Photography 1

Context and Narrative
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Appendix
Photography is a visual language. As with any other language, it’s important to understand its structure and vocabulary in order to express yourself and communicate effectively. The more fluent you become, the more playful and experimental you can be in expressing yourself creatively.

*Photography 1: Context and Narrative* aims to help you to create meaningful imagery by looking at photography applied in context. You’ll spend time looking at how practitioners use some of the ideas surrounding contemporary photographic practice. You’ll be encouraged to adopt an experimental and personal approach to your own image-making, taking your lead from the inspiration provided by others.

You’ll also think about how visual narratives are formed, for example the use of image and text, sequencing and editing in constructing stories. You’ll consider some photographic myths, such as whether photographs are ‘real’, and think about fact and fiction and the difference between taking and making a photograph. You’ll explore semiotics as a key principle in the creation and consumption of photography.

You’ll be encouraged to critically reflect upon all these issues – and more – in your practice and research.

Before you go any further, read the introduction to each part of the course to give yourself an idea of the course content.

Each part of the course represents roughly 80 hours of study. In each part you’ll be asked to complete a variety of exercises and research tasks, make notes on the subject matter, and also to reflect on your learning. It’s important to complete all of the exercises as they often build important skills or knowledge that you’ll draw on for the assignments.

Remember, too, that there are other students doing the course so you’re not on your own. Use the online forums to reflect on your findings and discuss issues with other students. Go to [www.oca-student.com/forum](http://www.oca-student.com/forum)

At the end of each part of the course you’ll complete an assignment and send it to your tutor for feedback. Reflect carefully on your tutor feedback and, if appropriate, go back to the assignment and make adjustments to it based on your tutor’s comments. If you submit for assessment, making such adjustments demonstrates responsiveness and learning and will help improve your mark. Note down what you’ve done differently, and why, in your learning log.
Exercise

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you’re clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your Student Handbook.

If you haven’t already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date (your profile). Mention any skills you already have that you think are relevant to the course. Comment on why you want to study this particular course and what you hope to achieve as a result of taking the course. Email your profile to your tutor using your new OCA email address (maximum 250 words). Your profile will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Also arrange with your tutor how you’ll submit your assignment work (e.g. whether you’ll email images as JPEGs or send prints in the post) and how you’ll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

It’s a good idea to get into the habit of submitting at least some images as prints to help you prepare for assessment, if you choose to go down this route.

Studying with OCA

If you haven’t already done so, now is a good time to work through the free introductory course ‘An Introduction to Studying in HE’ on the OCA student website: www.oca-student.com/study-guides/introduction-studying-he

Don’t be tempted to skip this introductory course; it contains valuable advice on study skills (e.g. reading, note-taking), research methods and academic conventions which will stand you in good stead throughout your studies.

Exercise

The OCA website will be a key resource for you during your studies with OCA so take some time to familiarise yourself with it. Log onto the OCA student website and go the link below. Watch the video and make notes.

www.oca-student.com/study-guides/using-website
Learning log

Whether you call it a journal, logbook, workbook, notebook or something similar, they are essentially the same thing. The learning log is something you create to record and support your learning and is an integral element of study with the OCA.

Your learning log is where you record your experiences, thoughts, feelings, and reflections on your learning activities. These activities can include courses you went on, exhibitions visited, books read, discussions had, internet sites browsed, TV programmes watched etc. As well as documenting what you've been doing whilst studying this course unit, it’s important to add your personal comments, to reflect critically on the work of others as well as your own. You can say what you think about the material you have encountered and how it has helped you with your studies.

If this is your first course unit with the OCA, see the study guide Introducing learning logs on the OCA student website, located in the ‘Resources’ section, for further guidance on what a learning log is and how to keep one.

Using an online blog

You're strongly recommended to use an online blog instead of (or in addition to) physical logbooks/notebooks/folders. This will be a requirement for students from 1 August 2017. For more details see this document from the OCA student website - www.oca-student.com/sites/default/files/oca-content/key-resources/res-files/sg_change_in_photo_reqs_221216.pdf

A blog is a great way to consolidate and present your course work, as well as providing your tutor and peers with a live view of your learning and reflections. Blogs can be sectioned off into various categories and can make your recorded learning more navigable to these external viewers.

Setting up a blog can be done for free through websites such as Blogger, Tumblr or Wordpress. If this is your first course unit with the OCA, see the study guide Keeping an Online Learning Log on the OCA student website, located in the ‘Resources’ section. There is also a OCA wordpress blog template in the same section of the OCA student website.

It’s also strongly recommended that you keep a separate blog for each of the course units you study, just as you would your coursework, sketchbooks, notebooks and learning logs. However if you insist on keeping the same blog for each course unit, you must separate all entries/posts from one another in order to clearly distinguish what learning was undertaken for a given course unit, otherwise your work could be at risk of being viewed as self plagiarism.
Course learning outcomes

You’ll probably have an idea of what you hope to get from the course already. Have a look through the following learning outcomes for the course and check if they match up with your aspirations. On successful completion of the course you should be able to:

- create images that demonstrate a practical and conceptual understanding of the appropriate use of techniques
- demonstrate an emerging critical awareness and ability to translate ideas into imagery
- conduct research, development and production in response to the themes raised in this course
- show a critical understanding of contemporary imagery in relation to historical practice and theory.

