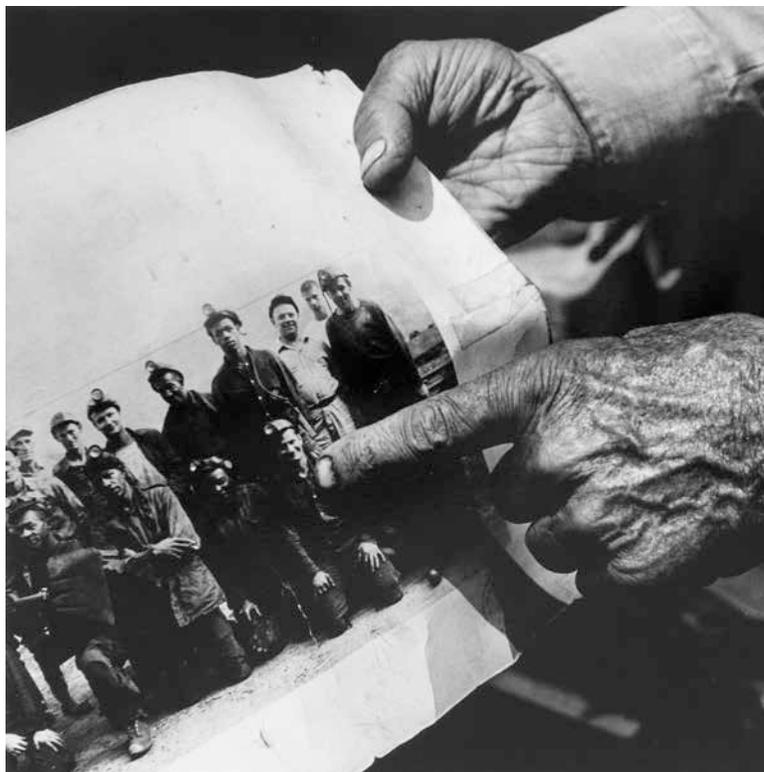


Physical Labor

Photographs of Workers 1940s to the Present



“**M**e voy al jale,” I can remember my dad saying as he went off to one of his two jobs everyday. *Jale* is the Spanish word for pull but can also mean to go to one’s place of work. I grew up in a working-class family where my dad would wake up at 4:00 a.m. for his first job as a maintenance man at a manufacturing company, come home to shower in the afternoon, and leave again for his second job in the produce section of a local grocery store. By 11:30 p.m. he was in bed for 4 ½ hours before his maintenance job started again. Working two jobs was a necessity to make ends meet but also a testament to my father’s great strength and commitment to work. I witnessed my mother’s role as a dedicated worker. She not only cared for three children and a husband in the home, but also worked in a factory, packaging binders. In the workplace, my mother was known for her perfect attendance record. I can remember that she proudly displayed the certificates on our living room wall. Both of my parents instilled a strong work ethic in their children that I am grateful to have inherited. *Physical Labor: Photographs of Workers 1940 to the Present* includes the work of nine documentary photographers, and seeks to represent a broad cross-section of laborers from around the world, celebrating their strength, spirit and commitment to work. The exhibition features striking images by Ken Light, which bear witness to workers across the United States, from the lush California fields, south to the Mississippi Delta, and across to the Appalachian coal mining country.

Although the working-class has been depicted in art, literature, music and photography, the toil of ordinary people who work in manual labor positions remains deeply undervalued. Professional jobs are awarded a higher social value, and financial remuneration, while work that poses physical demands is often compensated at the lowest wage levels. According to Ann Aurelia López, “75% of all individual farmworkers nationwide and 52% of all California farmworker families earn less than \$15,000 per year.”¹ The Computer Age has prompted U.S. Americans to seek less physically challenging work, leaving the manual labor jobs, which require no skills, to immigrants.² The physicality of labor can be understood in these photographs, which use the documentary approach to raise awareness through social activism, while at the same time serve as vehicles of artistic expression. The hands, faces and feet of the manual laborer often reveal the full effects of the labor left behind on the body. The hand has long been a cultural text for the physicality of labor and the word itself is a metonym for labor. The marks left on the body by years of physically challenging work can be seen in Sebastião Salgado’s *Rwanda (Hands)* 1991. The Brazilian social documentary photographer known for his long-term photographic projects has captured the essence of hard

Selections from the Comer Collection
Curated by Lupita Murillo Tinnen, Ph.D. candidate in Aesthetic Studies

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Edith O’Donnell Arts and Technology Building, Gallery

Top: Ken Light, *Feet of the campesino*, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1986, silver gelatin print, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches.

