

Interview by Jane Bayly with photographer Emily Schiffer - SEEing POTENTIAL: Photography as an Agent of Change

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Emily Schiffer is a documentary photographer interested in the intersection between art, audience engagement, and social change. In 2005, she founded the My Viewpoint Youth Photography Initiative on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota, where she continues to teach and shoot. In 2011, she co-created SEE POTENTIAL, a community engagement/ public art project that installs documentary images on abandoned buildings to illustrate economic development initiatives of community leaders on the South Side of Chicago. In 2014, she co-created Danube Revisited: The Inge Morath Truck Project, a photographic road trip and traveling exhibition in which a 2-ton truck was converted into a mobile gallery and driven along the length of the Danube River through Central and Eastern Europe.

Her photography is widely recognized within the United States and around the world. She has received various awards such as an Audience Engagement Grant from the Open Society Foundation, an Emergency Fund Grant from the Magnum Foundation, the Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Portraiture, winner of the PDN Photo Annual Personal Project Category, first prize in the IPA Lucie Awards, the Inge Morath Award, presented by Magnum Photos and the Inge Morath Foundation, as well as a Fulbright Fellowship in Photography. Her work has been published in two books: Danube Revisited: The Inge Morath Truck Project (forthcoming) and Burn 01. Her photographs have also been featured in renowned publications such as: Aperture, Smithsonian Magazine, PDN, TIME Magazine Lightbox, and Mother Jones. Emily has exhibited internationally and her work is in the permanent collections of The Farnsworth Museum, US, and The Center for Fine Art Photography, US, The Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Japan, Foto Baryo, Philippines.

In the following interview, Emily discusses her project SEE POTENTIAL as evidence that photography has the power to instigate social change within communities.



Emily, before you developed *SEE POTENTIAL*, you were located in New York, so what brought you to Chicago where the project is based?

I'd come to Chicago after receiving a Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund grant to pursue a project about the city's "food deserts." Around 384,000 people without transportation live more than a mile from a grocery store and have difficulty obtaining healthy options. But, because race weighs so heavily upon Chicago, I quickly became most interested in the historical context of this modern day crisis.

Did Chicago correspond to what you imagined?

I arrived in the South Side of Chicago in June 2011 anticipating tall buildings clustered together and people relaxing on stoops, similar to my Brooklyn neighborhood. Instead, the large, century-old single-family homes and sprawling lawns conjured visions of suburbia. Despite the frequency of blight, the wide tree-lined streets oozed tranquility. Segregation loomed everywhere, and dominated my conversations about the city's problems.

Could you describe the situation you were documenting and how it affected your photography?

The more time I spent in Chicago, the clearer it became that the city's food problems were the result of a lack of infrastructure, and that therefore the solution to food security requires more

than just food. I became committed to using my images to help rebuild the city's infrastructure in whatever way I could.

In order to understand the present circumstances, it is essential to acknowledge the history of segregation in Chicago. In 2008, a Census data study conducted by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research found that Chicago remains the most racially segregated city in the United States (VIGDOR, 2012). Their analysis is based on "isolation," or the tendency for single neighborhoods to be dominated by one racial group, and "dissimilarity," which represents the percentage of a racial group that would have to move for the group to be perfectly integrated in a city or metro area. An index above 60 represents high segregation. In 1960, Chicago's black-white dissimilarity index was 93. In 2010 it was still as high as 84 (Hall, 2010, 4). Segregation problems aren't just about race. They're about income, and the complex links between poverty, racial discrimination, and empowerment.



The development of industry in Chicago and the creation of thousands of jobs sparked the first Great Migration. 1.6 million African Americans left the rural southern United States for the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1910 and 1930. Chicago physically expanded during this time to accommodate the growth of its population and booming economy.

In 1917 the city passed a law stating that racial integration was illegal. The same year the Supreme Court ruled the city ordinance unconstitutional. Politicians turned to what is called a "restrictive covenants," contractual agreements written to the deeds of buildings that legally barred homeowners from leasing or selling to African Americans. By 1940, 80% of Chicago housing was covered by restrictive contracts. Therefore, African Americans could not legally obtain housing on the north side.

