

Nepal

**Kevin Bubriski, *Nepal: 1975–2011***

Santa Fe, NM/Cambridge, MA: Radius Books/The Peabody Museum Press, 2014. 304 pages. 200 duotone illustrations. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN 978-1-934435-72-4.

AT THE AGE of twenty, Kevin Bubriski went to Nepal in 1975 as a water engineer, engaged as a Peace Corps volunteer. For four years he worked in Humla and Mugu, taking along “a basic M3 Leica 35mm camera and a fixed prime 50mm lens” (25). Forty-six photographs taken in Jumla, Humla, Mugu, Dolpo, Rukum, Nuwakot, Khotang, and the Kathmandu Valley in 1975–1979 document the photographer’s early period. Bubriski writes in retrospect that Nepal “was simpler, smaller, more finite than today.” His camera was “like a notepad or sketchbook” (25). Indeed, the pictures documenting the visit of King Birendra to Jumla in 1978 appear as a visual noted, but the pictures of the porters in Kathmandu (31, 32) and the brothers in Karkibada (61) convey more than a sketch. These are powerful statements, indicating Bubriski’s working style of the 1970s. There is a strong urgency in the photographer’s gaze that materializes through the lens. To paraphrase Lisette Model, the split second reveals images and aspects of life that are almost unseen to the eye. Bubriski’s photographs are indeed “revealing” an unspectacular reality that is rarely observed. In retrospect—a generation later—this reality has turned into something spectacular because the scene has changed. Not only is there no more topknot to be seen (155) in Humla, as Charles Ramble points out; people simply look different. I do not refer to their clothes that have completely been replaced by globalized readymade shirts, or trousers and jackets from China, but their gaze, the way they look at the photographer, or at events. The first picture of the book (29, also 57) captures the excitement of hundreds of people in 1976—boys open-mouthed or touching their lips—“anticipating the living goddess Kumari” (28). The notion of surprise (“deeply-lined anxiety” [20] as Ramble writes) is gone now. Events are taken for granted.

Bubriski returned as a photographer and made three trips totaling twenty-four months between April 1984 and May 1987 with a tripod and a 4x5 large-format view camera, and travelled again extensively in the remote areas of the far west, Jumla, Mugu, and Humla, but also in Kanchanpur in the lowlands and to Barpak, the Nubri Valley, Gatlang, and to Sankhuwasabha in the far east. The result of these wanderings was exhibited in May 1987 at the American Cultural Center in Kathmandu and published (BUBRISKI 1993). Of ninety-four photographs, eight present landscapes, nine architecture and villages, while the remaining ones are strictly speaking “portraits.” These portraits established Bubriski’s fame. The way he worked under black cloth looking at people upside down allowed people to take time to pose the way they wanted to be seen, always looking at the instrument on the tripod. Be it a Tamang couple in Gatlang, two friends embracing each other

at Yarsa, a shepherd carrying a sheep in Doglang, or two Gurung boys in Barpak, Bubriski unfolds what I dare to call biblical scenes. Bubriski's "others are us, and his photographs show us for who we are," as Robert Gardener writes in the preface to the present publication (7). As an anthropologist, Charles Ramble, who (like me) saw the photographs in 1987, "felt slightly guilty about liking them so much," as he writes in his "reflections on Nepal" (10). The clothing and equipment in them were "not faux-authentic, but authentic," and "the composing ... was done by the subjects themselves," he writes in an attempt to justify his "liking." I do understand the fear of the anthropologist to like beauty within what one would deplore as utter poverty and a fight for survival. But I never felt guilty. My experience in 1986 in Jumla and Mugu allowed me to value Bubriski's work as a unique testimony that destroys any reproaches: Bubriski does not present clichés and he does not indulge the colonial gaze that tends to isolate the exotic. The present publication does not include any photographs published in 1993 but presents fifty-one photographs ("Through a Ground-Glass Darkly," 87–156) documenting the four years of productive work, including twenty-one photographs presenting scenes rather than portraits from the Kathmandu Valley. Bubriski writes of "careful visual exploration of what was contained within the frame" (87). His "visual exploration," since 1986 aided by a hand-held twin-lens reflex Rolleiflex, is mirrored by the gaze of those who explore his dealings under the black cloth. It is probably this facing each other that transcends the narrative and turns the photograph into a statement that owns the quality of testimony.

