Abstract

Through an in-depth case study of the origins and context of a unique mass-market mass-participation photography publication, this chapter argues that existing theoretical approaches for understanding photobooks are inadequate models for popular practices. One Day for Life: Photographs by the people of Britain taken on a single day was the best-selling British non-fiction book of 1987, selling close to a quarter of a million copies. Comprising 350 images from the 55,000 submissions to a competition that aimed to be ‘the largest photographic event the world had ever seen’, the book was the culmination of an ambitious fundraising endeavour in aid of cancer charities. Participants were encouraged to create ‘a lasting record’ of everyday life in Britain on 14 August 1987, to be accompanied by a pound donation per photograph. The book’s intention was to “represent the creation – and character – of ordinary people everywhere” through “an image of the nation in all its moods”. What One Day for Life represented more convincingly, however, is the way that photography’s hierarchies are structured and maintained. Throughout the soliciting and judging processes, categories of ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘distinguished’, ‘the public’ and ‘celebrity’ circulated in complex stratifying dynamics, and were continued in the form of the final publication. From the mass of submissions, Royal Photographic Society camera clubs initially selected a shortlist that was subsequently appraised by a panel of photographers explicitly recruited as ‘big names’. Submissions by members of the monarchy made up the first and final photographs of the book, and ‘celebrity contributions’ opened and closed the chapter sections. Unknown and well-known photographers co-existed in carefully designed distinctions in a project that promised credence and substance for ‘ordinary’ photography through professional accreditation and the prize of publication. As an example of what might be called ‘circadian photobooks’ – those using the single day as an organising structure – One Day for Life can be located within a long-standing genre of using times-of-day as narrative devices, whether it be in the 19th century journalism of George Sala’s Twice Around the Clock, Modernist novels such as Mrs. Dalloway and Ulysses or Mass Observation day-surveys. As a metonymic strategy, it is common in photographic practice and can be found among Life magazine photo-essays and in the most obvious One Day for Life precursors: the blockbusting American Day in the Life photography books that emerged in the early 1980s. These volumes, which are in turn indebted to the sentimental humanism of The Family of Man and are the only photography books to exceed it in sales, differ from One Day for Life as productions by professional photographers, but share a similarity in terms of their heroic ambitions, monumental scale and commercial vision. Informed by access to publication dummies, original promotional material and the archive of 55,000 rejected prints, and based on interviews with the book’s designer as well as key project organisers, judges and contributors, this chapter explores the sometimes conflicting multiple intentions of One Day for Life as a “national family album”, a historical record, a celebrity-studded fundraising spectacle, a celebration of ‘everyday life’, a public display of compassion, a photographic competition and a bestselling book.
As usual, the Sunday service of 15 August, 2010 at The Synagogue, Church Of All Nations was crammed with lessons for both the young and the old. I am still rejoicing over the fact that I was part of it all – I did not miss a second of it. It was indeed the day these people had been praying for. Prophet TB Joshua preaching to The SCOAN congregation. If you have been following the events at The SCOAN for a week regarding the internet issue, you will agree that it is indeed indescribable the kind of anguish these people must have gone through all these years without any hope of an escape. Their lives had been in turmoil until that call by the man of God, Prophet T.B. Joshua. The Sunday before, there was not much time for many of them to speak.