Your tutor will be looking for evidence that you’re beginning to demonstrate these outcomes in your work. It’s a good idea to apply these to your progress at the end of each part of the course and reflect in your learning log on whether or not you feel you’re beginning to develop these skills.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your Student Handbook at an early stage in the course. You’ll also find the Assessment and How to Get Qualified study guide on the student website: www.oca-student.com/content/assessment-and-how-get-qualified-1

For assessment you’ll need to submit a cross-section of the work you’ve done on the course:

- Assignments Two to Five, together with the original tutor-annotated versions
- your learning log or blog url
- your tutor report forms.

Assignment One is a diagnostic assignment designed to give your tutor a feel for your work and help them decide how best to help you. It won’t count towards your final mark if you decide to go for formal assessment, but the assessors may want to see it so that they can gauge your progress.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.
Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you’re going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you’ve completed in your learning log, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

Assessment criteria points

- **Demonstration of technical and visual skills** – Materials, techniques, observational skills, visual awareness, design and compositional skills. (40%)
- **Quality of outcome** – Content, application of knowledge, presentation of work in a coherent manner, discernment, conceptualisation of thoughts, communication of ideas. (20%)
- **Demonstration of creativity** – Imagination, experimentation, invention. (20%)
- **Context** – Reflection, research, critical thinking. (20%)

Basic research tools and skills

In your studies you’ll be expected to do research on the topics you cover. As this is a Level 1 course, many of the materials you’ll use will be identified for you in the form of extracts from texts or links to online sources. Unfortunately, links do go out of date from time to time. OCA check and update these regularly but if you do find that a link no longer works, please let your tutor know immediately so that they can feed this back to OCA. In the meantime you can try a general search online in the subject area and see what else you can find relevant to the topic you’re studying. Often the same information may be available with a slightly different address as websites are updated.

As you progress through the course you may wish to do further research and here are some starting points. (Research tools and skills, and study skills in general, are covered in some detail in the introductory course ‘An Introduction to Studying at HE’.) You should also try to visit as many galleries and exhibitions as you can during the course.
At a library

- handouts on how to use library facilities
- use of the internet and help in developing internet search skills
- academic journals
- specialist collections
- specialist magazines/newspapers/back editions
- photocopy services
- videos, CDs, microfiche and slides.

Using booklists

Booklists can be daunting even if you recognise some of the titles on the list. There’s a further reading list at the end of the course and your tutor may recommend other titles. You’ll need to assess the importance of some books over and above other books – you can’t read everything! Your tutors (and in some cases the course guide) will let you know which books are ‘essential’ for you to read and which are of a more general nature. All book publications are in print at the time of the course guide being published but of course this can change from year to year – OCA will republish booklists when possible.

The internet

The internet has a huge range of information and allows you to browse across an enormous range of sources. The internet should be your key research tool. If you don’t have a computer with internet access at home, make sure you set up time to use the internet at the library or at a friend’s house. Via the internet you can have access to:

- newspapers and magazines
- gallery and museum collections
- OCA website
- library catalogues and information
- relevant TV and radio programmes
- government papers
- access to specialist providers
- videos (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo)
- artists’ websites.

It’s important to be aware that not all internet sources are reliable. You’ll need to exercise judgement and at times cross-reference the information you find. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is the author of the article/information?
- Do they mention their qualifications or experience in the topic?
- Is there an obvious sponsor for the site who may have a reason to promote a particular view point?
• How old is the page and is the information updated regularly?

Have a look at any bibliography links given at the end to double-check that the information can be verified through another avenue.

There is also a great deal of information available through the OCA website and you can begin to explore this in the following exercise.

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**Exercise**

Log on to the OCA student website. Go to ‘Research’, then ‘Resource types’ in the drop-down menu and then ‘Online libraries’. Explore at least one of the libraries listed.

Next, take a look at the range of study guides available on the student website. Here are just two examples:

• Many new students feel a bit apprehensive about having to write essays, especially if they haven’t done any writing of this sort since school. Take a look at the guide to *Academic Essay Writing:* [www.oca-student.com/content/academic-essay-writing-1](http://www.oca-student.com/content/academic-essay-writing-1)

• If you quote another person’s words in your essays, you must indicate the source of the quote, even if it’s from the internet. Similarly, at the end of your essay, you must provide a reference list or bibliography listing any texts or websites you’ve used. You’ll find much more about this in the guide to the Harvard referencing system on the student website: [www.oca-student.com/content/harvard-referencing-system-1](http://www.oca-student.com/content/harvard-referencing-system-1)

Print out a copy and keep it to hand. Referencing can seem a bit daunting if you’ve not done it before, but if you take the time to learn how to reference properly now, it’ll save you a lot of time and trouble – and lost marks – later on in your studies.

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**Exercise**

This exercise is about planning your studies. The course amounts to 400 hours of study. This works out at around eight hours a week over a year.

• Draw up a study schedule. When are you going to work?

• Where are you going to work?

