“Entering” the Documentary Tradition:
On Arthur Rothstein’s “Entering Butte” and the FSA Photography Project

Frances Corry
History of Photography
Prof. Noam Elcott
10 December 2012

In the winter of 1949, Jack Kerouac was making his way through Montana on a cross-country bus trip. He arrived in the western metropolis of Butte late on a Sunday night, penning a description of the city that would be published twenty years later in an article for *Esquire:*

> I had hoped the saloons would stay open long enough for me to see them. They never even closed. In a great old-time saloon I had a giant beer. On the wall was a big electric signboard flashing gambling numbers ...What characters in there: old prospectors, gamblers, whores, miners, Indians, cowboys, tobacco-chewing businessmen! Groups of sullen Indians drank rotgut in the john. Hundreds of men played cards in an atmosphere of smoke and spittoons. It was the end of my quest for an ideal bar.
>
> Exhausting or not, there's no better way to see the West than to take a good old bus and go batting along on regular roads and come to all kinds of towns and cities where you can get out and walk sometimes a whole hour and see the world and come back to your bus and drive on.[1]

Ten years before Kerouac's visit, Arthur Rothstein, by then a veteran photographer of the Farm Security Administration's Information Division, also visited Butte. His practice – and the practice of FSA's photographers as a whole - was not too far from the philosophy espoused by Kerouac. (Kerouac would in fact write the foreword for Robert Frank's photography book *The Americans*, a publication heavily influenced by the work of FSA photographers). At the time of his 1939 visit to Butte, Rothstein had been "batting along" America's roads for four years, documenting the small towns and rural farmland of America since 1935, when the New Deal's Resettlement Administration began a photography project under the direction of Roy Stryker. In 1936, the project, which, at its basis, intended to record the struggles of Americans and the ways the New Deal was helping them, would be shifted to the Farm Security Administration's Information Division.

[1] "The Great Western Bus Ride," *Esquire*, March 1970.

Rothstein's most iconic images are not of Butte, though, or the other new metropolises of the West; they are "Fleeing a dust storm, Farmer Arthur Coble and sons walking in the face of a dust storm, Cimmaron County, Oklahoma" [1][2], or "Girl at Gee's Bend" [2]; images that show the hardships of American lives wracked by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, the nature of life in the country's largely overlooked and undocumented regions. The FSA project, of course, was more than just a historical record, or a sort of visual government report; as Stryker once said, it intended to capture "the kinds of things that a scholar a hundred years from now is going to wonder about."[3] It seems the goal was achieved. Rothstein's work, along with fellow FSA photographers like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, now resides in digitized form on the Library of Congress' website; it is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (among numerous other institutions); most recently, Rothstein's prints have been acquired by Columbia University, residing in the Avery Classics Collection.

Some of the photographs in this collection are, conspicuously, photographs of Butte – of new American urbanity in the middle of largely suffering rural America. Of particular note is "Entering Butte, Montana," a photograph from the Rothstein archives at Columbia. The black and white nitrate negative looks across a dirt road at small but sturdy houses and mining buildings constructed close together on a hill. They appear strung together by telephone wires. A bold sign displays a speeding warning; a man walks underneath it, going in the opposite direction of Butte, his dog leading the way. "Entering Butte" will act as a microcosm from which one can distill both Rothstein and the FSA's intentions; furthermore, it will help situate the FSA project into its larger political and art historical contexts, particularly the development of social documentary photography.

[2] Images follow the essay. They are labeled according to their bracketed number within the text.
[3] Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration*, page xviii.

* * *

A brief history of Rothstein's interest in Butte is helpful in understanding "Entering Butte," specifically the aesthetic choices the photographer made after his research. Rothstein orchestrated his visit to the city as part of a larger trip to Montana in 1939. Extensive research was required of all FSA photographers before their visits; Rothstein, on this trip, was interested in the agricultural disasters that continued to unfold in the state, but also was on the lookout for images to complete a file on successful FSA programs, specifically cattle ranches and sugar beet farming.[4] These were agricultural activities directly associated with FSA initiatives. Butte, however, was largely divorced from the work of the FSA and the Resettlement Administration. A rich store of copper had been found there in the late 19th century, and the city had been built, had survived, and continued to thrive because of the resource, largely unaffected by the Depression plaguing rural areas and small towns. As Stryker told Rothstein when approving his Montana trip, any photographs "we can get out of Butte [are] velvet."[5] That is, while not most important to the documentation of FSA work in Montana, Butte documentation was still relevant to the FSA photography project. Butte, however, was owned almost entirely by the Anaconda Company, which ran the copper mines, controlled the economy, owned the majority of Montana's newspapers, and otherwise worked without the help of the FSA.[6]

