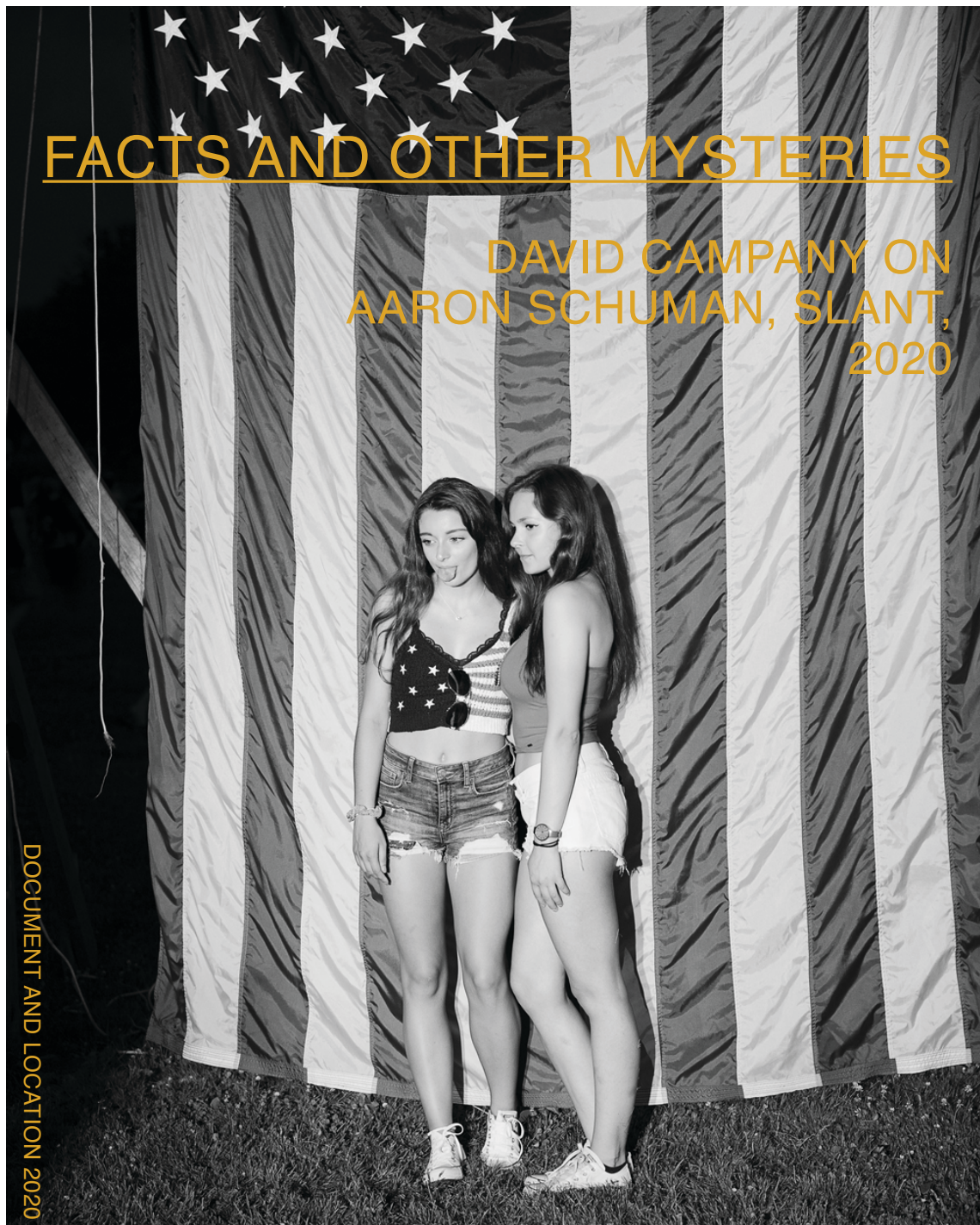


DOCUMENT AND LOCATION



FACTS AND OTHER MYSTERIES

DAVID CAMPANY ON
AARON SCHUMAN, SLANT,
2020

DOCUMENT AND LOCATION 2020

Facts and Other Mysteries

David Company on
Aaron Schuman, *SLANT*,
2020



I have been asked to write in response to Aaron Schuman's *SLANT*. The book does not quite add up, and that is no criticism at all. On the contrary, *SLANT* would be a lesser thing if it did. Comprising

observational photographs and newspaper clippings, Schuman's project proposes a set of relations without having to formalize or resolve them. In this way, whatever else it may be 'about', *SLANT* is about its own form, about its own proposition, about its not adding up, and what that not adding up might open onto for an engaged viewer/reader. Other than this, I am disinclined to make any kind of statement or 'reading' here. Instead, and truer

to the form of *SLANT*, I offer a group of discrete and fragmentary thoughts, a little like clippings, although perhaps not the kind you might find in a Massachusetts newspaper.

