viewfinder; but almost instantly we sense as well all that has been left out of the frame. Consciously or not, we ask: what meaning can this photo have in the light of all that it has excluded?

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To look at a photo, then, is to feel a disturbing tension between the plenitude of detail within it and the finality with which an equally rich surround has been left out. Photos, like history, are thus haunted by their exclusions; but unlike history, they freely confess what historical narrative is always trying to conceal: that history is partial, incomplete, a part standing somewhat presumptuously for the whole.

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Photographs also have ~~an amazing, perhaps~~ matchless power to bear witness that a particular moment or event ~~of the past~~ actually ~~existed~~, that it happened, that it was. Looking at Howard L. Bingham's photographs (in *Black Panthers 1968*) of the Panthers drilling in an empty school playground or sprawled on the grass reading what looks like Mao's Little Red Book,¹ one experiences first a ~~tiny shock~~ of disbelief: could this really have *happened* under the sunny skies above Oakland, California, right across the street from the Starbucks where I'm writing this ~~on~~ my laptop? But immediately after comes the rush of certitude only a photo can confer: yes, it must have happened, it did happen, for here is a photograph to prove it.

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5 Once we have fully absorbed the shock of this confirmation of and confrontation with a past that has disappeared, we see that its force flows mainly from mute material objects – those innumerable “things” so often left out of historical narrative and yet comprising so much of the stuff – the *thingness* – of life as lived. For there on the school building beside the Panthers is a faded poster announcing a “BIG RUMMAGE SALE.” And ~~there~~ parked on the street behind the lounging Panthers are the bleached specters of undistinguished mid-1960s American cars with shapes and names no one can now recall. Such objects persuade us that no one could have made this up: it’s “too real.” This persuasiveness is ~~produced, I believe,~~ by what feels like the absolute contingency with which these people and objects have been placed. In a movie version of the Panthers, what director would have thought to show them lying on the grass of a public park? What set designer would have thought to place that particular poster there (not, say, graffiti like “Off the Pigs” or “Power to the People?”) And in a film, the cars parked along the street behind the Panthers would all be classics – a Chevy Impala or a Thunderbird – because those are the kinds of cars that have been preserved by collectors. The nondescript hulks we can barely make out in Bingham’s photo were consigned to sheer obliteration long ago. Ironically, it is their very forgottenness, like the poster’s ephemerality, that makes them feel so historically real and ~~what~~ makes so credible the photo’s claim to have captured an actual moment.

25 But if the credibility of photos is so largely created by their embodiment of life’s ~~contingency~~ – the visible dents in the rear right door of the nearest car, the enigmatic expression on the face of the one Panther who is not reading his Little Red Book but is instead gazing at something outside the frame – it is our sense that *history* is responsible for those ~~contingencies~~, for placing those objects in just those places, that gives these random details so much interest today. (Not just God but history lives in details; it must feel crowded there.) The myriad objects in these photos – the different styles of boot and sunglasses the Panthers are wearing, the Vespa parked at a right-angle to the sidewalk – all seem to be *clues* of some kind. They almost instantly convince us that we can best retrieve and know the past not by reading about it or hearing stories about it but by penetrating the secrets of these material objects, understanding the what and whence and why of all these *things*.

40 For the historian, fortunately, some of these things fall into patterns with a fairly plain meaning. In Roberta Price’s photographs of 1960s communes in the Southwest (collected in *Across the Great Divide*), ~~for example~~, what many of the material objects testify to is the communards’ deep investment in the physical texture of their clothing and housing – a ~~particular physical~~ texture that produced, for them, the authentic setting in which they could perform their experiment in alternative living. They were inspired by Thoreau’s decision to live in the woods by the “labor of my hands only,” but they gave an odd twist to his advice that we “beware of enterprises that require new clothes.” What Thoreau meant was that new clothes do not signify a new life, but quite the contrary – they require deeper investments in and submission to *this* life. It was not the *newness* of clothes per se that bothered him; it was the obligation to don a certain uniform or costume in order to begin a new enterprise that struck him as ridiculous and self-defeating.