In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled against restrictive covenants, so city officials turned to redlining. Redlining is the now-illegal practice of banks refusing to lend to borrowers, or increasing the costs of loans for homes in racially determined areas. Redlining goes beyond home loans. It includes insurance, access to jobs, health care, and stores. Between the 1930s and late 1960s, Blacks could not get a home loan if they lived in "red" neighborhoods. This had deep and lasting effects on the growth and resources of Black neighborhoods as compared to whites (Coates, 2015).



Unemployment spiked when, in the late 1970s, the US began outsourcing its factories to developing countries. Most black workers did not have the ability to easily relocate to areas with more jobs. Because banks and other institutions had not invested in black neighborhoods, the economy collapsed, and neighborhoods began to deteriorate. Little has changed over the past four decades, and as a result, the local economy, emotional empowerment, physical health and education have been stunted (Coates, 2015).

So how did you go from “food deserts” to *SEE POTENTIAL*?

Frustrated by my inability as a photographer to change the situation I was documenting, and realistic about the limits of what I could (and perhaps should) initiate as an outsider, I began looking for ways to collaborate with local change-makers. Halfway through my first month of shooting, I met Orrin Williams, the founder and director of the Center for Urban Transformation. Born and raised on the South Side, he was familiar with Chicago’s problems and invested in finding holistic solutions. He had devised feasible and impactful solutions. But there was a problem: the majority of residents and politicians didn’t know what he or likeminded community leaders were working on. We had complementary needs: he needed to make positive community change more visible, and I needed a way to use my images to create tangible social change. Together we created *SEE POTENTIAL*, a public art project that repurposes documentary images as advertising for community-led revitalization, and mobilizes support for great ideas.

Michelle Bogre, in her book *Photography as Activism*, attempts to define activist photography. She writes, “Maybe activist photography begins at the point that a photographer thinks beyond the photograph, or when the photograph is not the end, rather a means to a solution even if the solution is nebulous” (2012, xv). Could you call yourself an activist photographer or say that *SEE POTENTIAL* marks a turning point as you evolved from a documentary photographer into an activist photographer?

I’ve always been interested in photographs as the beginning of a creative process instead of the end result, but *SEE POTENTIAL* marks the point at which this approach shifted to direct —

rather than nebulous—activism. My desire to use images for a direct purpose is partially inspired by my respect for craftsmen, for the potters and metal-smiths who craft utensils that can be used daily. For me, the gap between photography and life was painful. Integrating images into the daily public consciousness partially relieved that tension.

Could you discuss in more detail how SEE POTENTIAL used documentary photography to make a change in South Side Chicago?

SEE POTENTIAL is a public art community engagement project that aims to initiate, accelerate and strengthen ongoing community-driven revitalization projects in neglected areas across the South Side of Chicago. Through large-scale photographic installations, this project transforms derelict buildings and empty lots to provide an aesthetic shift that encourages residents to visualize potential in their communities. Each installation is accompanied by a dynamic text message campaign that enables communities to mobilize and affect positive change in their urban spaces. The core goal for this project is to change the aesthetics of oppression, and encourage residents to literally see the potential in their communities.

Were other actors involved in the project beside yourself?

SEE POTENTIAL represents a collaboration between myself; Orrin Williams, Director of the Center for Urban Transformation; and Magnum Foundation, working together with grassroots organizations and visionary community leaders from the South Side of Chicago who have innovative ideas for transforming neglected sites into positive community spaces.

I believe the photography used in SEE POTENTIAL is collaborative as well, isn't it?

In collaboration with these local community partners, the SEE POTENTIAL creative team chooses imagery that creatively reflects the spirit of the proposed transformation ideas for each site and then designs installations that incorporate the selected archival images with other elements contributed by the community. SEE POTENTIAL's site-specific installations use imagery from a network of contributing photographers who have worked locally in Chicago, as well as historical images from the Magnum Photos archive.

You have mentioned the “dynamic text messaging campaign” several times. Could you explain how this works?

The SEE POTENTIAL text messaging campaign encourages community members to show their support for specific site transformation ideas by sending a text message (SMS) to our web platform—it is like signing a petition of support via SMS. To show the total number of people who



support each site, every SMS is tallied and pinpointed at the site's location online: www.SeePotentialChicago.org. When someone sends an SMS they also receive an SMS in return that contains information about the site and ways to stay updated. Community leaders have access to the data and use it as evidence of community support in order to accelerate the actualization of their ideas and supplement grant proposals, bank loan applications and investor dialogue. Additionally, community partners organize launch events and other programming at each installation site to generate enthusiasm for the transformation idea and to inspire others to envision their own ideas for positive change.

