

Transcript: *Foreword*, Season 1 Episode 6 “Drug Photography”

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Episode Title: Drug Photography

[Alison] Welcome to a new episode of *Foreword*, a podcast where we meet researchers from Brock University’s Faculty of Humanities. I’m your host, Alison Innes.

[Theme music]

[Alison] We’re bombarded by images every day, whether we’re on Instagram or Twitter, reading a newspaper or Googling a recipe. Some images, like pictures of kittens, might make us feel happy. Other images, such as pictures of violence or drug use, might evoke feelings of disgust. But can those pictures also help us become more empathetic? I spoke with Dr. Linda Steer from the Department of Visual Art about her work on drug photography and how empathy can be a complicated a thing. Join me as we consider how the images we consume can make us more empathetic to others.

[Music]

[Alison] Today I'm speaking with Linda Steer, an Associate Professor of the History of Art and Visual Culture at Brock University. She teaches in the Department of Visual Arts and is a member and former director of the PhD program in Interdisciplinary Humanities. Professor Steer’s research focuses primarily on the history and theory of photography. She is the author of *Appropriated Photographs in French Surrealist Periodicals 1924 to 1939*. Using case studies from three key publications, *Appropriated Photographs* examines the surrealist visual strategy of re-framing found photographs. Steer’s current research looks at the complicated connections between empathy and photography in art and documentary photographs of drug use from the 1970s to the present. She teaches courses on the history of photography censorship and controversy and the arts and appropriation in art and visual culture. She is planning to teach a new course on the visual culture of the apocalypse in Winter 2021. So welcome, Linda.

[LS] Hi.

[Alison] So you are working in an area of visual art that some of our listeners might not be familiar with. What is visual culture and how is it different from art history

[LS] Well, that's a good question. Generally, we could think of art history as covering a much smaller selection of images than visual culture. Art history examines works of art, the institutions that are connected to works of art, artists, that kind of thing, throughout history, whereas visual culture is much broader. We live in a world where we're constantly engaging with images, particularly photographic images, which is my specialty, but any kinds of images and it's been the same throughout history and so visual culture allows us to examine images

that some might be works of art, some might be billboards or images published in books, built space images from popular culture, Internet memes anything like that. So it's broad but as an art historian I use our historical methods to examine visual culture so I always start with visual analysis and then I contextualize the image in whatever way is useful for what I'm doing if that makes sense.

[Alison] Yeah, and you've done some work with images on social media. So last year you published an article in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* on your work with drug photography, and we're going to provide a link to that for our listeners in the footnotes, and you were looking at images shared on Facebook about-- or story images shared on Facebook of drug users. So what is drug photography and what makes it such a complicated area of study?

[LS] Well, I use the term drug photography to describe photographs of people who use illicit drugs and photographs related to that, such as photographs that might picture spaces of drug use for example. It might seem a bit like a bit of an odd distinction to make when you think oh how many photographs of drug users are there, but there are many, many photographs of drug users. I was really surprised when I started researching this topic and there are, you know, there's a history of photographs of people who use drugs as well. So you know I found there are many photographs that picture people who use drugs and they circulate in various ways so online was one of the ways I was looking at, but also in photo books, lots of newspaper or magazine news photographs, and in art galleries, so there are a variety of kinds of photographs even in anti-drug ads, for example, that's another use of drug photography. So I've been focusing mainly on photographs made by contemporary photographers who are thinking about these photographs as art but I'll probably move on to other kinds of photographs as the research progresses.

[Alison] So drug photography or images of drugs and drug use is not a modern phenomenon, this is something that goes back a long time?

[LS] Well, I think about images of people smoking opium at the turn of the last century as drug photography for sure and it's a complicated category of photography because it's very easy to get into sensational or voyeuristic photographs of drug use and one of the photographers I interviewed called that class of photography junkie porn, that was the word that he used, and those are photographs that lack empathy or that are sensationalistic then just appealing to our interest in things outside of our own lives. I think that's an accurate description drug photography from news raises all kinds of questions that I've been interested in for a really long time. So how do we look at difficult images, how do photographers represent what we might call the impossible, so how do we even picture something like addiction and how do we picture things that might seem to lie outside of representation, like trauma or intense psychological states or even something like death, which is something that will happen to all of us but it really is outside of our experience is radically unknown. And so how does one picture a psychological state like addiction and should these photographs even be taken, should we be taking and viewing photographs of people at their most vulnerable. So there are also ethical questions. So

this sort of makes me think about what are the limits of photography. The other sort of issue too is that drug use both in and outside of photography is something that's intensely moralized in our culture. There's a lot of judgment and so I'm curious about the way that photographs interact with that kind of moralizing and judgment and what that might mean for the people depicted, for those of us looking at them

[Alison] So what are some the visual tropes are patterns that you see in this kind of photography?

