

Power and the Photograph: John Goodman's Tremont Street Series

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Foucault writes that complex power relations can be analyzed through the “antagonism of strategies.” In other words, it is worthwhile to study “what we mean by legality in the field of illegality” (Foucault, 1982). Power relationships can include “dividing practices” and “pastoral power” (Foucault, 1982). In this paper, I will use Boston's defunct Combat Zone and John Goodman's series, “Tremont Street, June 12, 1978” to discuss some of these power relations.

I have lived with these six photos for the last five or six years. (Fig. 1-6) Each individual photo is powerful and disturbing, and as a narrative, they punch me in the gut. This series is so personal and raw. The young girl in the series could have been me, my sister, or my friend. She is so real. To me she is not the “other” (Foucault). I wonder is she the other to Goodman? Is she the other to herself or is Goodman the other? Is the John the other? Is anyone the other? How did the Combat Zone become the environment where all of this took place?

The first photo (Fig.1) reveals Goodman “moving in” as a photographer. He describes himself as the “kid with the camera” (personal interview). The prostitute is the kid with the body. Her gaze is averted to look at what is about her. She seems vulnerable and knowing at the same time. It appears that the photographer and we, the viewer, are in complete control and that she as subject/object is oblivious. She is the other here. The photographer and viewer continue to be in control in the second photo (Fig. 2). It zeroes in on her body, ignoring the identity of her face.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

In the third and fourth images (Figs. 3, 4) she notices the photographer. Thus begins “the dance” (personal interview). She takes control of the situation and appears to step out of her role into a parody of prostitution. At that moment she chooses to be the subject. She and Goodman are playing a game where both seem to enjoy the moment. The point of view of the camera is also playful. Goodman moves up and down, in and out. One questions, whether she or Goodman is in control. Is she powerful because she is being seen? Is Goodman powerful because he has the camera? The viewer must determine that for themselves, based on the viewer’s own cultural background and experiences.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

All of a sudden, in the fifth photo (Fig. 5), a john appears with money secreted in his pocket. Business negotiations ensue. The young woman points her feet awkwardly like a child. The john, most likely a bellman from the Bradford hotel nearby, seems to be a hulk of a man. His only power seems to be money and the almost brutal gesture of his pointed finger. The question for the viewer is whether or not the woman has ceded control to the john or has she taken control to conduct business? They walk off quickly after what appears to be an agreement for services (Fig. 6). Consent appears mutual.

Power relations are rooted in a system of social networks and power can only be exercised over the free. It is important to look at who legitimizes power and the history of that power. (Foucault, 1982) Goodman’s photos became possible because of the strategies and actions of the state of Massachusetts. In this case it was the Boston Redevelopment Authority with the ironic acronym of BRA. The BRA influenced the individuals of the Combat Zone and beyond, not just individuals seen in this series, but the unseen, such as the pimps, other prostitutes, business owners, property owners etc.

The BRA attempted to contain the sex trade to a four-block area in the early 70’s. Its goal was to protect the general public from crime accompanying the sex trade and to

protect property values of the Back Bay and Beacon Hill (Giorlandino, 1986). BRA briefly toyed with the idea of razing the area but realized the displacement could make mat-



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

ters worse. The public thought “prostitution will be with us forever” (Esselstyn, 1968). and were resigned. The implementation of the Zone quickly led to prostitution taking place “out in the open on the streets”(Giorlandino, 1986). “The streets were energized, chaotic and they never slept” (Sheehan, 1973).

By containing the sex trade to the Combat Zone the BRA was attempting to use its power for the greater good. This is a power technique originating from Christian institutions termed “pastoral power.” and an important strategy of modern culture (Foucault, 1982). The BRA is part of the white male establishment termed the “State” (Foucault, 1982). Change and control were BRA’s objectives. As an institution, it separated the sex trade from the gentrified areas of Boston. The actions of BRA produced the environment which allowed Goodman or any other photographer to shoot photographs. “The area was revealed and open to me” (personal interview) and gave Goodman access.