Knowing this, Stryker's classification of Butte as "velvet" is interesting. Why would he allow photographs of a thriving city that had little to do with publicizing the work of the FSA? Not only did Rothstein document Butte, though, his images were not subject to Stryker's notorious

[4] Mary Murphy. *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936-1942*. Page 126.
[5] Mary Murphy. *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936-1942*. Page 127.
[6] Mary Murphy. *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936-1942*. Page 126.

hole punching of non-relevant negatives, an act known as "killing."[7] It speaks not only to Stryker's trust of Rothstein and his research, but also to the legible meaning of Rothstein's Butte photographs and the evolving intentions of FSA photography in 1939.

* * *

"Entering Butte" is among 38 photographs Rothstein took of the city that reside within the Library of Congress' FSA collection; it is one of two Rothstein photographs with the same title [3]. The photograph's power is determined by its careful composition; this structure creates marked visual and social juxtapositions. The image employs the rule of thirds. On the horizontal plane, the three receding houses divide the image; on the vertical plane, the dusty road, the receding, house-filled hillside, and the sky segment the photographic field. The image thus draws attention to the intersection of these thirds in the lower left hand section, where a man walks underneath a sign: ENTERING CITY OF BUTTE. SPEED LIMIT, 25 MILES PER HOUR. THIS WILL BE ENFORCED BY ORDER OF POLICE DEPARTMENT. He looks toward the photographer; hat tipped slightly forward, his bending knee and dark clothing starkly contrasting the house's straight lines and the sign's bold white background. It's important to note that Rothstein's personal print in the Columbia archives differs most notably from the FSA negative in its enhanced contrast. The images attributes are nearly identical in terms of cropping and color; in the Columbia print, however, whites become even brighter, the dark portions are more marked in their difference, further emphasizing the juxtaposition of the man with the sign.

This visual contrast prompts the realization of more salient contradictions within the photograph, contradictions in which the photograph's intended meaning is imbued. Composition

[7] "Farm Security Administration, Historical Section: A Guide to Textual Records in the Library of Congress." Prepared by Annette Melvinne, Library of Congress, Washington, 1985.

is again paramount in determining these juxtapositions. The angle at which the viewer sees the sign, as well as the sign's text and the image's title (that is, "Entering City of Butte,") asserts a movement from right to left, that we are travelling from the outer reaches of the city, approaching what we may imagine to be a bustling downtown Butte. Indeed, the idea of a "bustling" city is wrapped up in the sign's text: that is, the word "SPEED."

This is no arbitrary inclusion: Rothstein's other "Entering Butte" [3] highlights a "SPEED" sign even more prominently. In the second "Entering Butte," it is difficult to think about the landscape's details beyond the bold white signs dominating the image's first plane. A speed limit means there is, quite obviously, an influx of cars; these are the people who migrated to Butte, fleeing the drought and depression of agricultural life, to seek a living from copper mining; but those cars are also people who could afford modern technology, thanks to the city's copper industry. In a state whose most documented aspects were its suffering, technologically primitive farms, the SPEED sign explains a ubiquity of modern technology. The telephone wires linking together the landscape of homes and mining shafts reinforce this symbol.

The photograph's meaning thus hinges on what lies below this sign – that is, the solitary man and what we may assume to be his dog. We see no cars speeding down this road toward Butte; we see no bustling city life as we enter the city's bounds. There is only the man in his tipped hat, staring towards us, walking in the opposite direction of the established right-to-left motion of the photograph. As we are "Entering Butte," he is exiting it. The man looks towards us, and we are drawn towards his face, but are unable to glimpse his expression. Despite He is too far away as we view at him from the other side of the road.

The moment is notable, especially when compared to iconic images like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" or Walker Evans' "Allie Mae Boroughs," photographs that are today most

closely associated with the FSA project. Canonical images of the FSA are predominantly portraits. A close cropping to the individual's face determined the image's meaning and generated viewer compassion when circulated in magazines and newspapers. Rothstein, however, was famous for his particular method of shooting, which he titled the "unobtrusive camera." It was, as Rothstein states, "the idea of becoming a part of the environment that the people are in to such an extent that they're not even aware that pictures are being taken."[8] But in "Entering Butte," the man looks at Rothstein. The combination of a direct glance towards the photographer, reminiscent of FSA portraiture, with a distance that makes it impossible to interpret an expression, reinforces the image's notable sense of alienation. There is irony imbued in Rothstein's multiple juxtapositions, but it is strikingly sober.