[LS] Um, it's interesting, there are some pretty clear visual tropes actually that you would also think maybe didn't exist but they do. So there are a lot of images of injection, I've been focusing mainly on an injection drug use, but there are a lot of photographs of people injecting into their arms there's the extreme photographs of people injecting into their neck, which crops up so often, again something difficult to look at and it really tends to be extreme photographs. And then they're sort of in that class of injecting. There are photographs that show people just injecting into their arm their photographs of, a lot of photographs that show really bloody injections or people trying to find a clean vein or place to inject that are sensationalistic and we kind of see these images really first appearing, these images of injecting first appearing in Larry Clark's work. So Larry Clark's a photographer but also filmmaker; you might have heard of the film he made in the 80s called *Kids*. His book from early 70s, I think he took the photos in the late 60s and early 70s, was called *Tulsa* and he depicted teenagers, white teenagers, injecting drugs, engaging in sex and violence, and playing with guns, and things like that. And there's some very sort of intense photographs in in that book of people injecting and we see those kinds of images repeated over and over again; It's almost like he kind of set the tropes with that book and if you look, for example, at stock photographs there are lot of stock photographs of people injecting drugs, a strange number of women sitting on the toilet injecting drugs or sort of buff looking young men with a belt wrapped around their arm or something like that. So that's sort of one.

The other one that also seems to have come out of Clark's book called *Tulsa* is images of pregnant women using drugs. Pregnant women injecting, that's one of the most controversial images in Clark's book and that image in his book uses visual cues taken from the history of art, so there's a light kind of coming in the window and softly falling on this pregnant woman's body that invokes that long history of visual representations of the Virgin Mary, for example, so it prompts us to this woman in and what she's doing in Christian terms and in the kinds of identities that are open to women in Christian terms, which are limited. That tends to make the photograph more sensationalistic and reverse in a way. So pregnant women injecting drugs. Then there's also connected to that a lot of photographs of women who are addicted giving birth, or immediately after having given birth, and images of the babies, and will add to show whether the babies are addicted and that kind of thing, because there is a sort of moralism. Pregnant women using drugs are kind of moral pariahs in our culture, there's a lot of judgments it is kind of considered to be the ultimate crime. So that's another category.

And then there are other official tropes or categories I guess that show spaces that people live in and spaces where people do drugs, and those tend to show squalid overcrowded living conditions and they sort of feed into our expectations of what drug users are like and what drug use is like. You know, we know through research that that is not the case, so the kinds of repetitions that we see.

And I guess the other one would be people under the influence of drugs and again I've been mostly looking at injection drugs and a lot of sort of apparent heroin use for the most part, and there are a lot of close ups of peoples faces, facial expressions when people are high, people kind of nodding off, falling asleep who aren't really present, a lot of crying women and angry men, close-ups of their faces. There are other tropes, but I say those are the main ones that I've been interested in so far.

[Alison] So the photographs that you analyzed for your article, as I mentioned they were published and circulated online. And I'm thinking, for example, of the photograph that went viral a couple of years ago, which is ancient history and social media, of two parents who were passed out in a van with their young child that got a lot of attention. So how does social media and this really easy, rapid, sharing of drug photography, how does that complicate the use of interpretation of these photographs?

[LS] Well, I mean, you know, I've been thinking particularly about everything and how can these photographs either create or elicit empathy and that photograph of the Ohio couple, I wrote about that somewhere else as well, I wrote a blog post about that, because it was so horrible and the way that it circulated was awful. So it was taken by the police and published and they say that they wanted to show what they're dealing with in the drug epidemic in Ohio and that they were concerned about the kid. But the two people in the photograph are passed out, the two adults so they couldn't give consent to being photographed; the child's face is shown, the child can't give consent to being photographed, everyone's faces are shown. That image really affected me and it also affected me because I read the comments-- you know, don't read the comments, well I read the comments on that one and the level of hateful comments on that was very upsetting. The photograph dehumanized people and it really it worked because the comments didn't see these people as human in many ways, they were so vitriolic and hateful. There was an extreme lack of empathy and I think that's where the one of the issues with social media is, that Facebook, you know, click the like button, or it asks us to react immediately and for us to truly have empathy I think we need to contemplate and social media doesn't invite contemplation for the most part. So we have these reactions that tend to be judgmental because social media is asking us to make a quick judgment on all kinds of issues and we see, how many photographs do we see every day on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, various platforms? So we're asked to make a quick judgment and then once we tend to see other people's judgments, then people turn into turn into gangs in a way. So that's sort of the danger of social media. But one of them with Chris Arnade's photographs, who I wrote about in the article for the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, he posted most of his photographs on social

media. He didn't-- I think you had a couple that he showed in art exhibitions, he rarely printed them they mostly just circulated online. That's why I found his photographs so interesting, because his Facebook page elicited empathy from the viewers and it ended up becoming a community where people would gather to talk about these photographs and to share their own experiences with drug use either personally or with people in their families. He talk about how much they appreciated the photographs; People cared about the people who were depicted. He photographed some of the same people over a period of, I think, about five years so, and he posted the photographs with comments that contextualize them with the caption, a story that contextualize them so that you could hear the person's back story and what was happening at the moment and where they've been, where they were wanting to go, or who they were, you know, so it allowed people to form a connection with those who were depicted in the photographs and it was much more positive. Now I know that there were some negative comments posted and those he removed but he said overwhelmingly they were positive. So it really shows that context matters in photographic meaning, which is something I've been thinking about for years at the visual and context and the word image relationship is very important in understanding photographs.