Photography, dynamic texting, social media (SEE POTENTIAL is on Facebook), crowdfunding¹, etc., do you feel that this combination of new technologies and documentary photography is the new direction of documentary?

Definitely. The increasing availability of technology has produced citizen journalists and is encouraging dialogue and audience participation. Many photographers and foundations see this as an exciting opportunity to shift the burden of representation from a single photographer to a community. I am extremely excited about the growing opportunities for people to tell their own stories to a global audience.

You mention the « citizen journalist » - a catch-all term comprising Arab Spring Revolutionaries, Occupy Wall Streeters or the socially conscious next door neighbor. As a profes-

¹ SEE POTENTIAL, whose primary focus is the community, was made possible thanks to over \$13,000 in contributions on a crowd funding website, Kickstarter, in just one year.

sional photographer, how are you able to give voice to those who may not otherwise have been heard? Or how is your work enhanced by this phenomenon?

The best way to elevate the voices of those who are usually silenced is to let them speak for themselves. Whenever possible I give cameras to my subjects and train them as I would my college level photography students. I don't think it's possible to accurately speak for another person, and it bothers me when my interpretation of someone's life overshadows his or her voice. But training a subject so that they can produce head-turning images is not always possible. Time and a subject's interest are not always available. It's a delicate balance between my all-encompassing love for the act of seeing (and photographing), and my awareness of the problematic of telling another person's story. My solution is to be upfront about my intentions for taking and using images. Mutual respect and trust are vital. I do value outsider's perspectives and insights. The problem for me arises when outsiders dominate the public conversation. Some of the most engaging and effective journalism I've seen is a collaboration between insider and outsider storytellers. For example, Brenda Ann Keanneally's *Upstate Girls* project is a multimedia conversation between Keanneally and her young female subjects living in Troy, NY.

Before your project SEE POTENTIAL took off, had you already heard of different projects in which documentary photography mobilized people and resulted in tangible change?

Yes. The three projects that initially inspired this work were JR's wheat paste installations, Wendy Ewald's public art collaborations with young people and Aaron Huey's Pine Ridge Billboard project. I was inspired by the ability of those projects to transform spaces and encourage critical thinking. In the time since SEE POTENTIAL was launched, I've sourced inspiration for future projects from Pete Pin's work about the legacy of trauma in the Cambodian-American community, in which Pin's target audience is his subjects rather than the general public, the "Everyday Africa" movement, which aims to break stereotypes of Africa that are popular in Western media, and the Sudden Flowers collective in Ethiopia, in which a professional photographer spent years collaborating with young photographers who had lost their parents to AIDS to visualize their emotional experiences. Each of these projects exemplifies how collaboration creates energy, inspiration, and power: producing wide-reaching effects that are quite difficult for one person to achieve alone.

Starting in the late 19th century and early 20th century with photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, photography has long been used as a tool for social reform in the United States. Some photographs, intended to create social change, are regarded as fine art (Ansel Adams' photographs used as evidence before Congress for the preservation of Kings Canyon). Would you say that this project is an indication of the power of documentary photography to create tangible social change?

In my opinion, documentary images don't create change they create awareness. I think it is very dangerous to confuse awareness with change because it means that we photographers are usually

much less effective than we could be. SEE POTENTIAL is an example of how documentary photographs can be activated through collaborations with engaged change makers. The possibilities for using photographs to create change expand when we think of images of the beginning of a social practice instead of the end product.

The idea for SEE POTENTIAL germinated in 2011 and in 2012 it became a reality. Today, in 2015, even if activist photography is for some photographers more about the process of change than immediate results, are there any changes on the South side of Chicago that could be attributed to SEE POTENTIAL?

Yes. I would like to talk about four concrete examples from SEE POTENTIAL that confirm the power of combining documentary photography with on the ground practitioners.

