Digital Documentary Photography FA 18A-1 (10758)
Fall 2015, Tuesdays, 2:00pm – 4:50, 5:00 – 5:50
Prof. Pablo Delano
pdelano@brandeis.edu

Class meeting days

September 1, 8, 22,
October 6, 13, 20, 27
November 3, 10, 17, 24
December 1, 8

Introduction and Basics

This course is an introduction to digital photography as a means of documentation and personal expression. We will concentrate on using the photographic process to articulate our thoughts and ideas about the world around us. Initial assignments are designed to help you understand photographic technique especially as it pertains to the use of our primary tool, the digital camera. After acquiring a working knowledge of the camera and of post-processing, we will work on projects geared towards visual story telling or documentary work. The emphasis of this course is on formulating images, but we will also touch on various options for producing digital prints.

Prerequisites

There are no course prerequisites for this class. Some familiarity with photographic technique is helpful, but not mandatory. However, it is important to understand that the class focuses specifically on the practice of documentary photography and visual narrative as opposed to other sorts of photography. If you are not familiar with documentary photography, please research the topic before enrolling in the class. From the start, you should have ideas about what subject you feel compelled to document. This class is not a general introduction to digital photography; it is geared towards students who are specifically interested in documentary work. You will be expected to carry out projects that are documentary in nature.

Looking Outward

We start from the premise that the world is full of interesting things and that the process of photography will help us investigate those aspects of the world that interest us most. Hence, we will first work towards honing our ability to see critically and understand the visual language of photography. But the main thrust of the class is encapsulated in this quote from photographer Paul Strand:

I've always wanted to be aware of what's going on around me, and I've wanted to use photography as an instrument of research into and reporting on the life of my own time.
This process may take us out of our comfort zones, as we explore, discover, and challenge ourselves through the lens of the camera. You are encouraged to explore the issues you care about most deeply, and to use photography to share and communicate those concerns.

*It is expected that you will seek out subjects outside and beyond your immediate surroundings.* For example, the town of Waltham offers many possibilities. I will help you formulate the theme of your final documentary project based on your preliminary research and my own experience as a documentary photographer. Some project examples might include exploring a particular aspect of Waltham's Latino community (religious life, food, cultural expression) or of the Ugandan community. Or, you might carry out a project that examines the physical remnants of Waltham’s industrial past, its architecture, or built environment. Or, the city’s relationship to the river and environmental concerns related to that relationship. We will discuss in class the ethical issues that may be raised in the practice of documentary photography and photojournalism, and any ethical issues raised by specific proposed student projects.

**Equipment Required**

- Digital SLR camera, or “mirrorless” camera with viewfinder and manual controls, plus instruction manual or third party book about your specific camera
- Memory card
- Lens cleaning blower and tissue
- Portable External hard disk, usb powered.

**Equipment – Optional but helpful**

- Card reader, extra memory cards, extra camera battery

**What Happens During Class**

1. Discussion of your work. Each week, we will all share our assignments with the rest of the class. Each student will present their work informally and respond to constructive criticism from the other students and from me.
2. Learning about photographic technique, theory, ethical issues via demonstrations, lectures and discussions.
3. Learning about the history of photography, specifically documentary photography, and looking at the work of important documentary photographers.
4. In-class work sessions: editing and post-processing, occasionally team exercises.

**Class Work**

Work for this class will consist primarily of weekly assignments. The first set of assignments is geared to familiarize you with the tool set used in digital photography, and
with the visual vocabulary of photography. The second set of assignments will all be related to a documentary topic of your choosing. I will guide you as you identify a subject and produce a documentary photo series about that subject. You will show new photos in class every week.

After the initial investment in equipment, taking digital photographs does not incur any cost. Therefore, you will be free to experiment and photograph as much as you like. However, this freedom may also encourage you to photograph in a more frivolous manner, with less concentration. We will discuss workflow in class but generally you will be required to:

1. **SHOOT** many images per week, at least several hundred, as you try different approaches to the week's assignment.
2. **EDIT** those images down to 15 - 25.
3. **POST-PROCESS** those images in Photoshop. Do not work on original files. Always work on a copy of the file and keep backups of all original files.
4. **PREPARE** the images for presentation in class by saving in jpg format and copying them to an external hard disk.