• Get in touch with your tutor and arrange a date for the submission of your first assignment – and subsequent assignments if appropriate. You can also plan your study online at: [www.oca-student.com/studies](http://www.oca-student.com/studies)
As you move through OCA courses and you begin to look in more depth into your subject, the amount of reading and research required understandably increases. Having an understanding of the key issues in photography’s (relatively short history) is a fundamental part of working towards a qualification in photography. However, incorporating this research into your study schedule can be a challenge. ‘When am I going to have time to take actual photographs’ and ‘All I seem to do is read!’ are common complaints when visual arts students first begin to struggle with significant reading lists. At the beginning of each course assignment for C&N, consider making a chart planning and plotting your time. Decide how much time you are going to allocate to your reading, to your learning log and to your final assignment and try to stick to this as much as possible. There will be times where either your reading or your photography dominates completely. But as a whole, apportioning your time in a deliberate way will ensure that you don’t feel overwhelmed by the various requirements of the course.

Summary

By now you should have:

- familiarised yourself with some of the online support that is available through the OCA website,
- written your student profile and emailed it to your tutor
- set up a learning log or blog
- drawn up a study timetable and arranged at least your first assignment deadline with your tutor
- accessed an online library and taken note of the OCA study guides that are available to you.

Now you’re ready to make a start on Part One of Photography 1: Context and Narrative. We hope you enjoy it!
Introduction

OCA student Stephanie D’Hubert, *Presence of Absence* series
"I think it’s certain that one doesn’t only photograph with the eyes but with all of one’s intelligence.”

Brassaï (interview with Tony Ray Jones, 1970, quoted in Brittain, 2000, p.39)

Context: noun (Oxford English Dictionary)

the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.

The context of a photograph and its surroundings (i.e. what’s outside the frame as opposed to what’s inside the frame) are fundamental to how it comes to exist and how it is consumed. No photograph exists without a purpose, background or context. Whether on a billboard, on a gallery wall, or in a family album, the meaning of a photograph is influenced by what surrounds it – and not just its physical location.

Most of the photography we see around us is telling us something, albeit on a subliminal (or subconscious) level. By telling us what socks to wear, where to eat and how to feel when we look in the mirror, photography impacts our subconscious state from extremes of feeling good about ourselves to feelings of dissatisfaction that prompt us to indulge our ‘needs’ because we’re ‘worth it’. The distribution of these messages is part of our society and as intelligent beings it is our responsibility to be aware of these messages.

It’s also important to be alert to the messages contained in your own images so you don’t transmit unintended meanings or fail to recognise your own visual narrative. In your development as a photographer you should aim to become a thinking photographer rather than join the masses of sleepwalking photographers who adopt every trend, new camera or filter that is thrown at them.

Context is not only the geographical placement of the photograph (Twitter, billboards, gallery), although that is very important. Context also means the ideological positioning of the photograph or series of photographs. For this reason, looking at other artists’ work, both individually and in relation to that of other practitioners, is an important element of your research and will help you to position yourself within contemporary photographic practice. Reflections of this nature are of key importance in your quest to understand the work you go on to make, what you want to communicate, and where it belongs.
Thinking about who, what, why, where and how is always a good starting point to getting beneath the surface of photography. Judith Williamson’s ‘Advertising’ articles in Source photographic review provide an excellent example of a critical approach. Each issue she takes a currently distributed advert and writes about it from a visual, cultural and theoretical point of view, often leaving one dumbfounded at the depth of manipulation that seems to be going on behind the scenes. You’re encouraged you to read these and comment on them as part of your studies. See: www.oca-student.com/content/her

Joachim Schmid is an example of an artist who adopts a thoughtful approach to photography. He is a German artist who had been buying photographs in large quantities from flea markets for years (he has over 100,000). When Flickr was invented he moved from collecting on the street to collecting online. (He includes his own pictures in the archive.) Schmid spotted common features among the images he collected and categorised his findings into 96 books on various themes such as feet, groups of friends, married couples on steps, etc.

© Joachim Schmid, Archiv 317, 1993, from the series Archiv
As the books build upon each other, the overwhelming amount of crossovers begs the question ‘why do we all take the same picture?’ Without Schmid’s critical awareness of photography in context and obsessive collecting habit we wouldn’t have such an eloquent presentation of a shared and absurd human compulsion to record the same events in the same ways.

You can read an interview with Schmid on weareoca:
[accessed 24/02/14]

Erik Kessels is another example of someone working with the interesting question of why we all take the same pictures and what happens to them all. You can read a blog about it here and you may wish to blog about it yourself.
www.weareoca.com/photography/people-are-hungry-for-stories/
[accessed 24/02/14]

By understanding the context of particular photographs it becomes possible to obtain the fullest appreciation of the narrative(s) they convey.

**Narrative:** *noun (Oxford English Dictionary)*
- a spoken or written account of connected events; a story: a gripping narrative
- the practice or art of telling stories
- a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values.

Individual photographs and series of photographs hold within them their own narratives (i.e. what’s within the frame). This course will refer to narratives both within single pictures and series of photographs. By ‘narrative’ we mean the visual flow, the coherence of the set of images, or the construction of the single image.
Within the frame of the photograph are the elements that make up the narrative. In a series, the photographer builds upon these elements to back up the general flow of the narrative but this isn't necessarily linear; the photographer may manipulate the elements to cause disruptions in the story line, much as a writer might in a literary narrative. The overall narrative within a series of photographs should be consistent, however. You should be able to see patterns in your images that uphold your overarching set of aims or values and you should have a means of linking the images together to create this narrative. This is why photography holds such a close relationship to film and literature; the narrative has to hold together, otherwise it would be like watching the beginning of one film and the end of another. If you're going to challenge this – as some progressive film-makers do – you need to have a good reason for it. You don't have to conform to standard narrative approaches, but if you're to push the boundaries it's important to understand why you're doing so rather than submitting a random selection of disparate images that don't hold together as a narrative.

