

VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY

Parsons School of Design
PUPH 4061 A 5406
Thursday 9:00-11:40
Room 1111, Building L

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Office Hours: by appointment (flexible)

Description:

This class focuses on the photography of everyday life – vernacular images, like family albums and snapshots - and aims towards an understanding of the way they function, and how they contribute to the construction of ideas about identity, history and family. The strength of vernacular images lies in the desire and nostalgia they evoke, and their ability to both describe and prescribe family life, social place, and personal identity.

The conceptual basis of the course rests on the idea that the photograph is a powerful communicative tool which presents a subjective message. Photographs direct us, they persuade and convince, without our even noticing. While this class will include a discussion of the mechanisms at work in photographic representation, as presented in contemporary academic texts and artists' projects, and within the framework of current theoretical discourse, it will also insist on an acknowledgment of desire in representation.

Students will develop an understanding of their own work in relationship to the issues raised in class. The projects will be open-ended, and integration with a previously established interest and/or practice will be encouraged. The research paper will relate to discussions and readings, with an emphasis on new directions of scholarship.

Course Outline:

Topics – the history of photography, vernacular photographs, family albums, forensic images, alternative vernacular strategies, home movies, artists using vernacular photos, the politics of collection and display.

Activities - lecture, discussion of conceptual issues, and critique.

Assignments - photography projects, readings, reading summaries, a five page essay.

Course Objectives:

Things you should have an understanding of when you complete this course:

The definition and relevance of vernacular photography, the complex and contested nature of the photographic medium, the issues and theories surrounding different types of everyday imagery, and the correct format for a research paper.

Required Reading:

All readings will be distributed in class and are also on reserve at Gimbel Library, 2nd floor, Building L. See below for specific titles.

Grading:

Evaluation and grading will be based on:

Attendance (15%), participation in class discussions and critiques (5%), completion of readings and summaries (20%), a five page research paper (including a rough draft and proposal) (20%), and a photo based final project (including a proposal) (40%).

Students are expected to attend classes regularly and promptly. Faculty members are expected to fail any student who is absent for a significant portion of class time – defined as three absences for classes that meet once a week.

For further information on Parsons School of Design Academic and Attendance Policies, please refer to the Student Handbook.

Class Schedule

1/27 Introduction: Defining the term “vernacular”

Readings (due for the next class):

*You are required to write a brief summary (one paragraph) of each article for every reading assignment throughout the course, to be handed in the day the readings are due. As we will discuss the readings in class, please also prepare a few written questions to facilitate this discussion.

Batchen, Geoffrey. “Vernacular Photographs.” *Each Wild Idea*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

Tagg, John. “The Democracy of the Image.” *The Burden Of Representation*. (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1988).

Assignments:

Throughout the course, each lecture will be followed by a short critique of work in progress. Bring in what you have been working on to get feedback for your project. Some class days are designated as critique only, with no lecture – these will be more in depth discussions. The end of the class will close with four formal critiques – of which each student will show work in two (and will be expected to be present and participate in all).

2/3 An Absence in the History of Photography

Readings:

Berger, John and Mohr, Jean. “The Ambiguity of the Photograph.” *Another Way Of Telling*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

Burgin, Victor. “Looking at Photographs.” *Thinking Photography*. (London: The MacMillan Press, 1982).

Assignment: Bring work in progress to the next class for critique.

2/10 The Photographic Medium: The Threat and Promise

Examining the complexities and contradictions of photography

Readings:

Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Mavor, Carol. *Becoming*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

2/17 Family Dynamics: Your Life in Pictures

Snapshots, portraiture, and tourist images in the family album

Assignments: Bring work in progress to the next class for critique.

Proposal for final project due - to be discussed in next class and turned in.

2/24 Critique

*Proposal for final project due

Readings:

Sekula, Alan. “The Body as Archive.” *The Contest of Meaning*. Ed. Richard Bolton. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).

Phillips, Sandra S., Squiers, Carol, Haworth-Booth, Mark. *Police Pictures: The Photograph As Evidence*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997).

Assignment: Proposal for research paper due – to be discussed and turned in.