—

Photography is drawn toward events ('History') and non-events (everyday life). Yet both approaches involve the event of the photographic act itself. The representation of drama and the drama of representation can never be entirely separate. Writing is also drawn to events and non-events, and it too is an event in itself.

—

What is research for a wandering, observational photographer? Is research done before the photographic act? Is the photographic act itself a form of research?

—

The longer journalistic writing becomes, the more literary it becomes. The briefer and more condensed journalistic writing becomes, the more like poetry it becomes (and the more like an isolated photograph it becomes). It sacrifices exposition and explanation for evocation. The art of journalistic brevity is an art of evocation as much as it is a craft of description.

The photographer Garry Winogrand once said: 'There is nothing so mysterious as a fact clearly stated.' I suspect the writers of the brief newspaper texts that Schuman's father sent to him knew this. Those short little descriptions, while aiming for clarity, are as slant as anything. We should not be surprised that they prompted Aaron Schuman's project.

—

A newspaper comprised only of photographs is not a newspaper. A newspaper comprised only of writing is still a newspaper.

—

Schuman's project takes its title from the opening line and sentiment of a poem by Emily Dickinson:

*Tell all the Truth
but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit
lies
Too bright for our
infirm Delight
The Truth's superb
surprise
As Lightning to
the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must
dazzle gradually
Or every man be
blind —*

Dickinson connects truth telling and slant telling to the effects of light.

—

Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, where Schuman took his photographs. She was born in 1830 and lived through the period of invention and early proliferation of photography. It was a medium that seemed to both promise and complicate the idea of truth telling. What photography offered was at once unslanted and slanted. A document and an artwork. The two could be neither separated nor reconciled, and all the indeterminacy, ambiguity and mystery of photography would flow from this.

—

The word 'Slant' appears in another poem by Emily Dickinson. This one is also to do with light and can be understood in parallel to photography. It begins:

*There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons —
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes —*

And it ends:

*When it comes, the Landscape listens —
Shadows — hold their breath —
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death —*

I cannot know for sure, but I suspect Dickinson wanted to allude to the idea that we never see things 'for themselves'. We see them in the form of the particular light they reflect or emit. Such is vision, and such is photography. What is observable is always slanted by whatever the light that makes it visible, and photographable.

CITIZEN ASSISTANCE

• 4:14 a.m. — A man shoveling snow on State Street told police he saw a strange orange glow coming from the eastern sky that might have been something on fire. Police determined the glow was probably the sun coming up for the day.

NOISE COMPLAINTS

• 6:36 a.m. — Strange sounds coming from the woods near Mill Valley Estates were determined to be trees creaking due to the cold temperatures.

SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY

• 11:03 a.m. — An Amherst woman told police a neighbor who has behaved in odd ways is using a camera to photograph her home.

This light affects us in ways that ‘things in themselves’ cannot.

printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature.”

Only two photographs of Emily Dickinson are known to exist. There is a Daguerreotype portrait taken when she was 16 or 17 years-old. Another, from 1859 and discovered quite recently, shows

Emily Dickinson died in 1886, just at the onset of the halftone printing technology that allowed photographic images and type to be printed together on the same plate. Halftone is what permitted newspapers to reproduce photographs efficiently, more



• 11:15 a.m. — Police were notified about a man who threw a temper tantrum while at a downtown office. The man, who was wearing a jacket with photos of deceased people stapled to its inside, was not located.

FIGHTS

• 12:55 a.m. — People cursing at each other from opposite sides of Main Street near the Emily Dickinson Museum fled before police got there. There was no evidence that the argument became physical.

• 11:22 p.m. — Two people sitting on a pile of dirt near the Olympia Place construction site were sent on their way by police. They told police they were just discussing their relationship.

Dickinson with her friend Kate Scott Turner, also a poet. In ‘The Salon of 1859’ the French writer Charles Baudelaire warned:

“If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally. It is time, then, for it to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts—but the very humble servant, like

cheaply and in greater numbers. So, we could say that Dickinson’s life belongs to that first phase of photography, between its invention and the advent of what came to be called the ‘mass media’, with its standardised forms of truth-telling.

Words and photographs were combined at least as early as 1840. The parallels and affinities between photography and poetry were also explored around that time. In 1843, Constance Fox Talbot, wife of William Henry Fox Talbot, made an image of the first four lines of their friend

Thomas Moore's poem 'The Last Rose of Summer':

*'Tis the last rose of summer
Left blooming alone
All her lovely companions
Are faded and gone.*

Moore's rather lame poetry is nowhere near as compelling and Dickinson's although Constance Fox Talbot's image of printed text was significant. She and her husband were interested in how photographic technology could be put in the service of writing and the word, as much as images.