50 The communards, however, felt almost the opposite. For them it was precisely the *newness* of clothes – the newness of anything, in fact – that they rejected. ~~For~~ ~~newness~~ signified America’s insatiable demand for, and production of, more and

more objects of consumption. They refused to buy into this myth of Tantalus. But instead of deciding therefore to go without, they decided to go *back* – back to the past. Although the past itself was gone, its remnants could still be acquired – in Goodwill stores, junkyards, yard sales, and (yes) rummage sales. 5

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag famously argues that photography has “in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, copies and originals.”² Strangely enough, this blurring of the distinction between original and copy, reality and image, is also occurring in the very milieu Price’s ~~and Sime~~ photos represent: in order to break away from reality as given (which they experienced as a “weird mass of liberal nothingness” as Mark Rudd put it)³ and to create a new and more real reality off the grid, 1960s communards immediately availed themselves of images of the past, recycling the look of the frontier, of bygone days of log cabins, woodstoves, homespun woolens, and the like. The net result is that the paradox of their endeavor – breaking free by going back, seeking authenticity by being copyists – is foregrounded and emphasized by the blurring effect of photography itself. 10 15

The communards’ sheer genius at collecting old things that projected the aura they sought is vividly on display in a number of Price’s photos. In “Rock house kitchen with Kachina the cat, fall 1972,”⁴ ~~for example~~, sunlight pours across the kitchen’s wooden floor, where a Siamese cat sits warming itself, and falls upon the far wall above a gleaming chrome wood-burning cooking stove. On the wall above the stove hang six black cast-iron pans of different sizes and shapes. Perched on the stove’s tall backsplash are two willow, glass-chimney kerosene lamps. On the stovetop sit two kettles, a newer egg-yolk yellow one, and a much larger tin one that could hold at least a gallon, the kind cowboys on a cattle drive must have boiled their coffee in over campfires. (Next to it stands an hourglass-shaped Melita coffee maker with a wooden collar – the advance wave of the coffee mania that built slowly to the juggernaut of Starbucks in the 1990s.) The handmade counter to the right has been hewn from rough, 6 x 6 beams, and on the floor beneath it stands a neat row of large tin containers recycled from commercial use – the smallest is an empty can of Hills Brothers Coffee, the lettering on the others is not legible. 20 25 30

~~In sum~~, with the possible exception of the yellow kettle and the glass Melita coffee carafe, nothing in the photo is new. Everything has a dull patina of age mellowed by use and warmed by the light flowing into the room. These objects were *found* by someone who needed them, yes, but also by someone who recognized in them an aura, as Benjamin would have called it, that lent the home space a feeling of its own authenticity, that declared for all to see its strategic disengagement from modernity, newness, commerce. (Not one inch of plastic is anywhere in sight.) The aim here was to produce the anti-kitchen, the very opposite of what Mom’s kitchen probably looked like in suburban Scarsdale. But it was also to re-produce Grandma’s kitchen, or great Grandma’s kitchen – to return to that world of calico and beards and homemade bread and fresh vegetables that was wiped from the face of the earth by the 1950s craze for newness and “convenience.” 35 40 45

It is revealing to compare both the things and the domestic pride on display in this photo with those in Albert Barnes Kinne’s photo of a frontiersman’s cabin in Alaska around 1903.⁵ On the one hand, this cabin is an actual historical instantiation of the reality Price and her fellow communards were trying to create for themselves by going “back to the land” and living the hard lives of pioneer settlers scratching a 50

livelihood out of the hard soil or in the deep woods. To be sure, the home has been prepared and the scene has been arranged for the photographer; perhaps a good many of the innumerable furs hung on walls and draped over chairs have just been dragged out of mothproof storage boxes. Nonetheless, the photograph credibly testifies to a desire very different ~~than~~ that embodied by the material spaces in Price's pictures. The aura sought for here is strikingly Victorian, a claustrophobic aesthetic of carefully chosen commodities that, to our eyes, constitute a clutter.

