

Salgado's Workers

A Photographic Manifesto

With exceptional power and beauty, Sebastiao Salgado offers in photographs an "homage, tribute and farewell" to the workers of the world. His collection of images stands as a stark and potent testimonial to those men and women who form the backbone of the international economy.

Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age by Sebastiao Salgado. Aperture, 1993. \$100.00.

by Shari Rudavsky

The great analysts of the industrial age have never included photographers. Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Max Weber and Lewis Mumford all relied on words rather than images to argue their cases and reach their immense audiences. In this sense Sebastiao Salgado is a rare breed. A Brazilian-born photographer, he is a political theorist who relies exclusively on visual images to convey his unique perspective on the waning technological revolution. In his masterful collection of photographs, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*, we see the underbelly of the industrial era exposed in black and white.

In the book's dedication, Salgado reveals the explicit message of his work: "This book is an homage to workers, a farewell to the world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing and a tribute to those men and women who still work as they have for centuries." Salgado spent five years photographing workers around the world whose labor constitutes the foundation of the international economy. The result is a collection of more than 200 pho-

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tographs, and is among the most provocative and persuasive arguments for a "new world order" levied in recent memory.

From reality to exhibit to the printed page

Reviewing Salgado's tour de force poses a conundrum. Writing or talking about photographs often threatens to cheapen the visual image—to sap its power, beauty and expertise. Words demean a picture, and remove the gloss of subtlety from its

moved to Louisville, then Iowa City and will travel to Dallas, New York, and Chicago. The experience of walking through the exhibit cannot be matched. The large, beautifully matted photographs transport the viewer to a multitude of different worlds. And vision is certainly not the only sense stimulated by the rich images: the heavily sweet scent of perfumes distilled on the island of Reunion, the grinding noise of metal tools used to break ships in Bangladesh, the coarse smoothness of freshly woven cloth in Kazakhstan—each, in turn, envelope the intrepid viewer.

Those deprived of the exhibition can find a taste of the work in the exhibit catalog—replete with the grace hidden in the squalor, suffering, and humanity expressed in the exhibition. The book preserves more permanently what Salgado sees as a dying breed: the manual laborer. In a short introduction, he attempts to prepare the viewer for what is to come (in the exhibit a nearly identical text greets the visitor). "Concepts of production and efficiency are changing, and, with them, the nature of work. The highly industrialized

world is racing ahead and stumbling over the future. In reality, this telescoping of time is the work of people throughout the world, although in practice it may benefit few."



Coal mine at Dhanbad, India, 1989.

[Sebastiao Salgado/Magnum Photos]

sharply defined lines. Ultimately, photos speak most eloquently for themselves.

Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age opened as a touring exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art,

Salgado's seven wonders

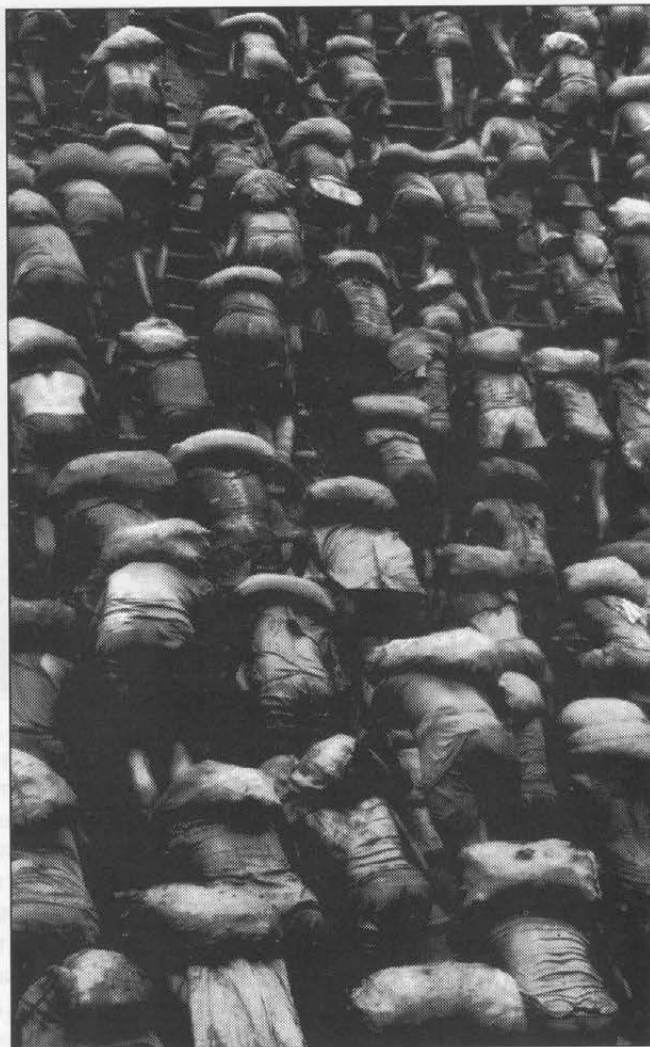
Salgado, who often spent months at a time engaged in photographing a particular area, divides the book into seven sections, ranging from the most basic of industries to the most technologically complex. The first concentrates on plants: from the tea fields of Rwanda to the cocoa trees of Brazil. Harvesting of animals follows, with tuna boats in Sicily and slaughterhouses in South Dakota. In the third and longest section, Salgado visits a variety of factories, from Ukrainian automobile assembly lines to a Chinese bicycle manufacturer and the French railroad system.