Rothstein's other images from Butte feature different attributes common to "Entering Butte." The city is highly textual, boldly captioning its buildings [4]. Photographs emphasize the city's founding industry, copper mining, as something inextricable from living in Butte, as mineshafts press up against sturdy homes [5]. Modern amenities, like gas stations [6], are featured; Rothstein stresses this modernity with images like "One of the Oldest Buildings in Butte, Montana" [7]. (It reads a recent "1890.") Furthermore, the sense of alienation pervades the images: nearly half are taken from a distant vantage point, looking across the street at people or structures [8]. His photographs of Butte then contrast his images of rural Montana, which emphasize dire conditions, certainly, but also the natural and decent life of family farming. "Son of Montana Rancher near Glendive, Montana" serves as a good example [9]. The commercial text, industry, and inaccessible people of Butte photographs are nowhere to be found. Instead, a boy rides on a

[8] "An Interview for the Archives of American Art." *Archives of American Art Journal of The Smithsonian Institute*. Vol. 17 No. 1, 1977.

horse, not in a car. The tonal contrasts of a simple landscape of sky and earth emphasize the lone figure, while the upward angle lends the boy a sense of quiet nobility.

In this way, Rothstein's "Entering Butte" subtly relates to the images of Lewis Hine, at least in their common social examination of how man relates to the modern technology. Hine, the sociologist turned photographer, was largely responsible for the documentary tradition from which the FSA project sprang. Through Hine's photographic work for the National Child Labor Committee, progressive laws were enacted to limit child labor; social documentary photography was therefore inscribed with the power to affect social change. While Hine was most well known for this feat, his later images examine man's relation to machine labor in the burgeoning American industrial age.[9] Rothstein's "Entering Butte" is stamped with Hine's tradition, and asks similar questions: how does one relate to these new modern metropolises? More specifically, how does the migrant worker of rural FSA photography respond to these new modes of life? Our analysis of "Entering Butte" thus suggests some answers. The solitary man of "Entering Butte" acts as a general symbol. He is not made noble by his modern landscape, as the "Son of Montana Rancher" was; he is dominated by it, visually out of sync with it, and seems, ultimately, to be forced to leave it. Rothstein's reflections on the FSA project, made in 1964, support this claim:

> The purpose of the project was to photograph these people who were going to be moved out and photograph them in such a way that you had some idea of how they lived and what they did, because their entire way of life was going to be destroyed. They were going to be taken out of this environment and moved into shiny new houses where they would no longer have the picturesque quality that they had living in the hills. This record that I made I think served a very useful purpose. It showed how a certain group of people in the United States lived at a particular time, and they no longer exist. [10]

* * *

[9] Lecture. "History of Photography," Columbia University. 12 November 2012.
[10] "An Interview for the Archives of American Art." *Archives of American Art Journal of The Smithsonian Institute*. Vol. 17 No. 1, 1977.

The context of Rothstein's interest in Butte is essential to examining his photographs in terms of a larger documentary tradition. The photographer, during his research for the 1939 trip, became interested in Butte after a discussion with muckraking journalist Joseph Kinsey Howard.[11] Howard was known for his pieces in magazines *Survey Graphic* and *Nation*, in which he excoriated the Anaconda Mining Company for its corrupt power over Butte and Montana. Muckraking journalists are known for acts of unearthing: they take an institutional situation, and through investigative research and convincing writing, expose unknown corruption so as to enact social change. They generally published their works in popular magazines for widespread dissemination. This muckraking model serves as an apt metaphor for FSA photography.[12] Through investigative research and trained photography, FSA photographers exposed dire situations of rural, Depression-era America so as to enact social change. This social change, of course, was completed through another step: the FSA's New Deal initiatives.

At their basis, the photographs served as visual "proof" of the work that needed to be done and the work that had been done. As Rothstein explains in his interview for the Archives of American Art, the American public did indeed question the images. Those that wondered if the photographs were fakes deemed them "New Deal propaganda;" it seems those that accepted their reality referred to them as "documentary."[13] Rothstein in particular extolled documentary reality as an epistemic virtue of photography: "Photography is well suited to this aesthetic approach," he once wrote, "because the camera has always been invested with credibility. For the documentary

[11] Mary Murphy. *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936-1942*. Page 126.
[12] Martha Rosler. "In, Around and Afterthoughts: (On Documentary Photography)" Page 1.
[13] "An Interview for the Archives of American Art." *Archives of American Art Journal of The Smithsonian Institute*. Vol. 17 No. 1, 1977.

photographer, simple honesty enhances the picture with the dignity of fact."[14] The documentary photographer's tools for interpretation are therefore couched in selection, not fabrication. Documentary choices are limited to the place to shoot, the angle to take, the moment to capture, and the technical development afterwards.

