

Dotter, Earl, (2018) *Life's Work: A Fifty Year Photographic Chronicle of Working in the U.S.A.*, AIHA Press (American Industrial Hygiene Association), Falls Church, VA.

Review by Janet Zandy

‘The camera has allowed me to do meaningful work.’ Earl Dotter

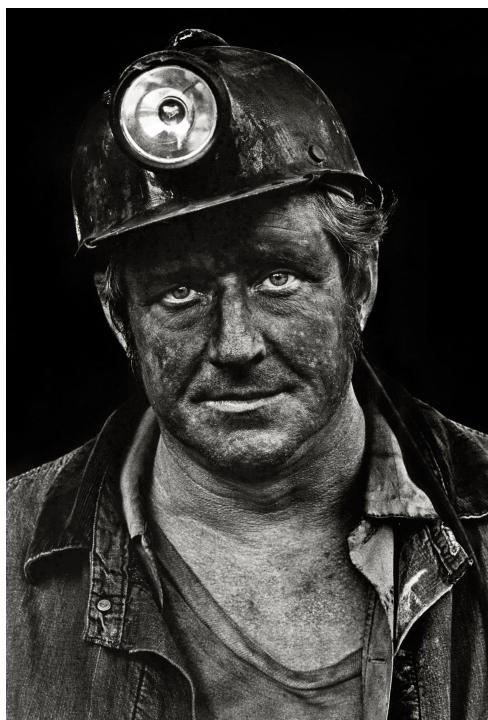
Earl Dotter’s photographs of miners, textile workers, cleaners, farm laborers, fishers, nurses, emergency responders, window washers, industrial hygienists, and other workers, especially those exposed to dangerous and hazardous conditions, constitute a narrative of labor both crucial and largely invisible. As was true of Lewis Hine’s efforts to ameliorate the cruelty of child labor, Dotter’s photographs have agency, revealing the struggle for safe work and democratic unions, the aftermath of job-related deaths and injuries to workers and their families, and the marks of labor on a person’s body as evidenced by missing limbs or ‘quiet’ chronic sickness. Dotter’s photographs are [under]grounded, rooted in a particular vernacular of labor and, simultaneously, a dense and wide canopy of workers’ lives. He masters the technical challenge of photographing in a coal shaft or on a fishing boat during a winter storm, as well as the necessary empathetic human connection of photographing without turning his subjects into distanced victims or sociological categories.

On the complicated question of his relationship to his subjects, Dotter recalls his experience working as a photographer for the *United Mine Workers Journal* (1973-77): ‘I was made welcome into the homes of mining families. I’ve learned that before I ever bring my camera out of the bag, the first thing I try to do is to let folks know who I am, why I want to take their picture. Then, if they are satisfied with what I’m up to, they are better able to respond and live out their life in front of the camera rather than act it out.’

Dotter has an interior drive to connect with people from *within* their own life circumstances. While he was a student at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he took a photography course that was catalytic and transformative. He learned that ‘aesthetic decisions flowed’ from a respectful connection with one’s subjects. As was true for many of his generation (Dotter was born in 1943), 1968 was a pivotal year. While living in lower Manhattan, he composed a series of photos emerging from his interactions with people in his neighborhood. His photos of the urban response to Martin Luther King’s assassination appeared in the final issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. In 1968 he joined VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) and was assigned to the Cumberland Plateau Region of Tennessee. After his stint in VISTA he remained in the Appalachian Region to photograph

the rank and file movement to reform the United Mine Workers Union. In 1972 he was staff photographer for the reformers' newspaper (delivered free to every miner), and after a successful democratic union election, he went to work for the *United Mine Workers Journal*. The decade that he worked with and for the miners was for Dotter a period of 'intense creative development' where he learned 'not just what to photograph, but how to create an image that would impact the viewer both visually and emotionally. The lessons learned during my 'coalfield years' still guide my work today.'

His photograph of Lee Hipshire¹, a West Virginia coal miner at the end of his shift, proves there is no oxymoronic contradiction between a beautiful portrait and the marks of a day's labor on the human face and body. (Lee Hipshire died of Black Lung Disease at the age of 56.) Hipshire's iconic, often reprinted portrait is included in *Life's Work*.



As is his photograph of a miner's widow. Her husband survived action in Vietnam only to die in the 1976 Kentucky Scotia Mine disaster that took the lives of 26 miners. It is a photograph of immense poignancy. Through a local newspaper Dotter approached the Griffith family and earned permission to photograph the out-of-the-way mountaintop funeral.

¹ All images reproduced with permission from the artist.



As the widow was leaving the graveside funeral service, Dotter photographed her. That photograph became a double-page spread in *The United Mine Workers Journal*. Some thirty years later, the widow, Mrs. Griffith, came to an exhibit of Dotter's mining photos. She was in a wheelchair and with her daughter with whom she was pregnant at the time of the earlier photo. Dotter recalls their encounter: '[She] explained to me about her life since the picture was made and how she had a pretty difficult life. She said that the coverage that ensued in the *Mine Workers Journal* was ultimately beneficial toward promoting mine safety. So there are continuing stories.'

Indeed, 'continuing stories' could be an apt subtitle to *Life's Work*, Dotter's new book, his *Fifty Year Photographic Chronicle of Working in the U.S.A.* Each of the fifteen chapters focuses on Dotter's photographs of an occupation with brief and useful accompanying commentary from experts in the fields of industrial health and safety. The book is beautifully designed with black background and white lettering dividing each chapter. With no dominating chronological order, the reader can move in and out of the visual job space Dotter creates. Through Dotter's informed photographic eye, readers see commercial fishermen in 'The Price of Fish,' (2002), emergency responders in 'When Duty Calls' (2001), nurses and health care workers in 'Maimonides at Work' (2012) and 'Just a Nurse,' (2007), Southern Textile Workers in 'Rise Gonna Rise' (1979), immigrants, migrants and new Americans in 'The Farmworkers Feed Us All' (2007), Native Americans developing energy resources in 'Holding Mother Earth Sacred' (2010) and Dotter's work with generations of miners, 'In Our Blood' (1970s) and the people of Appalachia (1969-1999).



This intelligent book is an alternative to clichéd presentations of so-called ‘heart wrenching’ conditions. It is structured so that we recognize not only the damage done to people by the work they do, but also the efforts to resist and improve those conditions. The physicality of labor is palpable in Dotter’s photographs. We see the strained human arm on the poultry processing line, the compression of the body entering a narrow trench, *and* the masks limiting exposure to asbestos dust and the better harvest tools for the stooping body.

Imagine this book in the hands of teachers and politicians. Rather than societal divisions, we see, instead, what James Agee described in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as ‘an effort in human actuality.’ Dotter reveals the connective tissue of labor, a circuitry achieved through his exhibits and workshops. Dotter’s photographs call for response and answerability. His quiet, fifty-year, photographic achievement illuminates the dignity of labor and every person’s absolute right to safe work. He enables us to see the intelligence of labor, what Mike Rose calls ‘the mind at work.’ We now have this crucial book as *tikkun olam*, a tool to repair the world.

Reviewer Bio

Janet Zandy is a Rochester Institute of Technology emerita professor. She is the author of the award winning *Hands: Physical Labor, Class and Culture* and other books on the working classes and culture. Her most recent book is *Unfinished Stories: The Narrative Photography of Hansel Mieth and Marion Palfi*, researched at the Center for Creative Photography, as an Ansel Adams Fellow. She was general editor of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 1997-2001. She can be reached at janetzandy52@gmail.com.

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