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# DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS: EMOTIONAL COMPLICATIONS

HOW THREE PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE MANAGED THE TRICKY  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECT AND PHOTOGRAPHER  
WHEN EMBARKING ON A LONG-TERM PROJECT.

BY SARAH COLEMAN

**DURING THE QUARTER CENTURY THAT MARC ASNIN**

has been photographing his uncle Charlie, he has seen Charlie struggle with depression and schizophrenia, watched him hang out with crack addicts and documented him having sex. Asnin was present on the day Charlie's wife walked out on him, when the couple's two daughters sat crying on the kitchen table as Charlie lobbed garbage bags and insults out of the window. "There's nothing he wouldn't share with me," says Asnin of his uncle. "Certain things he tells me, I'll say, 'Did you share that with your shrink?' And he'll say, 'Nah, I'd never do that.'"

Extreme, perhaps, but this gets to the heart of what can happen when a documentary photographer develops a close relationship with a subject over time. The photographer becomes a confidant and witness, sometimes a close friend. Then there's the other side of the coin: The subject can turn on the photographer and become needy or aggressive. The subject might want something the photographer can't give: money, perhaps, or love or an end to the suffering that prompted the photographs in the first place.

As Robert Capa once wrote, "It's not always easy



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**“He’s always said, ‘THESE PHOTOGRAPHS WILL SHOW EVERYONE WHAT THE WORLD HAS DONE TO ME,’”** says Asnin of his uncle Charlie.

to stand aside and be unable to do anything except record the sufferings around one.” Given that most documentarians choose their subjects because of a deep concern or personal connection to the subject matter, a certain amount of attachment seems inevitable. But how much involvement is too much?

“You have to be prepared for all the complicated stuff,” says Nina Berman, who spent over a year photographing severely wounded Iraq war veterans for her book *Purple Hearts: Back from Iraq*. One of the vets Berman photographed was a blind amputee living alone in a trailer; another suffered such massive burns that his ears literally melted away. Doing the project turned out to be even more emotionally demanding than Berman had anticipated. “I saw two really messed-up soldiers in the course of two days; both were blind,” she says. “It was devastating. You can’t help but want to rescue them in some way.”

Likewise, Lauren Greenfield felt her heart go out to the subjects of her most recent documentary project, a book and HBO documentary called *Thin*. Greenfield, whose books



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*Girl Culture* and *Fast Forward* documented the highs and lows of American youth culture, spent six months at the Renfrew Center, a mental-health facility that treats women with eating disorders. She discovered women so fixated on starving themselves that they were prepared to die for the cause; many, in fact, had attempted suicide. “The project was very intense; it was all I thought about for a year,” she says. “It was hard on my family.”

Greenfield, Berman and Asnin are all convinced that their own emotional involvement plays a vital part in being a good documentarian. Greenfield still talks to some of her subjects on a weekly basis: “It doesn’t feel right to be so intensely in someone’s life one day and not the next,” she says. Berman, too, has stayed in contact with many of her Iraq vets; she has helped some

of them get medical services or help from veterans’ agencies. And Asnin’s 25-year focus on his uncle Charlie has resulted in a relationship that has been more consistent and reliable than any other in Charlie’s life. “For 25 years, there’s been someone listening to him and paying attention,” says Asnin. “That’s counted for a lot.”

But all three are quick to admit that their relationships with their subjects have not always been all sweetness and light. Working with people who

**Opposite page:** Marc Asnin spent 25 years photographing his uncle Charlie (lying on bed) and his struggles. **This page:** Lauren Greenfield’s *Thin* focused on anorexic residents of the Renfrew Center like Cara (top left), who lost 60 pounds in two months in high school. **Top, right:** Nina Berman photographed severely wounded Iraq war vets, like Spc. Robert Acosta, 20, who survived a grenade explosion that mangled his left leg and ripped off his right arm. **Left:** A portrait of Marc Asnin.

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**Above, left:** Asnin's uncle Charlie sits by a window holding a gun. **Above, right:** Uncle Charlie smokes cigarettes with friends in the hallway of the building where he lives in Brooklyn. **Middle:** Nina Berman. **Bottom:** Spc. Adam Zaremba, 20, photographed by Berman at his base at Ft. Riley, Kansas. A field artillery man with the 1st Armored Division, Zaremba lost his left leg when a land mine exploded while he was guarding a bank in Baghdad.

are vulnerable and troubled is never easy, and it's even more complex when you're asking those people to collaborate in making images for publication. Are subjects whose mental health has been compromised capable of making a decision in their own best interests? What's their motivation for collaborating, and what are their expectations of what the project might do for them?

"In those early years, they didn't realize what I was doing—they'd never been exposed to someone documenting their lives," admits Asnin of his uncle Charlie's family, which he started shooting as an 18-year-old art student. But it soon became clear that Charlie himself was very interested in being photographed. "He's always said, 'These photographs will show everyone what the world has done to me,'" Asnin says.