- 3/3** Law and Order: Photography as Truth
Forensic, medical and insurance photography
*Proposal for research paper due
Readings:
Scott, James C. From "Weapons of the Weak." *The Cultural Resistance Reader*. Stephen Duncombe, ed. (New York: Verso, 2002).
Kelley, Robin D.G. From "Race Rebels." *The Cultural Resistance Reader*. Stephen Duncombe, ed. (New York: Verso, 2002).
- 3/10** The Kids are All Right
Vernacular strategies in photography, literature, publishing, and presentation
Assignment: TBA
- 3/17** Home Movie Night: Vernacular Film
Guest Lecturer: Kelli Hicks
- 3/24** Spring Break
- 3/31** The Everyday as Art
Artists working with vernacular photography
Assignment: Bring rough draft of essay to next class
Bring work in progress to the next class for critique.
- 4/7** Critique
*Rough draft of essay due
Readings:
Nickel, Douglas. *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life 1888 to the Present*. (San Francisco: The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
Close To Home, a handout accompanying a show of the same title at The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA, 10/04-16/05.
- 4/14** Collection and Display
The institutionalization and commodification of vernacular images
Sign up for critique schedule
Assignment: Bring work in progress to the critique day you signed up for.
- 4/21** Review Week
Assignment: Bring final draft of essay to next class.
Bring work in progress to the next class.
- 4/28** Critique
*Final draft of essay due
Assignment: Final project due on the critique day you signed up for.
- 5/5** Final Critique I
- 5/12** Final Critique II

Selected Projects/Bibliography:

- A New History of Photography*. Michel Frizot, ed. (Köln: Könemann Verlagsgeellschaft mbH, 1998).
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997).
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Each Wild Idea*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance*. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).
- Berger, John and Mohr, Jean. *Another Way Of Telling*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).
- Boltanski, Christian. *Sans Souci*. (New York: D.A.P., 1992).
- Buchloh, Benjamin H. D.; Wilkie, Robert, Eds. *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948-1968*. (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1997).
- Burgin, Victor. *Thinking Photography*. (London: The MacMillan Press, 1982).
- Close to Home: An American Album*. The J. Paul Getty Museum. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004).
- Cometbus, Aaron. *Cometbus*. (Self-published).
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. (New York: Routledge, 1966).
- Fee, James. *The Peleliu Project*. (Philadelphia: Seraphin Gallery, 2002).
- Goldberg, Jim. In *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*. (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1996).
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- Hines, Babbette. *Photobooth*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002).
- Lartigue: An Album of a Century*. Martine D'Astier, Quentin Bajac and Alain Sayag, eds. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003)
- Mandell, Mike; Sultan, Larry. *Evidence*. (New York: D.A.P., 2003).
- Mann, Sally. *Immediate Family*. (New York: Aperture, 1992).
- Mavor, Carol. *Becoming*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
- McClintock Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- Moosang, Faith. *First Son: Portraits by C. D. Hoy*. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1999).
- Newhall, Beaumont. *The History of Photography*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982).
- Nickel, Douglas. "The History of Photography: The State of Research." *The Art Bulletin*. v. 83 no. 3. (September 2001).
- Nickel, Douglas. *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life 1888 to the Present*. (San Francisco: The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
- Phillips, Sandra S., Squiers, Carol, Haworth-Booth, Mark. *Police Pictures: The Photograph As Evidence*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997).
- Robideau, Henri. *Flapjacks and Photographs: A History of Matti Gunterman, Camp Cook and Photographer*. (Vancouver: Polstar Book Publishers, 1995).
- Rothbart, Davy; et. al. *Found Magazine*. (Self-published).
- Taft, Robert. *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1942).
- Tagg, John. *The Burden Of Representation*. (Minneapolis: The U of Minneapolis Press, 1988).
- The Contest of Meaning*. Ed. Richard Bolton. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).
- The Cultural Resistance Reader*. Stephen Duncombe, ed. (New York: Verso, 2002).
- Van Manen, Bertien. *Give Me Your Image*. 2002-05.
- Zines*. (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001).