Single photographs contain within them visual codes that carry meanings. Photographers such as Jeff Wall have become renowned for their painstaking attention to detail when creating the narrative of the individual image. (A better word in this context is mis-en-scène, a term used in film for the set and construction of the scene.) As on a film set, every prop, dress and character is there for a reason: all contribute to the overall narrative of the image. (There's more on this in Part Five.)
The elements within pictures are generally there for a reason. Even in straight documentary (i.e. where elements may be there by chance rather than design) they become significant to the final reading as they become fixed in the frame and subject to lifelong scrutiny.

The implication here is that as photographers we’re aware of what we’re photographing and, even if we see something in our images that wasn’t intended, we’re critical enough to make sense of it later. Either approach is evidence of a thinking photographer.

To sum up, by being alert to both the broad context (outside the frame) and specific narratives (within the frame) of photographs, you’ll develop the means to delve deeper into creating and understanding meaningful photography. The aim of this course is to use both context and narrative to enable you to produce projects expanding upon your vision and to begin the early stages of formulating your personal voice. The course assignments are there to help you put into practice the issues discussed and to enhance your comprehension of photography and ability to create successful imagery.

Dispelling common myths about photography is an important part of this discovery. If you’ve studied Photography 1: Expressing Your Vision you’ll already be aware of the many technical myths that can be rightfully disputed, such as ‘the correct exposure’ or ‘horizons must be straight’. In much the same vein, you should be prepared to reflect on and challenge some of the conceptual myths about photography – ‘the camera never lies,’ ‘photographs are records of reality’ or ‘fact is stranger than fiction,’ for example.
Reflective writing

As you develop as a photographer, it’s important not only to develop strong technical skills but to use them effectively to promote your ideas and intentions. Your practical work should reflect what you’ve been learning both in terms of technique and your conceptual intentions.

Self-reflective writing will help you to order your own thoughts but will also help your tutor and course assessors (if you go down this route) to understand your intentions, how you intend to carry them out and how the result meets, or fails to meet, your intentions. Keep your reflective accounts relevant and concise. Be critical of your own practice – not necessarily negative, but thoughtful and reflective, perhaps with a little distance. Write factually about how your technical decisions, ideas and contextualisation have come together to create a successful (or, in some cases, not so successful) final outcome. Give reasons as to why you believe the outcome is successful/unsuccessful; this will help you progress next time and will provide a basis for discussion with your tutor. At assessment it will also demonstrate how well you understand your own work, which is very important.

Ideas books and diaries can be useful adjuncts to the learning log that records your artistic journey. Get into the habit of making notes as you go about your normal routines; these may prove very useful when you look back on them later. You’ll be using a diary in Part Three so you may wish to get a head start by keeping one from the beginning of the course.

Overall it is our hope that you’ll combine technique, personal intention and contextualisation in the final outcome to produce compelling and coherent practical projects that evidence a depth of research and personal vision.
Part one

The photograph as document
“…it is a different nature that speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye.”

Walter Benjamin (from ‘Art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, 1936)

In each genre the work is situated within a certain context and the issues surrounding these contexts are the focus of Parts One to Five of this course. The narratives within images are also situated within – and to some extent determined by – their contexts. How we read a work is affected by how it’s positioned: we read a news picture in a very different way to a photograph on a book cover. All this information adds to the discussion around individual images and how they’re positioned within photography as a wider discipline, and therefore how we can understand them.

The aim of Part One is to help you engage in the debate about ‘photography and truth’. You’ll think about the extent to which straight documentary is a record or document, i.e. whether a photograph is an accurate representation of an event. Through looking at historical and contemporary examples, you’ll consider how trustworthy photographs actually are. You’ll look at some different definitions of documentary photography, and consider the place for the documentary photograph within art photography. Finally, you’ll be challenged to use documentary photography to speak about something that isn’t true or to use it in a way that emphasises the point that a photograph doesn’t tell the whole story.
A photograph gives us the impression that we were there. By offering us a point of view on an event or scene, we are tricked, however momentarily, into believing that we’re looking at the scene rather than a photograph of the scene. We’re not eyewitnesses, only the photographer was there, but the photograph gives us the impression that we are. Once we realise that we’re looking at a piece of paper with a version of reality on it, rather than reality itself, we can begin to understand more fully the information we’re being offered, try to uncover its context, and reconsider our position to it in a more informed and critical manner.

The notion of photography as evidence is problematic because of many factors that are beyond our control as viewers. Who was taking the photograph? What was their agenda or intention? What did they choose to omit? When did they decide to press the button?

It is common practice today to use citizen journalism in newspapers. The rise of Twitter and other social networking means that images are instantly sent across the world, even in times of extreme emergency, direct from the centre of the action. Think of Syria, for example, and Abu Graib (Bull, 2009, p.120). The very accessibility of cameraphone photography means that the images they produce can be swiftly distributed in the most extreme of circumstances. This same quality means that ‘private’ images taken by those who happen to be present can also make their way into the public realm. What and who can we believe?

Exercise

Find some examples of news stories where ‘citizen journalism’ has exposed or highlighted abuses of power.