Kusanya Café

SEE POTENTIAL partnered with entrepreneurs who were creating the first café in the South Side neighborhood of Englewood. For the 20 years preceding this development, there were no sit-down restaurants or coffee shops in the area, let alone healthy options. The Kusanya team sought to use local products, hire local youth, hold regular poetry and book readings, showcase art on its walls, and serve as a meeting place for creative residents. The SEE POTENTIAL team felt that Kusanya's objective of creating a vibrant community space would positively impact the neighborhood.

The documentary images installed on the café's windows showed the potential for the café to be a vibrant community space. Images sourced from our archive as well as new images commissioned for this installation were printed onto poster paper and installed behind glass windows.



The installation created excitement and publicity for the café, which successfully opened in November 2013. The launch celebration was well attended and the event generated significant interest and enthusiasm. Several major connections happened as a result of the Kusanya / SEE POTENTIAL collaboration. Most notably, Architecture for Humanity (a not-for-profit architecture collective promoting advocacy and social change through the built environment) is now collaborating with Kusanya to support their vision.

The Café is thriving. Though SEE POTENTIAL can't take credit for the entrepreneurs' hard work or achievements, we are certain that SEE POTENTIAL mobilized support and enthusiasm. We activated a depressed building, increasing the potential people saw in their neighborhood during the transitional period when the community leaders were hard at work. SEE POTENTIAL partnered with community leaders at the Bronzeville Community Garden, whose mission is to:

1) engage Bronzeville residents around issues of food, nutrition, and health;

Bronzeville Community Garden



2) facilitate positive neighborhood interaction; 3) highlight income and food production opportunities in urban agriculture; 4) promote sustainability; and, 5) contribute to beautifying Bronzeville. SEE POTENTIAL's role and mission was to help the Bronzeville Community Garden expand their programming to create, "a community center without walls." The Garden is a teaching platform, with garden produce utilized for cooking demonstrations and discussions of health and nutrition. The garden is designed to encourage positive, informal neighborhood interaction between Bronzeville's economically diverse residents—from home owners to the homeless—through activities for young people, game events, free community feasts, and other family-friendly activities.

The Bronzeville community garden banner included a series of black and white professional photographs framed by small color photographs, which were sourced from community members and depicted the garden's community and programming. The garden's launch celebration brought many local community groups together and those at the launch gathering learned about the gar-

den's dreams for future infrastructure and programming. Since the launch, the garden has continued to host community events. They have the support of the local elected officials, have successfully fundraised, and increased their community programming to include: healthy living and exercise classes, nutrition classes, cooking classes, youth programming, arts programming, chess and checkers tournaments, senior programming, and the paid employment of a lead gardener. SEE POTENTIAL activated the garden space, and helped increase the attention and momentum of plans that would have largely gone unnoticed.

Imagine Englewood If

Communities need more than access to healthy affordable food in order to thrive. Thus the SEE POTENTIAL team decided to expand our collaborations that help build the infrastructure of the South Side community. Imagine Englewood If (IEI) is a community center in Englewood with many free resources. IEI seeks to address the needs of the Greater Englewood Community by offering a safe after school and weekend space, providing resources and information via workshops, classes, forums, professional development, community meeting, and trainings. Despite the profound impact IEI has had on Englewood's youth, the program is not funded, and thus relies on the commitment of volunteers. SEE POTENTIAL partnered with IEI to encourage the community to advocate for the expansion of IEI via grassroots and traditional funding.

Imagine Englewood If's banners included contemporary and historic images from our SEE POTENTIAL archive that depicted healthy intergenerational relationships and people coming together. Banners were installed over windows on the ground floor and were printed onto vinyl mesh to enable light to enter the building. Banner text included both English and Spanish to accommodate Englewood's mixed community.

In addition to a successful launch celebration, IEI has continued to promote the text messaging/online mapping platform to their networks. This SEE POTENTIAL installation has also attracted the attention of the Alderman (the neighborhood mayor) and SEE POTENTIAL helped them use the data we have generated as an engagement and mobilization tool.



Imagine Englewood If hosted a launch event for the community, where they distributed books and toys. Since the launch, IEI's community leader has used postcards —featuring images from the SEE POTENTIAL installations and the support text phone number—to effectively expand the call out beyond those who attended events at the site or passed by on the street. They have achieved the highest number of support texts of all SEE POTENTIAL sites, increased their number of volunteers and hours of operation. Though they have obtained grass roots funding, they have not yet received the institutional support needed to pay their staff.