The texts in Schuman's book are images of texts. They are clippings cut from

newspapers that have been photographed and then reproduced on the pages of his book. Do we relate to these reproduced clippings as images or as texts? And in our relation to them are we readers or viewers? If the answer to both questions is "both", then what might this tell us; what might it imply?

In a literal sense, photographs can include words. Words cannot include photographs.

Many of Schuman's observational photographs contain text: street signs, shop signs, hand-printed signs, mechanically printed signs, graffiti, advertising. The observable world is already 'scripto-visual'. Writing has



invaded it, overwritten it. In some ways the presence of words in the world, and in photographs of the world, masks a deeper interpenetration. Language conjures mental images, and images conjure language in the mind. Recognizing something (a 'chair', a 'tree', a 'house', a 'newspaper') involves mentally naming it. Reading a word and understanding it ('chair', 'tree', 'house', 'newspaper') involves the forming of mental images. On some fundamental level all understanding, and all communication, is scripto-visual, like a rebus. It is only out

there in the world that words, images and things can appear to be separate entities. The mind's distinctions between them are much less clear, although this is not to say there are no differences.

—

The texts clipped from newspapers that are reproduced in Schuman's book were not directly accompanied in those newspapers by photographs. In Schuman's book they are, although the term 'accompaniment' is very loose. All elements in a book accompany each other. That is something



• 9:40 p.m. — A South Amherst resident told police he got a phone call from a person claiming to be an Afghan soldier who had him "in his cross hairs" due to his involvement in local civil rights issues. The resident called police again the following day to report additional prank calls from the same person, who spoke with a Middle Eastern accent.



SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY

■ 3:06 a.m. — Police located four men near a home under construction at the intersection of Mill and State streets, with one of the men holding a wooden stake. The men told police "they were trying to find adventure." They were sent on their way.



NOISE COMPLAINTS

■ 7:19 p.m. — Residents at The Boulders reported a loud argument between a man and woman and banging on the walls that caused a painting in their apartment to fall to the floor. Police determined that the neighbors were engaged in what was described as "overzealous copulation," and were not arguing.

books do (or we do with books). The elements are in each other's company, but the relations are neither explicit nor fixed.

—

There is a long history of book publishing that involves the placing of photographs and text in tenuous and suggestive accompaniment. It includes Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges La Morte* 1892, André Breton's *Nadja* 1929, Claude Cahun's *Aveux non Avenus* 1930, James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let us now Praise Famous Men* 1941, Victor Burgin's *Hôtel Latone* 1982 and Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* 1988, among many others. This history is often understood as a sub-genre, or counter-genre, at odds with mass media preference for combining

photos and text as apparently seamless and adequate accounts of the world, the way a conventional newspaper does. There is some truth to this. (Agee and Evans, for example, resisted the narrow conventions of mainstream journalism, bending them while working for its institutions, and breaking them in the making of their book. In a book, as opposed to a popular magazine, or newspaper, you can do what you like, although it might not appeal to the masses.) But it is also misleading to see experiments in image-text relations as resistances to mainstream journalism. They have their own motivations, their own desires to get at truths.

—

There is only slant. Regimes of realism



are just that. Regimes. Shared or enforced conventions that eventually crumble. When they do crumble, there can be immense feelings of relief, but also of trepidation and anxiety: will the world be plunged into relativism? Into ‘post-truth’? Into ‘fake news’? (The death of God had, and is having, a similar effect). But ‘slant’, as I imagine Dickinson and Schuman to understand the term, is not the same as ‘spin’. Slant is a matter of accepting that truth must be pursued while knowing that its form cannot be presumed. It has to be fought for, and fought over, speculated, experimented, hypothesized, wrestled with, and offered sincerely, while knowing that it is always going to be partial and provisional.

David Campany is a curator, writer, and Managing Director of Programs at the International Center of Photography, New York. His most recent book is On Photographs (Thames & Hudson 2020).

■ 5:45 p.m. – A woman reported seeing a strange light in the sky over Belchertown Road that she said was brighter than a star but dimmer than the moon. Police determined the light was coming from a star.

SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY
• 12:08 a.m. — People inside a vehicle at the high school who told police they were observing stars were warned about their behavior and sent on their way.



Artworks by Aaron Schuman
© Aaron Schuman

Text by David Campany
© David Campany and Foreground

Design by Ben Tupper
Published by Foreground, 2020

Foreground
The Old Church School
Butts Hill
Frome
Somerset
BA11 1HR

foregroundprojects.org.uk

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, including photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing by the publishers.

DOCUMENT AND LOCATION

Document and Location is a new research group developed by academics from Fine Art, Photography and Architecture at The University of The West of England, Bristol, in partnership with Foreground.

The group's research and accompanying public programme of exhibitions, events and publishing that will investigate how our understanding of place is directly formed through how locations are recorded and subsequently narrated by different disciplines.

Supported by
University of the West of England
and Arts Council England



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**