Price's communards were not aware that the pioneer settlers whose cast-iron cooking stoves they had picked up for nearly nothing were Victorian. And in any case, most would not have agreed with Freddie Mercury who, before joining Queen, sold used clothing in London's Kensington Market in the mid-1960s, and once remarked: "I want to lead the Victorian life, surrounded by exquisite clutter." Instead, as Price's photos reveal, they wanted a coziness that did not hem them in too much, a feeling of warm and comforting yet airy domestic space – the precursor of the aesthetic typified by the fern bar of the 1970s and more recently by the open floor plan and the upper-middle class kitchen with its cherry (not *linoleum!*) floor and cabinets, its enormous Viking (not *GE!*) stove, its granite (not *formica!*) counters, its genuine nickel and copper Italian espresso machine, its recessed lighting, its pasta and flour in mason jars from Williams and Sonoma, its restaurant-grade heavy and dull (not *shiny!*) aluminum cookware, and so on and so forth. The difference, of course, is that today this look is expensive, not found; it is pre-packaged by designers, not created by a fortuitous confluence of need and nostalgia. [817].

Like the communards, the Panthers (in Bingham's photos) appear to have been extraordinarily invested in clothing as a material means of conveying their political and spiritual identity. In photo after photo, our eyes meet again and again a veritable wall of black leather jackets, berets, and sunglasses. The Panthers' uniform was exactly that – a way of exhibiting their uniformity, their collective identity, their seriousness. If we compare their uniform to that worn by one of their historical predecessors, the members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA),⁶ several differences may help further deduce the semiotics of their garb. Garvey's followers ~~look~~ like members of a marching band, and even while their expressions are quite solemn, their uniforms radiate a celebratory joie de vivre. Ornamented with braid and epaulettes, they seem to signify a kind of *imperial* identity: they convey, along with collective purpose and identity, a desire to appear *grand*, to dazzle onlookers, to win respect through display of a certain excess, an excess marked by the plain fact that these uniforms could never be mistaken for ordinary street clothes.

Conversely, the ordinariness and the simplicity of the Panthers' uniform is what comparison with the UNIA's uniforms make so vivid. Their uniforms *are* street clothes (or at least could be mistaken for such). No one young black man wearing a black leather jacket, a beret, and sunglasses would have attracted much notice. That this outfit was in fact a uniform became manifest only when a group of Panthers had gathered – and suddenly their collective resolve materialized from the air of the streets and neighborhoods they saw themselves as expressing and protecting. Taking a cue perhaps from the Nation of Islam (but perhaps also from the Bay Area's extensive exposure to a Japanese zen/martial arts aesthetic), they chose clothing that would radiate power from its simplicity ~~rather than its excess~~. Indeed, if there is excess in their uniform, it is an excess of black leather – almost certainly an affirmation of the black flesh that – as they knew so well – in itself triggered


white racist responses of fear and loathing. Their uniforms, then, did not conceal or ornament their blackness but insisted upon and flaunted it. The Panthers knew well that one of the functions of their performance was to bring white racism out into the open where everyone could see and feel it.