Guidelines to remember:

1. Do not delete any images from your original shooting session except for those that you actually delete while shooting.
2. Keep backups of all your image files. You are responsible for your images. If you experience a technical failure of your computer or any external storage device you are expected to have a backup. *Losing your work due to technical failure will be considered the same as not having done the work.* We will discuss backup strategies, including Brandeis Box, in class!
3. Have all your image files from the whole semester available in class. Bring your camera, with charged battery to every class.

**Weekly Assignments**

On our first day of class, we will discuss the trajectory of our specific weekly assignments. I will not provide a list in advance because we need to leave room for integrating our classroom discussions into the next week’s work. However, the work flow is described above.

**Readings and Self-guided Exploration / Research**

In addition to the assignments described above, there will be small readings or research about specific photographers or about photography techniques and methods. These will be assigned in response to the work you produce so as to be most relevant. I also expect that, as someone interested in photography, you will engage the topic on an informal basis and look at books, magazines and websites related to photography without specifically being assigned to so. It’s expected that you will learn from this independent exploration and
demonstrate this knowledge in class discussions – this is a graded component of the course (see grading criteria).

I expect you to take advantage of Brandeis’ membership in Lynda.com and to familiarize yourself with their excellent Photoshop tutorial videos available online

**Connecting to Global Photographic Practice**

While the focus of the class is on MAKING photographs, images that are relevant or meaningful in today’s world cannot be formulated in a vacuum. Therefore, at a date to be determined around the middle of the semester students will prepare a PowerPoint presentation for class in which they share the work of accomplished photographers from the past or present whose work they find especially provocative or relevant to their own trajectory as photographers.

**Final Portfolio**

The final portfolio will take the form of a slide show on Flickr. Each of you is required to create a Flickr account and learn how to use it. Flickr is a web-based photo sharing application. If you don’t want your Flickr to be public, there are various levels of privacy you can specify. You also have the option to produce a self published book on the Blurb platform. Ask me about this.

**Grading and Attendance**

You need to arrive in class on time. Habitual lateness will lower your grade.

You cannot pass the course if you have more than two absences (for any reason). If you have a documented medical or personal emergency we can meet with university authorities to discuss the matter. If you need to miss a class for any reason, or if you know you will be late, please e-mail me. “Excused” absences include only those covered in Brandeis policy about academic coursework and religious observance.

To pass the class, you need to do all the assignments. However neither doing all the assignments, attending every class, nor working very hard will guarantee passing or getting a good grade. Assignments will be judged according to the following criteria:

1. Does your work meet the specific goal of the assignment; does it solve the visual problem that was assigned? Did you go off campus to photograph? Is the work documentary in nature?
2. Is your work of good technical quality and is there enough of it?
3. Do you have the assignment ready to present to the class on the day it is due?

Grades will be assigned according to the following factors:
60% - Quality of work as described in the above criteria.

20% - Class attendance, the quality of your participation and your demonstrated knowledge of photography gained from outside reading and research.

10% - Mid-term technical quiz.

10% - End of semester photographers quiz

Communication

At any point during the semester, please do not hesitate to ask me about your progress in the class. Also, if you are doing poorly or in danger of failing, I will send you a mid-term progress report. I am happy to meet with you outside of class – please e-mail me for an appointment. My office hours are Wednesday mornings. If you need to miss a class for any reason, or if you know you will be late, please e-mail me.

Disabilities

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to be familiar with, and to follow, the University’s policies on academic integrity. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures. All policies related to academic integrity apply to in-class and take home projects, assignments, exams, and quizzes. Students may only collaborate on assignments with permission from the instructor. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university.

Privacy:

This class requires the use of Flickr, a website that may disclose your coursework and identity to parties outside the class. To protect your privacy you may choose to use a pseudonym/alias rather than your name in submitting such work. You must share the pseudonym/alias with me and any teaching assistants as needed. Alternatively, with prior consultation, you may submit such work directly to me. You may also set your Flickr account to “Private” and generate a Flickr guest pass, which you would then share with me.

Time Commitment

Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of work time per week in preparation for class.