When the story began bringing the nephew critical attention, however, the emotional territory for the uncle became more complicated. "He sees the benefits of what's come to me from his story, and he's happy about that—but it's mixed," says Asnin. "For years, he told me that it was better for me to keep him in this fucked-up situation because it was more photographic—you know, all that poverty and misery. But I told him that if he woke up tomorrow and broke out of the cycle, it would be even more interesting."

When part of "Uncle Charlie" was published in *LIFE* magazine in 1987, Charlie was especially proud. "He always hoped someone would read his story and come and buy him a house, because it was so sad," Asnin chuckles, adding, "Nah, there were no donations or CARE packages. But he's made a lot of progress. Through the project, he's seen time passing and realized that his life is coming closer to its end—and that maybe it's time to stop waiting for Godot."

For Greenfield, working at her mental-health facility meant taking extra precautions to ensure that her subjects understood what her project entailed. She and HBO hired a consultant so that the women could discuss their participation and how it might play into their recovery. Still, the vulnerability of her subjects meant that access was constantly being reevaluated and renegotiated. "One girl wanted to take

part, then spoke to her therapist about it and decided she was doing it to gain attention, so she decided not to. We had to respect that." At times, she worried she'd be left with no material. "As a documentarian, you know that all you have is your access and relationship with people," she says. "It's scary when you get rejected. But you have to be mindful and respectful of your subjects. I learned not to take it personally."

Once she had secured a commitment, the intensity of the bonds

Greenfield formed resulted in some extraordinary footage. When one woman, Polly Williams, was kicked out of Renfrew for breaking the rules, Greenfield spent the night by her side, fearing that her subject was contemplating suicide, and filmed Polly purging all the food she had eaten that day. "That's a situation someone wouldn't normally witness; it's incredibly shameful and private," says Greenfield. "But the fact



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**"I DON'T SEE MYSELF AS A SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY" says Berman, "but helping someone out is just being a decent person."**

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that it was just me hanging out and being alone with her allowed her to feel comfortable. With these girls, they attach and you have to be sensitive to that.”

On the flip side, Berman says that her Iraq War veterans were very detached and low-maintenance during her shoots—which caused its own emotional complications. “These are not people who ask for things; they’re taught in the military not to do that,” she says. Feeling their pathos nevertheless, Berman decided to intervene actively in a couple of cases. One soldier, Spc. Tyson Johnson, had come home from Iraq having lost a kidney and sustained shrapnel wounds to his lungs and heart, only to be told that he owed the army a \$3,000 signing bonus because he hadn’t fulfilled his contract. Berman told ABC News about Johnson, and the channel ran a story that resulted in the debt being written off. “When I got a feeling about one of them, that this guy really needs help, I’d take the next step that I didn’t have to take,” she says. “I don’t see myself as a social service agency; that’s not what it’s about. But in my mind, helping someone out to the best of my ability is just being a decent person.”

Offering money or help as an inducement to participation oversteps journalistic ethics; Berman points out that she never offered help in advance, but only after she had done a shoot. It was an easy rule to follow, she says, because “none of my subjects felt sorry for themselves.” Recently, the owner of a coffeehouse in Maui contacted her to say that he had collected enough money to send one soldier, who’d had both legs blown off, on a Hawaiian vacation. When contacted, the soldier said, “You should really send my buddy from Alaska; he’s in far worse shape than I am.”

Sometimes, though, those attempts to help can end up in heartbreak. In the early 1990s, Berman says, she got involved with a crack addict she had photographed on the streets of London. Rhonda (not her real name) was “an extremely special person who got a very fucked-up ride in life,” says Berman. The two became friends, and when Rhonda moved to New York, Berman became a kind of



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if, knowing everything I know now, I’d have chosen not to do the project 25 years ago—no, I can’t say I’d have made that choice.

“If you’re not prepared for that raw, real stuff—if you just want to shoot a couple of crack addicts on the streets and go home, then maybe you shouldn’t be doing that story,” says Berman. “If you don’t attempt to make some connection to your subject, it feels like a selfish enterprise.”

Greenfield remarks that many of her former subjects have become like extended family members: Her family now expects them to float in and out of their lives periodically. “I like it when people keep in touch,” she says. “I have a higher comfort level with being intimate in other people’s lives than someone who’s not a photographer might.”

For these three photographers, compassion is every bit as important as composition—if not more so. To illustrate this point, Asnin tells an anecdote about a time he collaborated with a magazine writer on a story about a Baltimore trauma center. “A woman flipped over in her truck and died on the operating table, and I cried,” he says. “This guy was an asshole. The next day, he said to me, ‘Maybe you should look for a different profession. You’re too much of a mensch for this.’” Asnin shakes his head; his lip curls in disgust. “I said to him, ‘You know, that’s why I am good at this. Because I can cry.’” □