

# A visual typology of urban narratives: the photographs of Susan A. Barnett

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With great enthusiasm, many visual scholars have picked up the camera as a methodological tool for social science research. Making strong and compelling ‘researcher-created’ visual data requires training and skill that is perhaps even more time consuming to acquire than learning SPSS or other statistical software used by quantitative researchers (Warren and Karner 2014). However, unlike statistical training, learning to use a camera skilfully is seldom taught in social science courses. Scholars intending to do visual research are often left on their own to develop the technical knowledge and visual aesthetics necessary to create rich and engaging photographic data.

Workshops taught at various photography centres and classes at community colleges offer some options for skill development and technical mastery. These courses serve as a strong first step in becoming a competent visualist, though it is unlikely that these instructors will have any grasp of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of visual research. Thus, nascent visual scholars must carve their own paths to competence – putting together for themselves the lessons of camera use and critical research processes. In this self-guided process, another equally important path to proficiency is through concentrated study of the work of others. Viewed for ideas about technique and creativity, images made by photographers in fine art, commercial, journalism as well as by other visual researchers can all provide ideas useful in strengthening the visual practices for capturing social data. Looking at numerous photographs and all the various ways that images can be created has great heuristic value.

The purpose of this article and portfolio is to highlight a photography project that visual scholars might find relevant to their own social science research. Technically and aesthetically accomplished work, such as Susan Barnett’s inspiring approach to visually documenting personal identity within urban contexts, is offered as a creative example of one possible means to document social life photographically. Of particular interest to

social scientists who struggle to gain approval from Institutional Review Boards and Human Subject guidelines, Barnett provides a means to capture data while allowing the subject to remain anonymous.

With a new take on a photographic standard, Susan Barnett’s series *Not in Your Face* offers a fresh perspective on street portraiture. With over 2000 images, Barnett documents the social expressions of identity through T-shirt visual culture. From cartoon characters to political statements, philosophical sayings to concert souvenirs, memorials to religious iconography – T-shirts display the wearer’s interests and ideals. Clothing has always been a carefully coded language of class and power that tells the world much about one’s status and position in life. Contemporary T-shirts have elevated this to more overt messages – ‘Hate is not my Drug’, ‘Stop Violence Against Women’, ‘RUN DMC’ or ‘Love is Everything’, which clearly link the wearer to specific social groups and ideologies. *Not in Your Face* is a comprehensive body of work that offers an engaging photographic archive of a time and place in our embodied, global visual culture.

Like earlier street photographers, Barnett photographs people where she finds them. She is not a covert photographer seeking a decisive, candid moment, rather she works much like a visual sociologist might. Barnett approaches individuals wearing T-shirts, introduces herself and her project and asks if they will pose for her. Often, she says, ‘They will immediately pivot and assume their natural stance’. Happy to have their T-shirt statement recognised and comfortable with the faceless approach, her subjects seem to relax during the photo shoot that can last from 2 to 15 minutes. Also, like a visual researcher, Barnett collects their stories and asks about their choice of T-shirt. ‘Nine times out of ten there is a deeply felt reason why they choose to wear a shirt depicting Marcus Garvey or the Virgin of Guadeloupe or even Batman’, she explains. Though Barnett is quick to add, the project ‘isn’t about the T-shirt per se’, rather it is ‘about self-identity and validation. They wear a kind of badge of honour that says “yes, I belong to this group not the other”’. The resulting

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images are anonymous, faceless street portraits that document the variety of identities existing in the social landscape.

There is a respectful directness in Barnett's portraits that is reminiscent of Bernd and Hilla Becher's typologies of built structures (Lange 2006). At first glance, one is drawn to the T-shirt imagery, yet as one moves in closer the viewer is rewarded with a number of details that mark the wearer's identity even without seeing the subject's face. 'Good photography is a conversation', Barnett believes, 'it sparks curiosity and questions'. This approach informs her work – all body types, ages, genders and ethnicities are represented to the viewer without judgement. Some people hold children, others have purses, bags or skateboards, and tattoos, accessories and hairstyles can be seen – all visual markers of the self-represented in the images. *Not in Your Face* asks the question – what is necessary in portraiture? Barnett's revealing yet faceless portraits document identities expressed through body and clothing options offering curious hints, possible clues and above all more questions.

In a number of the images, the wearer is echoing imagery from the T-shirt in the rest of their attire. A red wig that matches the red handprint in 'Stop Violence Against Women' or black hat like the silhouette in 'Who will be Tide's Dirtiest Kid in America?' or red cap similar to the one the Geico gecko sports on his shirt. One wonders which came first – the T-shirt or the personal style. In 'Popeye', we see a man whose body type closely resembles the cartoon character and he even poses his arms to accentuate the similarity. The choice of T-shirt expression appears quite personal even though the message is often mass produced. When multiple people wear the same shirt (e.g., RUN DMC), its looks different on each person. In her seemingly simple, direct manner, Barnett captures the uniqueness of each person's embodied self. The T-shirt message and imagery is just one of the myriad of clues available.

Like August Sander's *Citizens of the 20th Century* (Sander 1986), Barnett's images offer a typology of personal expression. While Sander focused on a hierarchy of occupations, Barnett makes no judgements photographing all T-shirt wearers equally in an honest, straightforward manner. She artfully composes the images as a study of types, of semiotic specimens of 21st-century expression. Using her 35-mm Ektar loaded with Portra Vivid Color film and a heavy, 49-year-old Leicaflex SL2 that once belonged to her father, Barnett photographs each subject from a slightly lower perspective using a wide-angle lens to 'flatten them out', which both isolates the subject from

the background and yet leaves them within their cityscape context. The resulting three-quarter portraits offer clear and seemingly simple Becher-like descriptive images: a typology of personal expressions of self.