Along with their uniforms (and of course their occasional guns), what also sparked the revelation (apocalypse) of white racism was the Panthers' posture, their attitude of resolute defiance. Oscar Wilde famously remarked that "The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is no one has yet discovered." Commonly taken to be a postmodern quip about the performed nature of personal identity, Wilde's words could also be understood quite differently: as affirming that we have an overriding obligation to make the existential leap to unwavering political commitment. Bingham's photos make clear that these young black men —they were mostly men— were poseurs. Like the communards, but more self-consciously and at greater personal risk, they were *performing* their rejection of American society — not its newness and sterility but its long history of racism. Yet Bingham's photographs fail to make visible the inner resolve required and displayed by the Panthers. Perhaps that is an inner state no photo could quite represent, but one reason Bingham's in particular fail to do so is that he very seldom shows us the overwhelmingly white context through which the Panthers so often moved. We very frequently see the Panthers through the eye of the camera, but we almost never see what the Panthers themselves saw — thousands of whites' eyes staring back at them in wonder, fear, and hatred. Bingham does provide a few photos of the faces of visibly angry and hateful police officers, and a few of the police arresting Panthers; he also shows us the faces of sympathetic and admiring young white audiences listening raptly to the Panthers — and, in the process, being radicalized by them (another interior state that any photo would have trouble capturing). All of this makes perfect sense because so much of what the Panthers were about was *being seen* and so undoing black invisibility. But as a consequence, something vital is left out: none of his photos allow us to inhabit the consciousness of a Panther who stands defiantly face-to-face with white hatred and does not flinch.

Lest I inadvertently give the impression that the Panthers were more worthy of a radical's respect than the communards, I offer the suggestion that many Americans in this second decade of the twenty-first century would find both groups equally horrifying and reprehensible. That is, Roberta Price's, Peter Simon's, and Howard Bingham's books are equally unlikely to grace many American coffee tables today. This is most obviously so in the case of Bingham's book about the Panthers. The first three years of Barack Obama's presidency have made it abundantly clear that we do not yet live in a post-racial America and that, for many white Americans, the mere image of a black man asserting power feels like an overturning of the very order of things. But why, with 1960s fashion still so dominant, with pornography a quasi-legitimate multi-billion dollar industry, and with marijuana being consumed by a majority of Americans, would photos of 1960s communards disturb anyone today?

The answer, I think, is more visible in Simon's book, *I and Eye*, than in Price's. Because several of Price's photos manage to convey the very hard work the Southwest communards had to perform all year long in order to survive, they would win for these young dropouts a measure of grudging respect from even the most conservative viewer. (These communards not only built their own homes, but often they had to hew the timber and make the adobe bricks with which to build.)

5 Simon's communards, by contrast, owned or rented old New England farmhouses, and their enterprise was much more visibly about having fun. As Simon represents them, they were looking for a chance to forge authentic lives not "phony" ones (to use Holden Caulfield's word), but they were also looking for something their middle-class parents seemed to have forgotten all about: sex, eros, the pleasures of
 10 the senses. Sex, of course, like racism, is as American as apple pie. But sex that is infused with love not just hunger, with pleasure not just domination and submission, with laughter and giggles not just grunts and screams – this kind of sex threatens to satisfy the desire that would otherwise be channeled into the more respectable drive to achieve the American dream.

15 Nearly 50 years after the 1960s, it is still clear that Herbert Marcuse had it right: the suppression of eros goes hand-in-glove with other more visible forms of political and social repression. The flower-encircled breast and nipple of an anonymous communard (in a Simon photo) expressed a defiance that was – and I think still is – as unsettling to Americans as a Panther's raised and clenched fist.  we have a glimpse of revolution on behalf of life itself. It is a claim that Americans can indeed "get back to the garden" before the Fall, and that out of this pre-lapsarian innocence a new and better world might be born. No matter that the garden was bought by someone's trust fund. No matter that the communards later fell out over the fact that some were gentlemen farmers and others unpaid laborers. It was the idea, or the image, of what they were doing that mattered – because it cut so deeply against the congenital gloom and anger so zealously nurtured by Puritans of yesterday, and today. (Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount" remains the canonical justification of the repression of "gay sinners" by the "grisly saints" of this settled order.)