[Alison] You've talked about empathy being entangled. What is entangled empathy?

[LS] It's a concept I've borrowed from Lori Gruen, who's a philosopher, and this is how Gruen defines it, I'm reading here, that it is a process that involves integrating a range of thoughts and feelings to try to get an accurate take on the situation of another and figure out what, if anything, we are called upon to do. And I liked that idea because I think that empathy is much more complicated than we tend to think, you know. We tend to think about empathy as being pro social behavior and that's it, we need to have empathy, and it's important and that's it, but there are dangers in empathy as well, there are dangers of overidentification because empathy asks us to imagine what the situation is like for the other. And so there are dangers of overidentification, of appropriating the feelings and circumstances of the other, particularly when one is a white person looking at an image of a black suffering body, and Kimberly Juanita Brown, she calls it the liberal fallacy of empathy when she's writing about a photograph that Kevin Carter took of a dying Sudanese girl who was being watched by a vulture. And so for Brown empathy can be a form of erasure of the other where all of the emphasis becomes on the feelings of the viewer, rather than on what's happening to the person that's depicted in the image, so it almost can have a dehumanizing quality. So I wanted to be really careful with empathy and I wanted to acknowledge how complex it is and that's why Gruen's idea was really useful for me. I guess it's a form of what I call ethical empathy. Ethical empathy can make viewers aware of issues and how those issues affect people by connecting with people pictured in photographs and examining our own feeling, so it's a process of back and forth--we connect, make a connection with whoever is depicted in the photograph, then we examine our own feelings and then we go back to the photograph and think about how our own feelings are impacting how we see the photograph, and it's kind of back and forth, it's a relational process, rather than an instant reaction. And so then we can figure out what is this photograph asking

me to do, where do I stand, what's my role, and then what might I do. And sometimes that might be simply standing up for drug users when people start speaking negatively about them or thinking about people that we see in our community that we might pass by everyday not paying attention to. Those kinds of things I'm trying to figure out, the structural causes of addiction for example, and to help in whatever way we can, so it's a form of empathy that asks us to act and asks us to acknowledge who we are, where we stand and what our subject position is as well and that can hopefully take us away from simple voyeurism

[Alison] So when we see these images on line or circulating, it sounds like what you're suggesting is the we pause and we engage in kind of dialogue with that image.

[LS] Yeah, exactly, I think it's important and it's difficult because we see so many images every day. I mean how many images have you seen today already?

[Alison] More than I can count!

[LS] That's right, yeah, you know, me too and I've just been writing a lot today, I haven't even been looking at a lot of images, but I'm looking around my space right now there's images all around me, and you know when we soon as we look on social media it's all images. So what if we pause and have a look close look at what's happening in the image, look at the relationship to the text, and use our critical evaluation skills to write, who made this image, what is it saying, where has it been, how does this circulate? These kinds of questions are really important. How do I feel about this image? Why do I feel that way? What are my feelings about this image and what's my own history with this issue, whatever it might be, or with this person, what are my own biases, what's my subject position? For me, you know, I always approach things, I'm a white cis- gendered woman. What's my subject position when I'm looking at this image and how does it differ from those who are depicted, you know? I'm a middle-class person, might be different than someone who is under housed, for example, who might be looking at that image. So what do I bring in and try to be aware of mapping myself onto the person depicted in the photograph and then imagining their circumstances, and empathy does ask us to imagine what would I do, how would I feel in this circumstance, because we can't truly know how someone else feels. But if we do this back and forth, we have a better chance of understanding how they might feel.

[Alison] Would that be the same kind of advice that you would offer to the photographer, or I guess we're all photographers, we're always taking pictures with our phones, do those questions work from the photographer perspective?

[LS] It's a little bit different from the photographer's perspective, I think, because the big issue with photography on drug users in particular, but any kind of photography, is how do we photograph with consent and what does consent mean. And that's something we're talking about in various ways in our culture right now, what exactly does consent mean, and there are different ways of thinking about consent when photographing vulnerable populations. So that photograph of the Ohio couple with a child in the back. there's no consent there at all in any

way to be photographed. But what do we do about consent with people who are using drugs? So can a person who's high give consent, for example? Well there's two ways of thinking about that. We could say no, that person isn't able to give consent because they are compromised in that moment, they might not fully understand what's happening, and they might not fully understand the implications. That's one way of thinking about it, you know, what would they think in five years if they stopped using drugs and are going to get a job and this photograph of them is still circulating on the Internet? But then there's the other side of that, are we saying then that people who use drugs or not able to give consent and make decisions about their own lives? That's a problem, too, so I don't have an easy answer for that but I think be honest, get consent, talk to people, think about where you post images, definitely don't take images of people without their consent.

[Alison] Thank you, that's, I think that is a really good advice for us to end on today. So I'd like to thank you for your time and sharing this and I'll provide some links to your articles in in the notes as well so our listeners can read more. Thank you

[LS] Thanks so much Alison, it's been wonderful talking to you.

[Theme music]

[Credits]

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