Bottom: Ken Light, *John, seventy-seven years old and missing three fingers, points to himself in a 1952 panoramic by Rufus Ribble*. Amigo, West Virginia, 2002, silver gelatin print, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches.



Ken Light, *Drying Alfalfa, Highway 180, Central Valley, California, 2006*, silver gelatin print, 10 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches

work in his depiction of the rough hands, worn through the repetitive action of picking tea at a plantation in Rwanda. Along the same line, Ken Light's *Feet of the campesino, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1986*, portrays the difficult and strenuous life of the Mexican peasant farmer realized in his soiled, leathery feet. The years of planting and harvesting his crops have left their mark on his now aged feet. We witness the slow decay of the toenails, which are covered with dirt, and wonder whether he toils to send the food to the market or simply to feed his family. Indeed, to say that manual labor hastens the decline of the body is an understatement.

In Ken Light's *John, seventy-seven years old and missing three fingers, points to himself in a 1952 panoramic by Rufus Ribble, Amigo, West Virginia, 2002*, we see an old man pointing to a tattered photograph of a diverse group of coal miners with his worn, stained finger. The physical effects of his life's work can be seen in his hands as he points to the photograph. The name "Johnny" is written along the bottom of the panorama; an arrow also points upward toward the man. The arrow, the pointing finger, and the missing fingers function as indices. The man in the picture is kneeling on the front row with his disfigured hands placed gently on his lap. Despite the fact that his right hand is missing three digits, he appears to smile happily for the photograph. Joel Leivick's *Underground Quarry Workmen* (1988) and Marcus Bleasdale's *Open Gold Mine Pit North Eastern Congo* (1995) both illustrate how the enormous land surrounding

them overwhelms the small and virtually insignificant worker. These workers are not seen as individuals but rather masses gathering raw materials for our comfort and consumption. Ken Light's *Field Workers, Tulare, California, 2008* is another demonstration of a tiny laborer working the vast land. The aerial photograph shows farm workers clustered in a small area toward the middle of the frame. The heavily patterned land is made up of neat rows of diagonal lines across the dynamic composition. Again, the workers cultivate the expansive land as a group instead of as single human beings. For most of us, our daily experiences are so distant from agrarian life, that we generally do not give a second thought to the person who picked our strawberries, lettuce, tomatoes, or other fruits and vegetables. During our visit to the produce aisle of the supermarket, we do not consider the hard work of harvesting and the exposure to pesticides and other dangerous conditions. Ken Light does show us a solitary worker in *Drying Alfalfa, Highway 180, Central Valley, California, 2006*. The middle-aged laborer wears a straw cowboy hat and a long-sleeved western shirt for protection against the harsh sun. He is dwarfed by the massive bulk of alfalfa he carries with one hand above his head. There are no other workers to be seen as a field of dried alfalfa surrounds him. Instead, the viewer makes a connection with the single man, thus recognizing his humanity.