The third chapter ("Rituals on the Street," 159–212) presents thirty-seven photographs from the period 1986 to 1989, which by now had become more narrative and even accidental ("Jyapu farmer carrying radishes and scallions—seen from the back," 179). The inevitability of the earlier years' photography is replaced by the fast click which succeeds in perfect composition, demonstrated by the famous picture documenting farmers crossing the Vishnumati River (177), "famous" because it featured on the cover of the journal *Himal* in February 1992, titled "Limits of Growth: The Weakening Spirit of the Kathmandu Valley." Since the end of the 1980s the valley has changed rapidly in the wake of increasing urbanization, and the Himalaya changed at a similar pace by being made accessible through the building of roads.

The fourth chapter ("Emergency to Ceasefire," 215–33) presents eleven black and white and four color photographs taken in February and November 2005. Moving among military and razor-wire barricades one feels almost lonely, in search for the photographer's eyes that intensively turned to the lens in the 1980s. The change to color does not add any specific quality to the scenes at Lukla or Namche.

The fifth chapter ("Return," 235–65) presents twenty-five color photos taken in June 2010. Bubriski returned to places where he worked more than thirty years earlier. His remembered world seems to have passed away. Scenes from schools document rapid change, which the photographer meets with a certain insecurity. Clad in a polo shirt, the teacher (251) looks at him in anticipation of a future that will be totally based on imported ideas and goods, paid with money earned abroad. Humla has meanwhile arrived in a global economy to which Nepal contributes labor. In Bubriski's "return" the photographs breathe a notion of melancholy.

The final chapter (“Taxi Kathmandu,” 267–97) presents twenty-three color photographs taken in 2011: “I rolled down the window and turned my camera to the rapidly changing world just beyond the taxi door” (267). Yes indeed, the world has been changing rapidly and keeps changing. Bubriski is passing by (in a taxi), he has distanced himself from that world and even implicates social stress: people queuing for water (281), an ancient well “has less than four inches of water” (280), and “homeless young men ... sleep late into the morning” (283). Billboards dominate the urban environment, promising beautiful hair and the lowest tariff for mobile calls.

Kevin Bubriski presents almost forty years (1975–2011) of photography in *Nepal* and thereby speaks about himself. In 1985 he looks at people and people look at him. In 2011 he does not look at people and people do not look at him (290, 292, 294). There is a decisive change from focus to casual glimpse. He writes about his 2011 encounter in disgust, “traffic jams, rush hour frenzy, delay, potholes and road closures” and “turned (his) camera to the rapidly changing world,” (267) in which he is not at home.

I ask myself why I admire Bubriski’s early period photographs without “feeling guilty” and why the cool casualness of the view from the taxi does not speak to me. I am maybe trapped in a prejudice that senses originality, or even “authenticity” in a bygone world, an allegedly “true” world of epic quality. Similar to Bubriski, Sebastião Salgado captures not only landscapes around the world, but people (SALGADO 2013), who “beyond the picturesque alienness,” as Ramble writes, express “curiosity at the photographer” (20). Pictures of people in Ethiopia in 2007 (317) or a young man in 2005 at Mato Grosso in Brazil, holding two fish (501)—all of them looking at the photographer with an intensity that Bubriski was mastering in 1985. Ursula Schulz-Dornburg captured quite a different world when she documented people waiting at bus stations in Armenia in 1997–2001: “Their raised faces, like the characters of a shifting, indecipherable text, are spelt out in a provisional eternity” (BÄRMANN 2002). What I called melancholia is perhaps better characterized as “provisional eternity.” Gaze is imprinted on paper, in memory of people and place. It is an act that speaks directly to the viewer, be it in waiting for a bus, showing fish, or spinning wool (see the photograph [taken in 1977] on page sixty-six of the book under review).

REFERENCES

BÄRMANN, Matthias

2002 Living in transition. Photo Series by Ursula Schulz-Dornburg. In *Ursula Schulz-Dornburg: Across the Territories 1980–2011*. Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, 18.

BUBRISKI, Kevin

1993 *Portrait of Nepal*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

SALGADO, Lélia

2013 *Sebastião Salgado: Genesis*. Cologne: Taschen.

Niels Gutschow
Heidelberg University