The Forum

The SEE POTENTIAL team agreed that communities need art and music in order to thrive. The Forum, a former theater and community hub that is now vacant and boarded up was thus a perfect candidate. A major landmark in Chicago's history, it once attracted musicians such as Nat King Cole, and housed important meetings for the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and radical groups. Bernard Loyd, a Bronzeville based entrepreneur, plans to rehabilitate the Forum



and create a contemporary performing arts center and retail space with venues such as locally owned healthy restaurants, music-themed retail shops, and bookstores.

Because cultural spaces are essential to a neighborhood's vibrancy and vitality, we were excited to promote this initiative through SEE POTENTIAL. We anticipate over 200 jobs will be created through the various independent businesses. SEE POTENTIAL served as a catalyst for neighborhood involvement and direct neighborhood calls for change to the local alderman and banks so that they grant construction loans for the project.

To convey Loyd's plans of creating a contemporary performing arts space that is deeply connected to the building's legacy, the forum's banners included a historical timeline drawing from archival imagery representing different points in the building's history, as well as its present state and future plans. The banners also displayed imagery of Nat King Cole, who performed at the Forum during its heyday, and contemporary Bronzeville musicians, Khari B and Maggie Brown (who performed at the launch event).

At the July 2013 launch celebration, spoken word artists and local musicians performed on the street outside of the Forum. As of 2015, the community leaders have continued to activate the sidewalk outside of the building (since the building is not yet functional) including community events dialogues led by local scholars, sidewalk open studios for artists, and outdoor performances. The installation is now a spot on an historic bike tour of the neighborhood. In addition to using the SEE POTENTIAL to engage residents, help secure funding, and attract attention from local government, this SEE POTENTIAL installation ended a community-wide debate about whether or not to demolish the Forum. Opponents of the revitalization plans have been converted into supporters because this SEE POTENTIAL installation enabled them to understand Loyd's vision.

If we conceive of photographs as the beginning of an artistic process (rather than the end result) how can we activate images within the situations they represent? Can images disrupt social dynamics or mobilize people to change their environment?

When taken out of the gallery or editorial context and placed into a public realm, images have the opportunity to engage the larger world. When utilized by a social movement and given a specific objective, images can indeed become agents of social change.

As a first collaborative photographic endeavor, SEE POTENTIAL could be considered a success. Have you taken the lessons from this experience to develop a new collaborative project? What issues do you feel your photography can help “correct” (as Lewis Hine once said)?

I am excited to expand this collaborative way of bringing images into the public domain. I’m particularly interested in exploring empathy as a means for social transformation. I am currently developing a project that visualizes the emotional impact that tensions between people of color in New York City and the police have on *all* New Yorkers.

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Further bibliographic suggestions by Emily Schiffer:

General socially engaged photography articles/ publications:

This Huck Magazine issue is dedicated to socially engaged photography:

<http://www.huckmagazine.com/get-the-mag/current-issue/>

<http://www.pdnonline.com/features/PDN-November-2012-6733.shtml>

<http://aperture.org/shop/aperture-214-documentary-expanded-magazine>

This is not mentioned in the interview, but it is a project that deeply inspires me: <http://mullenlowegroup.com/news/everything-we-do-can-change-the-world-jose-miguel-sokoloff/>

Pete Pin

<http://www.huckmagazine.com/art-and-culture/photography-2/pete-pin-origins-issue/>

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Aaron Huey / Pine Ridge Billboard Project

<http://time.com/3776608/broken-treaties-aaron-hueys-pine-ridge-billboard-project/>

<http://nativeamericannetroots.net/diary/888>

<http://outsiderbooks.com/project/mitakuye-oyasin/>

Fantastic talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/aaron_huey (worth watching, this is the best presentation I've seen about history's impact on the present). Interesting to talk about later is how different my perspective is about life on the reservation.

Film: <https://vimeo.com/47043218>

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JR

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Sudden Flowers, published by Fishbar, 2014

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<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/sudden-flowers-ethiopia-aids>

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/22288/1/the-sudden-flowers-of-addis-ababa>

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http://www.slate.com/blogs/ behold/2014/07/17/brenda_ann_kenneally_documents_life_below_the_poverty_line_in_troy_york.html

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<http://www.americanphotomag.com/12-best-things-we-saw-at-photoville>