How do these pictures affect the story, if at all? Are these pictures objective? Can pictures ever be objective?

Write a list of the arguments for and against. For example, you might argue that these pictures do have a degree of objectivity because the photographer (presumably) didn’t have time to ‘pose’ the subjects, or perhaps even to think about which viewpoint to adopt. On the other hand, the images we see in newspapers may be selected from a series of images and how can we know the factors that determined the choice of final image?

Think about objectivity in documentary photography and make some notes in your learning log before reading further.
Documentary and social reform

The Farm Security Administration (FSA), 1935–44, was set up as an agency to look out for the good of farmers who had been badly affected by the Great Depression. The men who set it up, Rexford Tugwell and Roy Stryker, “were convinced of the power of photographs to give a human reality to economic arguments…” (Dyer, 2006, p.3). Among the photographers working for the FSA were Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, who produced some of the most iconic images from the period.

![Migrant Mother](via Wikimedia Commons)

*Migrant Mother* came not only to represent the particular family in the picture but all the other families suffering the same plight. Perhaps because of its direct resemblance to images of the Madonna and child, it became emblematic in its own right, creating problems of ownership and payment rights for the people in the picture. Although there’s no doubt that the FSA’s expansive photography project raised awareness of the situation across the country, there was scepticism around how the images were commissioned.
Stryker would give the photographers lists of photographs he wanted them to find, for example. One such list for ‘Summer’ (Dyer, 2006, p.4) included:

Crowded cars going out on the open road. Gas station attendant filling tank of open touring and convertible cars.

Rock gardens: sun parasols; beach umbrellas; sandy shores with gently swelling waves; whitecaps showering spray over sailboat in distant horizon.

People standing in shade of trees and awnings. Open windows on street cars and buses; drinking water from spring or old well; shady spot along bank – sun on water beyond; swimming pools, rivers, and creeks.

Such a controlled approach to photography leaves the integrity and altruism of the FSA open to suspicion. Dorothea Lange herself believed that “to know ahead of time what you’re looking for means you’re then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting” (ibid., p.6).

See Martha Rosler’s 1981 essay ‘In, Around and Afterthoughts (on documentary photography)’ for a more in-depth discussion. This is available to read online.

Lewis Hine (1874–1940) believed that photography should be a vehicle for social reform. As a political activist Hine used photography, particularly photographs of children in factories and enduring poor working conditions, to raise awareness and promote social change. Combined with captions provided by Hine highlighting the perils the children experienced on a daily basis, the images helped achieve a convincing condemnation of the law on child labour.
Photojournalism is a term used to identify news imagery. It’s often seen (or mistaken) as a factual way of using photography to inform the public of events and happenings across the world. However, as we know from the many different messages our own newspapers give us, the choice of news photograph all too often reflects the publisher’s agenda. Below are very short introductions to three critical viewpoints on the uses, problems and benefits of photojournalism. For more reading please see Chapters 3, 5 and 6 in La Grange, A. (2005) Basic Critical Theory for Photographers. Burlington, MA: Focal Press

Three critical viewpoints

1. Charity – Martha Rosler

“…which political battles have been fought and won by someone for someone else?”


Martha Rosler believed that the social conscience of well-meaning photographers such as Lewis Hine was not helping the social situation because it reinforced the gap between rich and poor. She argued that the need for the poor to rely on the rich for sustenance and social change is not beneficial in the long term and that it’s simply a way of reinforcing hierarchical structures imposed by capitalism.

2. Compassion fatigue – Susan Sontag

“In these last decades ‘concerned’ photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.”

(Sontag, 1979, p.21)

Sontag argued that bombarding the public with sensationalist photographs of war and poverty was a certain way to numb the public’s response. She believed that the more distressing images people saw, the more immune they became to their impact; viewers became reduced to inaction, either through guilt or a dismissive lethargy towards making a difference.

Sontag reversed this view in Regarding the Pain of Others (2004), but ‘compassion fatigue’ is still used as an argument against war imagery today.
3. Inside/Out – Abigail Solomon-Godeau

In her 1994 essay ‘Inside/out’, Solomon-Godeau argues against a binary insider/outsider approach to documentary photography: either voyeuristic and objective on the one hand or subjective and ‘confessional’ on the other. A way forward would be to avoid both these positions and produce work which provides a distanced look at the subject as well as offering some sort of ‘truth’, which may not be the truth. She offers Robert Frank’s *The Americans* and Ed Ruscha’s work as good examples. She also believed that Martha Rosler’s way of depicting the Bowery was shifting the debate from an inside/outside one and into the realm of representation, which she saw as stemming from art photography.

This essay is quite hard to find, but you can read a summary/discussion of it in *La Grange*, 2005, Chapter 6 (p.125). This volume also contains a summary of the first part of Martha Rosler’s essay (Chapter 5, p.113).