30 In the introduction to his recent translation of *Illuminations* by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud (the youthful genius so inspiring to the youthful geniuses Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, and Patti Smith), John Ashbery writes that "absolute modernity was for him the acknowledging of the simultaneity of all of life, the condition that nourishes poetry at every second."⁷ This "simultaneity of all of life" is almost  shockingly borne in on us by the reflection that the communards in New Mexico and New England, and the Panthers in Oakland, California were all doing their thing simultaneously. What we call "the Sixties" was in fact a number of radically different yet loosely connected scenes happening at the very same time in rather distant places. (These tenuous connections become visible in X's wonderful photo of a bare-chested Huey Newton holding up the album cover of Dylan's *Highway 61*
 40  *revisited*.) Perhaps nothing can convey this "absolute modernity" of the Sixties better than simply leafing through volumes of photos of these different scenes and juxtaposing their images.

45 One other volume that I happen to own is *Larry Burrows Vietnam*, an agonizing series of images of yet another Sixties scene, the steady presence of which is nowhere visible in the books I have discussed but which was surely felt, almost daily, by the communards and Panthers themselves. Opening Burrows's book, one is instantly struck by the fact that here, too, uniforms are being worn, and here too mute things – "the things they carried" in Tim O'Brien's memorable phrase – seem to be the most profound embodiments, or containers, of the meaning of that past.
 50 Most of Burrows's photos are of American infantrymen slogging through rice paddies, shooting their M1s into dense walls of jungle, lying dead in wet mud, rounding up sullen Vietnamese villagers and taking them off for interrogation. Burrows neither sentimentalizes nor vilifies these young men; instead, he compassionately

records the human suffering war inflicts on all who have been swept up in it. Because, as a photographer of faces, he stands on a completely different level than Simon, Bingham, and Price, it is really the *things* he photographs that most fully evoke the bizarre simultaneity of this very different Sixties scene. The texture of the GPs' fatigues, the shredded and frayed canvas that covers their helmets, their mud-stiffened blankets and blood-stiffened bandages, their worn boots, the dull gleam of their gun barrels . . . it is from these things that the unimaginable (to those who have never been there) reality of war leaks into our world and our consciousness. In one photograph⁸ we see a young soldier sound asleep on a virtual nest of the things he has carried, things that he now knows better than anything he has ever known, things that are talismans and comforts, and that he gathers round him as he might once have gathered his stuffed cuddlies in his childhood bed: his M1 rifle, a new bar of Ivory soap, a flak jacket, webbing, two canvas-covered canteens, two packs of matches, an opened pack of Salem menthols, and two empty, crumpled bags of M and Ms. These things, for this moment, constituted his scene, while half a world away, at the very same moment, communards in Vermont were constructing their own nests of things, and Panthers in Oakland were donning their own uniforms to fight their kind of war. ~~Looking at all of~~ these photos of these various scenes, the utter implausibility of the definite pronoun "the" in "the Sixties" overwhelms us. And yet, ~~at~~ the very same moment, we realize that nothing more effectively conveys the spirit of that decade than this juxtaposition of the simultaneous and the different – ~~its~~ absolute modernity.

Notes

1. Crist and Bingham, *Howard L. Bingham's Black Panthers 1968*, "Bobby Seale Leading Black Panther Drills" and Untitled photo of Panthers reading Mao's Little Red Book. (Both black-and-white, no page numbers in book.)
- AQ4 2. Sontag, *On Photography*.
- AQ5 3. Rudd.
4. Price, *Across the Great Divide*, "Rock House Kitchen with Kachina the Cat, Fall 1972." (Color, p. 62.)
5. Albert Barnes Kinne, "What Artistic Taste and Refinement Can Do in an Alaskan Cabin," University of Washington Photo Collection, 314.46.
- ~~photo (I haven't located one yet) of United Negro Improvement Association members marching in uniform.~~
- AQ7 7. Ashbery.
8. Burrows, *Larry Burrows Vietnam*, Untitled photo of soldier sleeping. (Color, p. 242.)

Bibliography

- AQ8 Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Maypole of Merry Mount."
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*.
- AQ10 Peter Simon, Untitled. (Black-and-white, p. 79).

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