Salgado next turns to natural resources, depicting the particularly horrific working situations of the gold mines of Brazil and the sulfur volcanoes of Indonesia. In a subsection of this theme, Salgado turns his camera to oil, capturing many of the best known shots from this collection: workers struggling to tame the burning oil wells of Kuwait. He concludes with a look at three large-scale industrial projects: the construction of the Chunnel between England and France, and India's Sandar Sarovar Dam and Rajasthan Canal.

The photographs from each area, as Salgado's dedication pledges, pay homage to the total exploitation of the workers. People dominate Salgado's bleak industry-scape. They stare unapolo-

getically at the camera, glare down their technological nemeses, and battle against poor working conditions. Few of these workers actually smile, and indeed they seem to have little to smile about.

But while Salgado's admitted short-term agenda is to portray the plight of the worker, his deeper goal is just as accessible. He strives to convey the message not through academic, intellectual prose but through the painful emotions only pictures can evoke. Once the photos begin, the text ends. Included in the back of the book is a companion pamphlet of captions for the photographs, so that one can flip through each simultaneously switching equally from words to images. Or, if one prefers, the viewer can effectively mute the words and let the images speak for themselves. And speak these images do, quietly but persistently indicting the industrialism that created them.



Gold mine of Serra Pelada, Brazil, 1986. 50,000 men form this "human chain of scrapers." [Sebastiao Salgado/Magnum Photos]



Coal miners, Dhanbad, India, 1989. [Sebastiao Salgado/Magnum Photos]

Perhaps the most disturbing of the collection's images comes from the gold mines of Brazil. There, fifty thousand men hoping to find their fortunes spend their days precariously balanced on ladders stacked against the pueblo-esque contours of the mine.

Salgado introduces his work on this section from above the Serra Pelada gold mine, a cavity in the ground the size of a football field. The men, each clustered over their "own" 65-foot-square plot of land, cling like worker bees to a hive. In the next pictures, Salgado moves in closer, showing the strength of their leg muscles, sharply contoured from days standing on the ladders. Finally, the photo shows their faces, locked in consternation, each hoping that with the next scrape or shovel they will find a glint of gold ore hidden in the mire; a glint that will make possible all their dreams.

These joyless men, who Salgado tells

us in the captions are nicknamed “mud hogs,” are rigorously watched by a bevy of armed guards. Salgado includes without explanation a photograph of a group of anguished men struggling to gain control of a pistol—the final arbiter in a fight over gold.

Multi-dimensional visions

Salgado’s photographs project a constantly mutating, kaleidoscopic effect. Overall, they provoke you to rue the dark side of the industrial age. Yet, if you view them from different angles or out of order, you will see something new. Look at them through an environmentalist’s eyes and you see sumptuous, sweeping landscapes the world over destroyed by the demands of industry.

See them through a medical microscope, and the air in almost all of the industries he documents is visually clogged with particles waiting to infest lungs and wreak havoc on the respiratory system. This effect is most apparent in his sulfur mining photographs, which are all coated with a delicate fog of sulfur so noxious that workers must cover their mouths with cloth in order to work with the resource.

Consider yourself an expert in international development and frown on the signs of underdevelopment so incidental but yet essential to Salgado’s catalog: everywhere are workers who toil for minimal wages, engaged in the most



Sebastiao Salgado, Paris, 1989.
[Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos]

menial and taxing of labor, struggling to produce, produce, produce for consumers—for us.

A paeon to the worker rather than the consumer, Salgado’s book contains few examples of these products in use. One such shot looks down onto a rain-swept street showing a horde of ponchoed Chinese hurrying along on their bicycles. The photo stands alone after a series

depicting the bicycle makers at work. Another, even more telling two-page spread displays the promotional imagery of a Kazakhstan boulevard lined with photographs of workers who have boasted the highest productivity for that month.

For the most part, however, the workers in Salgado’s world exist in symbiotic relations with machines that rarely benefit them. Large-scale technology frequently dwarfs the humans who run it, and this relation is deftly captured. At times one cannot tell whether Salgado views humans as machines with eyes, or machines as humans without eyes.

An alien world close to home

Readers may find the catalogue’s layout frustrating. It prints many pictures across two pages, creating an artificial crease in the middle of the photograph. I found this technique less jarring in the landscape shots than many of the close-ups of people. One image particularly ruined by being reproduced in this way is a neck-down shot of a female cigar worker rolling a cigar between her fingers. Because this was early on in the book, the viewer is loath to break the binding too much, and therefore keeps it half-folded, ruining the sensual, almost sexual, effect this image had in exhibit. If seen while flat, the worker’s cleavage swells out of her lowcut blouse, while her deft fingers twist the cigar shut. Scrunched together in the book, the photo seems oddly off kilter, the cigar disappears into the fold and the woman’s absent head becomes distracting.

But the breathless beauty and incomparable scope of this book overrides these objections. Salgado augments his mass of stunning images with contact-sheet-esque collages that present in miniature some of the work left out of the exhibit and catalog. Upon leaving the exhibit, upon shutting the book, one feels as though one has left behind a bizarre and alien world. And then the realization dawns that this is the world in which we all dwell. Our demands for perfume, tea, natural resources, bicycles, automobiles, and railroads all necessitate the struggle that Salgado has captured with his camera lens. Trained as an economist, Salgado has constructed a provocative, hypnotic and highly theoretical critique—albeit wordless—of international economic conditions.



Gdansk Naval Shipyards, Poland, 1990. Here “trade union leader Lech Walesa began his rise toward the presidency.” [Sebastiao Salgado/Magnum Photos]