*Research point*

If you’re interested in the critical debates around photojournalism, try and make time to find out more about at least one of these critical positions during your work on Part One. Here are some questions to start you off:

- Do you think Martha Rosler is unfair on socially driven photographers like Lewis Hine? Is there a sense in which work like this is exploitative or patronising? Does this matter if someone benefits in the long run? Can photography change situations?
- Do you think images of war are necessary to provoke change? Do you agree with Sontag’s earlier view that horrific images of war numb viewers’ responses? Read your answer again when you’ve read the next section on aftermath photography and note whether your view has changed. See also: [http://lightbox.time.com/2014/01/28/when-photographs-of-atrocities-dont-shock/#1](http://lightbox.time.com/2014/01/28/when-photographs-of-atrocities-dont-shock/#1) [accessed 24/02/14]
- Do you need to be an insider in order to produce a successful documentary project?
Aftermath and aesthetics

Recent years have seen a shift from an action-based and highly visceral kind of war photography towards ‘aftermath’ photography – quiet, contemplative, often large-scale and aesthetically beautiful images of places of devastation. In fact this approach is reminiscent of the work of one of the earliest war photographers, Roger Fenton, who photographed battle scenes with dead bodies and took portraits of soldiers in quieter moments. Contemporary versions of this form are usually devoid of people and engender a pensive mindset in the viewer.

In his 2003 essay ‘Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on the problem of ‘late photography”, David Campany sets out his concerns about the ability of aftermath (or ‘late’) photography to convey the complexity of political events. In particular he considers Joel Meyerowitz, the official photographer selected to photograph scenes after 9/11, whose work he considers too safe and beautiful and therefore not fitting for depicting the horrific scenes of terrorism.

Roger Fenton, Major General Robert Garrett and Officers of his Staff, from an album of 52 photographs associated with the Crimean War
Campany argues that these large-scale contemplative works become a monument to national grief that deadens the desire to seek a political explanation:

“Certainly the late photograph is often used as a vehicle for mass mourning or working through … The danger is that it can also foster an indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as concern. Mourning by association becomes merely an aestheticized response.”

Campany’s essay is easy to follow and worth a read. You’ll find it online at: http://davidcampany.com/safety-in-numbness/ [accessed 24/02/14]

In combining the horror of the situation and the aesthetic pull of the image, the 9/11 ‘falling man’, like Migrant Mother, came to sum up a whole epoch.

In 2002 Paul Seawright was commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to make a series of images of the war in Afghanistan. He adopted an aftermath approach: devoid of action, a lingering threat lurks behind the stillness of these images. The title Hidden also directs us to an invisible danger.
Although not in the context of war, Edgar Martins pushed the boundaries of aftermath or late photography when he produced a photo essay for the New York Times of the house price crash in America, *Ruins of the Second Gilded Age* (2009). Martins went to abandoned and often half-finished housing projects to photograph them with a large format camera. The quiet images were symbolic of the collapse of the housing market and the aftermath approach emphasised the lack of movement in economic recovery. This work also became the subject of a heightened debate surrounding digital manipulation. (You’ll return to this later in Part One.)
The term ‘documentary’ has come to cover a variety of genres (news, journalism, art). ‘Reportage’ has an equally ambiguous definition within the wider documentary arena. While some news coverage may be done in a reportage manner (on the ground, close to the action), generally speaking reportage is more closely related to a subjective way of storytelling than the more objective intentions of photojournalism. In reportage what is implied is a story from the point of view of one person, showing expression and movement, as though one is experiencing the story for oneself. This is in contrast to a more distanced style, often described as cold, which lends itself better to typology and other categorical and informative uses of the medium. (See Eugene Atget’s frontal views of Parisian buildings and their inhabitants.)

The ‘decisive moment’, Henri Cartier-Bresson’s famous phrase, fits well in the context of reportage. The decisive moment is not simply the right moment caught by the photographer that makes a good picture, although that could be part of it; it’s the ability of one picture to tell a bigger story about an event or issue. It’s about all the components coming together within one frame to speak of something beyond the frame.

In the image above, Bresson photographs a Belgian Gestapo informer being revealed to the crowd before she could hide among them. The elements of the picture, the reversed roles it reveals, and the anger in the accuser’s face, have become symbolic of the Allied victory in Europe in 1945. This is a decisive moment, when the press of a button tells a much wider story in an instant.
Nan Goldin (b.1953) is an example of a very personal and subjective use of reportage photography. Depicting her personal friendship circles in very intimate settings (including scenes with sex, alcohol and drugs), Goldin portrays herself as an insider within this group and therefore shows us an experience of life through a reportage or snapshot style, albeit a very well developed aesthetic one.

**Colour and the street**

Street photography began life in black and white, in an age when colour photography was deemed unrealistic because it carried connotations of advertising. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Eve Arnold, Robert Frank and Walker Evans, amongst many others, paved the way for reportage to be used in an artistic way, with no functional purpose other than to tell viewers about life from the point of view of the photographer. As colour photography began to be accepted as an art form in the late twentieth century, street photography followed suit.

**Research point**

Do some research into contemporary street photography. Helen Levitt, Joel Meyerowitz, Paul Graham, Joel Sternfeld and Martin Parr are some good names to start with, but you may be able to find further examples for yourself.

- What difference does colour make to a genre that traditionally was predominantly black and white?
- Can you spot the shift away from the influence of surrealism (as in Cartier-Bresson’s work)?
- How is irony used to comment on British-ness or American values?

Make notes in your learning log.
Exercise

Find a street that particularly interests you – it may be local or further afield. Shoot 30 colour images and 30 black and white images in a street photography style.

In your learning log, comment on the differences between the two formats.