In the Combat Zone dividing practices (Foucault, 1982) are very obvious. The environment and activities within became normalized and the public could feel safe because unacceptable behaviors were not happening in their neighborhoods. The prostitute was free to choose, so was the john, and so was the photographer. Each has their role. None of this interplay was passive. “Power exists only when put into action” (Foucault, 1982). This particular series is evidence that power relationships flow back and forth quicker than Goodman can photograph.

Goodman, describes himself as a believer that photographs shouldn't be explained. "What it means to you and what it means to someone else is two different things and that is the beauty of the whole thing" (personal interview) "I'm the photographer, I'm the one that made this thing happen" (personal interview). He never stages anything not even to have the subject "move the right hand a little higher" (personal interview) He describes that when the connection happens, it is "universal and endures." "That is its validity" (personal interview).

Goodman's shadow is in three of the photos. This is unusual. Feminist critics like Carol Duncan, would interpret the shadow as looming over and dominating the subject with his virility. However, the light was just falling that way and Goodman just "went with it" (personal interview) knowing the shadow was there but wanting the shot. Goodman looks for a "...feeling, an event, a happening. It is a whuoomph. That's all I want to do, that's all I want" (interview). This is a fine visceral description of Roland Barthes, "punctum" (Barthes, 2010).

When speaking of the young prostitute in the photo series. John says that he did not know her name but had seen her. He was sure that she had seen him around. Initially, during this shoot, there was a non-verbal acknowledgement. It became a "dance of sorts" "She was playing, and I was moving in as a photographer" (personal interview). Goodman had a certain comfort level within the combat zone. "I kind of just floated through in an anonymous way. They were also in an anonymous way and that is how that world works." (personal interview) Even though Goodman seems to be describing an us/them type of scenario, I fail to see judgment in these photos or during the interview. Although John Waters (2012) states that, "All photographers are voyeurs, as soon as you look through a camera, you are promoting voyeurism." Does that make us, the viewer, voyeurs as well? I think the answer is yes.

Goodman was a new type of documentary photographer that is described by Martha Rosler (2005). His personal goals were to try and make a living as a photographer "always working on my own projects" (personal interview). Goodman's photographs are a "narrative depending on the viewpoint of the viewer and the only meaning to be found is within the frame of the image" (Rosler, 2005). Unlike the photos of Dorothea Lange, or Walker Evans these photos were not used by the "state" to change the thinking of the general public (Rosler, 2005).

Goodman is interested in what happens, then abstracts and deconstructs the photos. He wants his photos to be more “symbols and to be obscure so one can continue to have a dialogue.” John is not interested in “straight reportage” (personal interview). Photo #3 (Fig. 2) from this series was in an exhibition called *Exposed*. (Phillips, 2010) and traveled to Tate Modern, Walker Art Center and SFMOMA in 2010. Goodman states:

I was showing her [Sandra Phillips, senior curator of SFMOMA] work maybe 5 years ago. I had gone through this whole thing of like what pictures I should bring to this meeting I had with her. I remember specifically thinking, should I show her this? And I thought yeah, I’m gonna show her this. When I showed her the body of work, when she saw this picture, she instantly recognized what she was looking for and she said yes this one (personal interview).

Did this action empower the photo to become art, or was it already art? These photos originated with Goodman but they have become “part of the culture and are a result of the culture...They are about representation, identity, and power – about History itself” (Batchen, 2001).

The series was shot in early evening and the Combat Zone was “getting ready” (personal interview). When asked if this series is powerful? Goodman says “yeah” Did he feel privileged? “Absolutely” (personal interview). Whether the young girl in the photos was “divided inside herself or divided from others” (Foucault, 1982) remains unanswered. Certainly the environment of the Combat Zone allowed for these complex power relations to take place.

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