And yet the "truthfulness" of these FSA images is firmly couched within their historical moment. These photographs were meant to document developing problems and developing progress, and their timeliness was paramount. The images were taken, the film sent back to Washington for processing (though some photographers did it themselves)[15], and put in the FSA files for free use by the press. Indeed, when they weren't used in a timely manner, they caused controversy; one need only look to Rothstein's "Cattle Skull, Badlands" to see what arose when an image was caught out of its timely context. The image of the skull on dry cracked ground was taken in May, that is, prior to the worst of the summer drought that would come to wrack the region. An AP press member published it several months later. Critics of FSA photography used the disparity as ammunition against the work of the organization, that the image had somehow been crafted in anticipation of New Deal measures for the region.[16] [17]

Indeed, the power of "Entering Butte" is not necessarily granted by its aesthetic qualities – it does not strike you viscerally in the way that "Migrant Mother" does. Its power is in its historical moment. By understanding its context – from the corruption of the Anaconda Mining Company, to the newness of Butte as a city, to the resettlement of farm workers plagued by drought and the

[14] Arthur Rothstein. "The Documentary Tradition." *Photographic Journal of the Royal Photographic Society* Vol. III No. 2 1971
[15] "Farm Security Administration / Office of War Information Black and White Negatives: Background and Scope." Library of Congress website.
[16] Errol Morris. "The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock (Part 1)," *The New York Times*. October 18, 2009.
[17] "An Interview for the Archives of American Art." *Archives of American Art Journal of The Smithsonian Institute*. Vol. 17 No. 1, 1977.

Depression- one is able to glean a delicate tension between rural, government-assisted America and new, modern cities of the West. Furthermore, viewers of the time would have been familiar with the other tropes of FSA photography; therefore "Entering Butte" gains meaning from familiarity with the FSA aesthetic, pulling reference points from the ubiquitous FSA photographs found in national photograph-centric magazines like TIME, or LOOK, as well as regional newspapers. The importance of Rothstein's photographs of Butte as articles of social documentary was largely lost as time went on. They became historical images, depicting old technology in an almost humorous manner (speed limits at 25 miles per hour!); they were emptied of their ability to make the viewer realize a need for social change. Indeed, the Library of Congress now houses the images of the FSA, both physically and digitally, while Rothstein's personal prints are in Columbia's Avery Library. They are entrenched in systems of academic or governmental preservation.

Other photographs, though, remain more fully ingrained in cultural consciousness; as their power to enact specific social change wanes, FSA images either fade into the historical past or become art objects. Nearly thirty of Rothstein's prints reside in the Museum of Modern Art's Permanent Collection; a portfolio of his prints residing in the Avery Classics Collection is hand-signed by Rothstein, thus inscribing on the images both monetary value and the authenticity of an artwork. Devoid of the ability to incite action, the images are stripped more closely to a power driven by art historical tradition and emotional recognition of the subject. This is another reason why portraiture remains in the FSA canon. We are divorced from a nuanced understanding of historical technology, but not from a nuanced understanding of human expression. Technology changes fundamentally over time, but faces do not. Furthermore, while the government's archive of these images was once a free repository meant to disseminate documents that could stir an

