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El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers



Susan Meiselas
Soldiers search bus passengers along the Northern Highway, 1980
© Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

On view from
September 16 through
November 27, 2005

Media Preview
September 15, 2005
9:30 - 11am

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From September 16 through November 27, 2005, the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) will re-present an exhibition of wartime images that it first showed twenty-one years ago. *El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers* was exhibited at ICP in 1984, at the height of the civil war in that Central American country, and included the work of thirty photojournalists who covered the conflict. This landmark of photojournalism remains of interest today not only for the quality of the work and the photographers' committed engagement, but also as an opportunity to reflect on parallels between photographic responses to U.S. foreign policy then and now.

In 1979, a coup d'état in El Salvador initiated twelve years of bloody civil strife. The subsequent assassination of human-rights advocate Archbishop Oscar Romero and the murder of four U.S. churchwomen in 1980 drew world attention to the violent repression there. The Reagan Administration, which sought to prevent a takeover by leftist guerillas (whom they suspected were aided by Cuba as well as the newly victorious leftist government of neighboring Nicaragua), supported the dictatorial junta with military and economic aid throughout the early 1980s. During this time, right-wing death squads accounted for the murder or disappearance of some 70,000 civilians.

The exhibition, which documents this conflict, was originally organized by photographers Susan Meiselas and Henry Mattison. They engaged the participation of over two dozen fellow photographers in the project, including John Hoagland, Eugene Richards, Eli Reed, and James Nachtwey. Taken between the 1979 coup and June 1983, these black-and-white photographs—startling and shocking in their explicit recording of the facts of death—interpret the internal struggles that became a war with global implications, and present an urgent portrait of the then-widespread daily violence in that country.

Recently donated in its entirety to ICP, *El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers* was first presented in 1983 as a book that included text by poet Carolyn Forché and a detailed timeline of the then-escalating conflict. After opening at ICP the following year, the project circulated extensively as a traveling exhibition, touring museums, university galleries, high schools, public libraries, and churches, creating a public forum for dialogue about the crisis and America's role in it.

This exhibition stands as an important example of photographers working collaboratively to raise public awareness about an urgent political situation. As ICP founder Cornell Capa noted in 1984, "The photographs of *El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers* are...urgent eyewitnesses to a civil war occurring practically in our backyard. They were taken by thirty photojournalists who put their lives on the line to fulfill their assignments. Some left them there. These photographs, charged with horror and emotion, are a visual plea to stop the bloodshed and inhumanity."

Public Program

ICP will present a panel discussion entitled *Capturing Conflict: Photojournalism Over Three Decades*. For more information, please call (212) 857-0001.

El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers is made possible with support from Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz and Gayle and Robert Greenhill. It is organized by ICP Assistant Curator Kristen Lubben.