The long history involving the documentation of migrant workers includes the photographs of Dorothea Lange, who was employed by the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression between 1935 and 1939. Lange is known for her connection with the laborers she photographed; she often included their words together with her images. One Mexican laborer is recorded as saying, "I have worked all my life and all I have now is my broken body – June 1935."³ During the 1950s and 1960s, documentary photographers George "Elfie" Ballis and Ernest Lowe both began their careers photographing migrant workers. In Ernest Lowe's *Cotton Pickers, Pixley, Tulare County, CA* (1961), we notice two men in a cotton field each dragging a long white bag behind them as they hand pick cotton. The bags, which are strapped to their back, become part of their body and the legless workers appear to slither through the fields. Indeed many farm workers bend, stoop, crawl and creep along as they carry on with their labor-intensive work. In Ballis' *First Grape Strike by NFWA, Delano CA* (1966), the renowned Chicano activist Cesar Chavez is seen leading a group of farmers, including women and children, in one of his most famous strikes. In 1966, the strikers marched 250 miles from Delano to Sacramento, California's capital, to present a list of their demands. In the photograph, Cesar Chavez is beaming with pride as he holds a small flag displaying the Spanish word for strike, "huelga" and the black eagle logo that stood for the organization that he helped found, together with Dolores Huerta. The organization was dedicated to the rights of migrant workers. With the transformations of 1960s came a shift in social attitudes. Workers such as Chavez began campaigns to fight the injustice and discrimination they were experiencing. Reminiscent of the group protests organized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ballis presents Chavez in his leadership role, guiding peaceful marchers as they seek change and a hopeful future. During the Depression, the U.S. Congress extended measures with the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which included overtime pay for workers, but sadly excluded the farm worker.⁴ Chavez was leading a fight for basic worker rights including decent housing, higher wages and overtime pay. In July 2010, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill mandating overtime pay, after eight hours, for farmworkers.⁵ The overturning of the bill speaks to the continued need for photographs, such as these, to serve as social documents for reform.

Ken Light began photographing migrant and child farm labor in 1978. He recalls his friend and fellow photographer Bill Owens discouraging him because Dorothea Lange had already explored this subject during the Depression. Yet through Light's photographs, we continue to see workers in the U.S. toiling under conditions that remind us of the Great Depression. Most recently in 2012, Light along with his wife Melanie Light published *Valley of Shadows and Dreams*, expanding upon his visual record of the farm worker in California's Central Valley. In the forward of the book, Thomas Steinbeck argues, "Ken and Melanie Light's exploration of California's Great Central Valley exposes a system and set of attitudes that go back to—and have changed little since—the region's conquest by colonial Spain."⁶ One of the most horrifying realities is that children continue to work in the fields alongside their parents. Children of these working-class parents are often burdened with the difficult task of helping their family financially. In Ken Light's *Veronica Heags, 12 years old, chopping cotton, New Africa Road. Coahoma County, Mississippi, 1991*, the child is tightly gripping a long-handled hoe as she looks sternly into the distance. She stares beyond the frame, possibly daydreaming of something other than having to work the fields. Her head is wrapped with a zigzag patterned rag, and her multiple layers of dirt-ridden clothing provide the evidence of her labor. Her shiny earring stands out as a small detail, what Roland Barthes refers to as the *punctum*, an element that pierces and stirs me as a viewer.⁷ The small piece of luxury catches the eye when juxtaposed amongst the scene of drudgery. While there are children who continue to work in the fields alongside their parents, others entertain themselves at their parents' place of work or business. Working-class families generally do not have the resources for childcare.⁸ In Arthur Leipzig's *Ideal Laundry* two small Asian children are peering out the large window of their parents' business. Their expressions reveal both a curiosity and sense of boredom. These children become a symbol for the family business and perhaps an indication of their future. The 1946 image also serves as a reminder of the jobs available to immigrants, including those found in the service industry such as laundry, domestic work, grounds maintenance and janitorial duties.



Ken Light, *Gathering la leña (firewood) for cooking*, Michoacán, Mexico, 1985, silver gelatin print, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches

Race and gender, like immigration status, generally play a role in determining job levels. While Gordon Parks' *Ella Watson, American Gothic* (1942) clearly represents a parody of Grant Wood's 1930 painting, it digs deep into issues of race, gender and civil rights. The photograph was taken while on assignment for the Farm Security Administration⁹ and provides an example of the type of labor available to African American women during a time of racism and segregation. Instead of the farmer's pitchfork, Ella Watson sternly holds a broom and mop, a symbol for the domestic service jobs common to African American women, while the giant American Flag ironically hangs in the background as the emblem of the American dream. Unlike Grant's farmer who is seen firmly holding the pitchfork, Ella Watson's hands are not included in the photograph. She stands behind the oversized broom and mop that are in the foreground appearing larger than the petite woman. Like the farmer, Ella wears the same rounded glasses yet she represents both the man and the woman, which implies her role as a breadwinner of the family. Many women bear the burden of dual roles, often balancing the caring of their family with work outside the home.