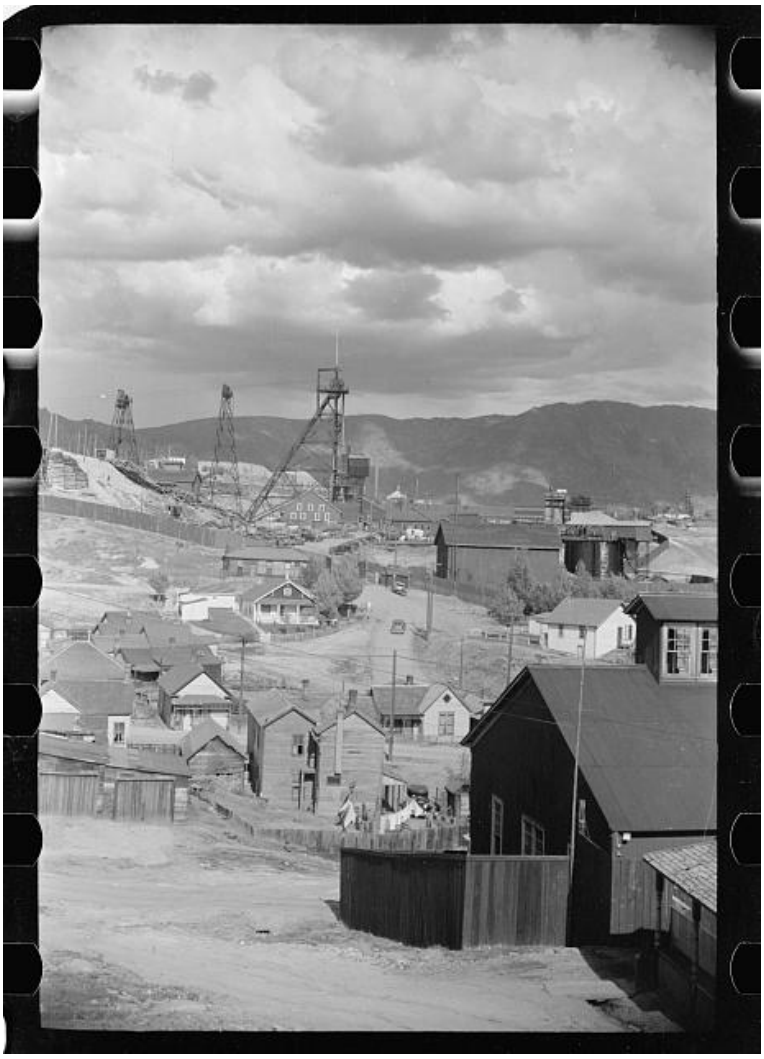
acceptance of social change, the ability to freely access the Library of Congress' digital images is now more relevant as a document attesting to the FSA project as a historical phenomenon. Its massive digital archive is a testament to the power of a project that largely founded our idea of documentary photography.

[1] "Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm." April 1936. Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

[2] “Girl at Gees Bend.” April 1937. Gee’s Bend, Alabama.

[3] “Entering Butte.” Summer 1939. Butte, Montana.

[4] “Bar and Gambling House.” Summer 1939. Butte, Montana.



[5] “Copper Mine in Miner’s Backyard.” Summer 1939. Butte, Montana.

[6] “Gas station, Butte, Montana.” Summer 1939. Butte, Montana.

[7] “One of the Oldest Buildings in Butte, Montana.” Summer 1939. Butte, Montana.

[8] “Moving Picture Theater, Butte, Montana.” Summer 1939. Butte, Montana.

[9] “Son of Montana Rancher near Glendive, Montana.” July 1936. Glendive, Montana.

Works Cited

Cohen, Stu. *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration*. Boston, Massachusetts: David R Godine, 2008.

Evans, Walker. *Allie Mae Boroughs*. Alabama: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C, 1936. Photographic Print, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00651773/.

"Farm Security Administration / Office of War Information Black and White Negatives: Background and Scope." Library of Congress website.

"Farm Security Administration, Historical Section: A Guide to Textual Records in the Library of Congress." Prepared by Annette Melvinne, Library of Congress, Washington, 1985.

Kerouac, Jack. "The Great Western Bus Ride," *Esquire*, March 1970.

Morris, Errol. "The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock (Part 1)," *The New York Times*. October 18, 2009.

Murphy, Mary. *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936-1942*. Montana Historical Society Press, 2003.

Rosler, Martha. "In, Around and Afterthoughts: (On Documentary Photography)." 1981. *The Contest of Meaning*, ed., Richard Bolton. Boston, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992.

Rothstein, Arthur. "An Interview for the Archives of American Art." Interviewer Richard Doud. *Archives of American Art Journal of The Smithsonian Institute*. Vol. 17 No. 1, (1977).

Rothstein, Arthur. "The Documentary Tradition." *Photographic Journal of the Royal Photographic Society*. Vol. III No. 2, (1971).

Rothstein, Arthur. *Bar and Gambling House*. Butte, Montana. Summer 1939. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa19970123156/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *Entering Butte*. Butte, Montana. Summer 1939. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1997011156/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *Entering Butte*. Butte, Montana. Summer 1939. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1997011164/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *Fleeing a dust storm, Farmer Arthur Coble and sons walking in the face of a dust storm*. Cimmaron County, Oklahoma, April 1936. Negative, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998018983/PP/.

Rothstein, Arthur. *Gas station*. Butte, Montana. Summer 1939. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1554011312/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *Girl at Gee's Bend*. Gee's Bend, Alabama, April 1937. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000006958/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *Moving Picture Theater*. Butte, Montana. Summer 1939. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1997011312/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *One of the Oldest Buildings in Butte, Montana*. Butte, Montana. Summer 1939. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1997011312/PP/

Rothstein, Arthur. *Son of Montana Rancher near Glendive, Montana*. Glendive, Montana. July 1936. Negative, nitrate. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1997011412/PP/