What difference does colour make? Which set do you prefer and why?
A brief review of some major exhibitions that happened in New York and London between 1967 and 2008 demonstrates not only how photography was changing, both in how it was made and how it was presented to the public, but also how notions about ‘documentary photography’ shifted during the same period.

In 1967 John Szarkowski curated the show *New Documents* at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). His aim was to demonstrate a new kind of documentary photography in America and he selected Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand to make his point. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, general opinion had regarded all photographs as documents. After photography began to be accepted as art, Szarkowski saw the need to differentiate.

The press release from MoMA in 1967 said:

“In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it.”

In 1978, also at MoMA, Szarkowski curated the exhibition *Mirrors and Windows* with the aim of providing a critically balanced view of the development of art photography in America over the previous two decades. Within ten years MoMA had expanded its understanding of photography, seeing it as moving out of the realm of documents and into art.

The UK finally caught up with America in 2003 when Tate Modern put on its first exhibition devoted to photography. *Cruel and Tender* was the first of its kind in Britain and examined photography’s relationship with realism. Artists such as August Sander and Lewis Baltz were shown alongside Philip-Lorca DiCorcia and William Eggleston to demonstrate the diverse nature of photography and its relationship with truth. Accepted notions of photography as a factual recording device were challenged, allowing photography to enter into the currency of ‘art’.
The Tate’s fourth exhibition dedicated to photography, *Street and Studio* (2008), amongst other things questioned perceived notions of candid moments or real events (traditionally linked with the street) and staged moments or made-up events (traditionally linked with the studio) and how such distinctions were becoming blurred. In interrogating preconceived notions of what is real (candid street photography) and not real (staged imagery), this exhibition assumed that photography was an art form and was no longer trying to convince us of the case. We had moved on and the myth of ‘the camera never lies’ was debunked.

The two Tate shows reveal a dramatic shift in thinking about photography in the UK over a short period of time. Photography was now recognised as an art form in its own right. Candid photography was no longer viewed as a ‘real moment’ but instead was beginning to be seen as a ‘representation’ of a real moment. Within five years, distinctions between what was real and what was not had become blurred. Staged events were happening on the street and candid moments were being captured in the studio. As styles changed, so did the understanding of what ‘real’ meant in relation to photography. As a result, photography was seen less as a record of reality and more as an expression of it and this change in perception was being presented to the public at last.

**Research point**

Look online at Paul Seawright’s work, *Sectarian Murders*.

- How does this work challenge the boundaries between documentary and art? Listen to Paul Seawright talk about his work at: [http://vimeo.com/76940827](http://vimeo.com/76940827) [accessed 24/02/14]
- What is the core of his argument? Do you agree with him?
- If we define a piece of documentary photography as art, does this change its meaning?
On first seeing Sarah Pickering’s series *Public Order* what we appear to be looking at are eerily empty houses and streets, perhaps photographed early in the morning or with an element of post-production applied to remove signs of life. Either way, we’re left feeling uncomfortable and even unsafe; destruction and danger seem to lurk there.

The uncanniness increases as we look closer. Constructs and façades emerge and things are suddenly not as they seem. Why are all the windows boarded up? Why is there so much debris? What has happened? We start to form our own narrative, based on news reports, past experiences, hearsay...

Pickering photographed police training grounds – towns set up with the sole purpose of practising for real-life emergencies. Now the mask is lifted the series makes more sense; we’re released from our unease and able to share the enjoyment of the work, safe in the knowledge that it’s a controlled environment. However what this clever piece of art documentary does is drip-feed scenarios into our subconscious. Why do these places exist? What do they do there? What else don’t we know about? It becomes disconcerting all over again but in a very different way. By using a visual strategy that makes us question and probe the work, Pickering enables us to challenge society norms that we take for granted or wouldn’t otherwise think about.
Exercise

Look at some more images from this series on the artist’s website.

• How do Pickering’s images make you feel?
• Is *Public Order* an effective use of documentary or is it misleading?

Make some notes in your learning log.
Alessandra Sanguinetti is a Magnum photographer. In her imaginative series *The Adventures of Guille and Belinda and the Enigmatic Meaning of their Dreams*, she documents the lives of two young girls growing up, their relationship as sisters and their lifestyle in South America. However a more complicated layer is added to this work as Sanguinetti portrays and interprets the girls’ imaginative play and dreams into visual depictions of fantasy. In one sense, it’s a documentary project as it follows the lives of these girls over a period of time, giving us insight into a different way of life. On another level, it fits within the realms of fiction and fantasy, and is perhaps more at home in an art gallery with no fixed meaning attached. The strength of this work lies in its ambiguity. By refusing to lead the viewer to which images are ‘real’ and which are not, the work itself becomes part of a wider spectrum using a documentary approach to encompass ideas of art and recording.

Both these examples show how documentary-style photography can be used to challenge what is real. Instead of claiming to give objective points of view, these photographers have used an objective style of photography to make a point about creating fictional, constructed and ultimately subjective realities.
With the increase in technological advances, including post-production software which enables relatively easy cloning or other adaptation methods, there’s now a debate about the degree to which manipulation is acceptable. This debate is not a new one, as you’ll see.