Women not only work inside the home, as they tend to domestic matters including childcare, cleaning, washing and cooking, but also hold jobs, often in low-paying positions. In Ken Light's *Gathering la leña (firewood) for cooking, Michoacán, Mexico, 1985*, an older Mexican woman is carrying an enormous bundle of firewood on her back using only a piece of cloth to hold the heavy load. The woman appears to be in her seventies as witnessed through her wrinkled face, though it is not clear how much of her appearance is the effect of age, and what is due to the life of hard work she has endured. Her arms are crossed revealing only one hand while the other is tucked away inside her sweater, still holding a piece of wood. While the sweater she wears over her clothes is suggestive of cold weather, the sun shines brightly and harshly on her weathered face. As she warily looks away from the camera, a flower earring is revealed that stands out against the dark shadow cast on her neck. Similar to the young girl mentioned earlier, the earring is a small piece of luxury and serves as a contrast to the ruggedness surrounding the woman. The *mandil* (apron) she wears over her clothes is tattered and worn. Instead of fatigue, the woman appears tough and ready to handle anything that comes her way despite her years. The only feminine quality remains the flower earring. In contrast, Luis Mallo's *Passengers* (1995), shows a person caught in the midst of knitting. The composition does not reveal the person's face and identity as male or female yet we assume them to be female because of the presentation of this craft. The hands are older yet soft. The dark, heavy coat contrasts sharply against the whiteness of the hands, needle, and yarn. The yarn appears to come from the right side of the frame and the long needles form a triangle. The art of knitting has been conventionally associated

with women's work. Is the person making a garment to be sold for money, or perhaps it is a gift, to be worn by a loved one? Regardless, Mallo represents the act of knitting as a labor of love. By isolating the activity, he elevates the idea of using the human hand, instead of a machine, to make the piece of clothing.

Manual labor transforms the body, yet often it commands only the lowest wages. Society values the work of the professional more than those whose bodies withstand physical abuse. Nonetheless, despite the hard labor, the endurance of the human spirit is witnessed through the photographs of people from around the world as they make a living, working, toiling, sweating and struggling to make ends meet to support themselves and their families. The photographers included in this exhibition together strive to demonstrate the strength and commitment of the manual laborer, and serve to remind the viewer that our lives are all affected by the often unseen workers who make these contributions. While current depictions acknowledge our distance from conditions suffered by workers of the 1930s, these documentary photographers continue to devote extended periods of time to recording social situations, thus using images to advocate for reform. The photographs bear witness by offering unique insights into work environments, especially those we do not encounter on a daily basis. Once educated, viewers collectively can help to make a difference in the way we acknowledge and value the work of the manual laborer.

—Lupita Murillo Tinnen



Luis Mallo, *Passengers*, 1995, gelatin silver, 5.2" x 7.8"

Notes:

- 1 López, Ann Aurelia. *The Farmworkers' Journey*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 146.
- 2 Camarota, Steven A. and Karen Zeigler. "Jobs Americans Won't Do? A Detailed Look at Immigrant Employment by Occupation." Center for Immigration Studies, August 2009, <http://www.cis.org/illegalImmigration-employment>
- 3 Lange, Dorothea et al. *Dorothea Lange: The Crucial Years, 1930-1946*. Madrid: La Fábrica Editorial, 2009, 88.
- 4 US Department of Labor. Revised July 2008, http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/fairpay/fs17a_overview.html
- 5 Neuburger, Bruce. *Lettuce Wars: Ten Years of Work and Struggle in the Fields of California*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013, 374.
- 6 Light, Melanie, and Ken Light. *Valley of Shadows and Dreams*. Berkeley, Calif: Heyday, 2012, ix.
- 7 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 27.
- 8 Light, Ken, and Paula DiPerna. *With These Hands*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1986, 71.
- 9 "Gordon Parks's 100th Birthday: Celebrating The Groundbreaking American Photographer's Work In Photos," *The Huffington Post*, November 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/30/gordon-parks-100th-birthday_n_2218086.html

THURSDAY, APRIL 10

Exhibition Reception: 6 – 7:30 p.m.

O'Donnell Arts & Technology Building, Gallery

Photographer Ken Light and curator Lupita Murillo Tinnen will be in attendance.

Followed by a lecture by photographer Ken Light

7:30 p.m. in the JSOM Davidson Auditorium, SOM 1.118

Book-signing available after the lecture.

April 4 – May 3, 2014

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