Barnett has begun displaying the portraits in a grid format, much like the Becher's work, which allows the viewer to contrast and compare the various messages available in the clothing, accessories, body postures and context. Like the visual sociologist, she can arrange the portraits to form typologies of gender, race, age or location allowing the viewer to discern patterns in expressive aspects of self within social groups as well as differentiations between groups. Within the grid, viewing the portraits alongside each other provides a strong and insightful document of an historical moment in our culture. 'It is a universe of individuals', Barnett explains, 'but combined they create a picture of our time without the imposition of judgment'.

Susan Barnett offers a finely articulated vision and demonstrates the skill needed to masterfully execute engaging yet non-traditional portraits. With her steady sensitivity to her subjects – to their stance, gesture, accessories, clothing and message – Barnett captures images which offer twin portraits of the particular and the cultural simultaneously. *Not in Your Face* offers a historically significant typology of public expressions of identity and personal appropriation of global visual culture. With the fresh perspective she brings to the work, Barnett photographs a very specific moment in the public display of T-shirt expression that will intrigue and delight collectors and scholars for years to come as well as provide an inspiring example of how technical skill and a creative approach can provide rich and compelling social data.

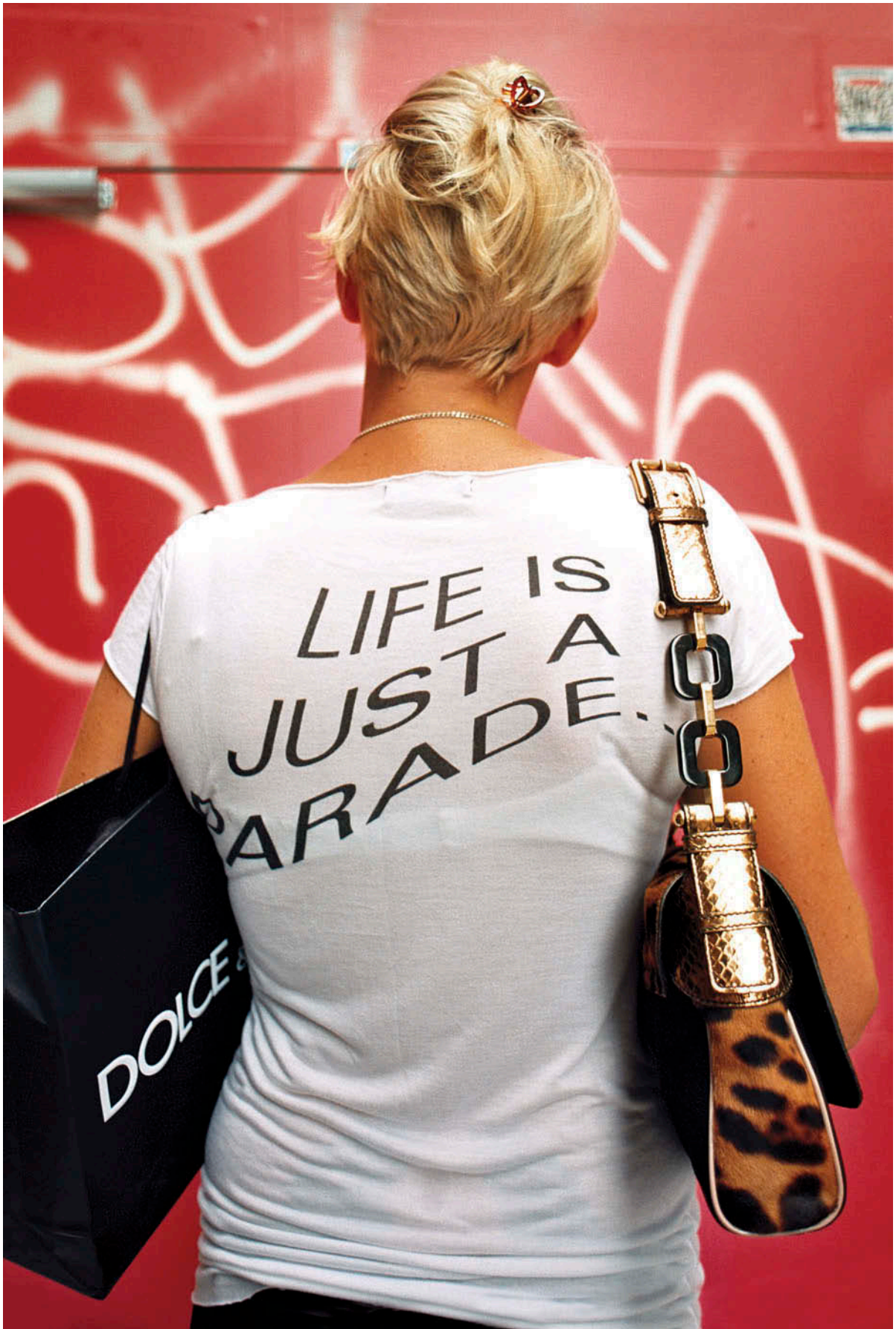
#### NOTE

All images included by Susan A. Barnett, copyright 2014. Used with permission. All rights reserved. More of Susan Barnett's work can be seen at <http://notinyourface.com/> and in her forthcoming book *T: A Typology of T-Shirts* (London: Dewi Lewis Publishing).

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