One of the first photographs ever taken was a staging of the photographer’s own death. Hippolyte Bayard (1801–87) had invented a photographic direct positive process before Daguerre and Fox Talbot (the men usually accredited with inventing photography) but hadn’t got any recognition for it. In an ironic reaction to the sense of injustice he felt, Bayard took a photograph of himself as a drowned man.
This was the text written on the back:

*The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you. As far as I know this indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with his discovery. The Government which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself. Oh the vagaries of human life....! ... He has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay.*

Across the Channel, Victorians were fascinated by spirit photography. Photographers would make money from unsuspecting clients by charging above the odds for a portrait with a deceased family member’s image appearing on the print. Of course the photographers knew certain techniques of blending negatives and double exposure and to a modern eye it seems unbelievable that people were taken in by this phenomenon.

The ghost of a man’s wife appears before him, c.1870

Ada Deane, Spirit photograph taken of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1922
The Cottingley Fairies, 1917, was part of a set of five pictures taken by two teenage girls, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, who claimed they played with and took photos of fairies in their garden. The press got hold of their story and it became a subject for debate for decades to come. Remarkably it wasn’t until the 1970s that the hoax was confirmed.
Oscar Gustav Rejlander (1813–75) became known as the father of art photography and a master of photomontage. His work *Two Ways of Life* was constructed using over 30 separate negatives and depicts the life of a sinner versus the life of a saint in one highly elaborate tableau.

**Exercise**

Instead of using double exposures or printing from double negatives we now have the technology available to us to make these changes in post-production, allowing for quite astonishing results.

Use digital software such as Photoshop to create a composite image which visually appears to be a documentary photograph but which could never actually be.

To make a composite image you need to consider your idea and make the required amount of images to join together.

Upload the images and decide which image you’ll use as your main image and background. Use the magic wand to select sections of image from the others you wish to move into your background image. Copy via layer and drag into the background. Do this repeatedly until you have all the pieces of your puzzle in place. In order to make it more convincing, use the erase tool on each layer to keep the edges soft and to create a better illusion. Be aware of perspective and light and shadows for the most effective results.
Technological manipulation may not be solely a modern phenomenon, but that doesn’t help us with where to draw the line. And modern use of digital manipulation doesn’t necessarily equate to a ‘lie’. In fact some artists have used it to illuminate a subject or add a different point of view.

In her Young Musicians series, Wendy McMurdo photographed children playing instruments and computer games but digitally removed the instruments and computers in post-production. This forces the viewer to look at the psychological state of the child. The subjects seem emotionally heightened and almost trance-like in appearance and the point about the impact of technology and music is strongly made.

Wendy McMurdo, Solo Violinist, St Mary’s School, Edinburgh (Young Musicians series), 1998. Reproduced by permission of the artist.
We hope that Part One has demonstrated to you that each photograph is a ‘point of view’ that depends on the time it was taken, the person who took it (no matter how objective they try to be) and the things outside the frame, unknown to the viewer, which may add or take away from what’s revealed in the frame. In this sense every photograph, regardless of its visual accuracy, is a manipulation of reality. A photograph cannot tell the whole story and is therefore part of a wider narrative. This is an important point that is often overlooked in the dissemination of news and facts in media and popular culture. Although photography has played an important role in providing information, for example in photojournalism and historical archives, we must take its context into consideration in order to fully understand the whole story.

Now that you’ve reached the end of Part One, reflect on what you’ve learned in your learning log or blog.

- What was your idea of documentary photography before you worked on Part One? How would you now sum it up?
- What are the differences between documentary, reportage, photojournalism and art photography?
Assignment one

Two sides of the story

This assignment is designed to give your tutor a feel for your work and won’t count towards your final grade if you decide to have your work assessed. However, the assessors may wish to see it so that they can gauge your progress across the course.

Create at least two sets of photographs telling different versions of the same story. The aim of the assignment is to help you explore the convincing nature of documentary, even though what the viewer thinks they see may not in fact be true. Try to make both sets equally convincing so that it’s impossible to tell which version of the images is ‘true’.

It might be interesting to consider the project as evidence for a court case. What conflicting stories can you make your images convincingly tell? Would it stand up in court?

Choose a theme and aim for 5–7 images for each set, depending on your idea. Discuss this with your tutor.

Here are a few ideas:

• You could interpret this brief by showing the same scenario from two different angles. Does this alter how we read the situation?

• You may wish to create an alter ego by using snapshots of yourself or a friend. This could involve photographing them in two very different and potentially conflicting personas.

• You could make a parody of a dating website profile picture. Create different versions of the same person looking completely different in each one. Which one represents them best and how can we know?

Or you may prefer to use your own take on the theme. However you choose to interpret the brief, ensure the images are candid and ‘taken from real life’. Be experimental and take some risks. Perhaps you could make a list of ideas and choose the most challenging or absurd option to stretch yourself.

Send your sets of images to your tutor by the method you’ve agreed. Include an introduction of 300 words outlining what you set out to do and how you went about it. Also send to your tutor the relevant pages of your learning log or your blog url.

It’s good to get in the habit of printing your work so try to send prints to your tutor where possible. This is not obligatory but will help when it comes to assessment. Developing your prints in order to achieve the best results is a long process so it’s best to start now.
Reflection

Before you send your work to your tutor, check it against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course and make sure that it meets all the criteria. Make your evaluation available to your tutor.

Your tutor may take a while to get back to you. Carry on with the course while you’re waiting but please don’t attempt the next assignment until you’ve received your tutor’s feedback on this one.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you plan to submit your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you’ve done and why in your learning log.