

## about the cover

Doug and Mike Starn, *Ganjin*, 2000-05, toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 264 x 264 inches, © 2007 Doug and Mike Starn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



## exposure

The Journal of The Society for Photographic Education

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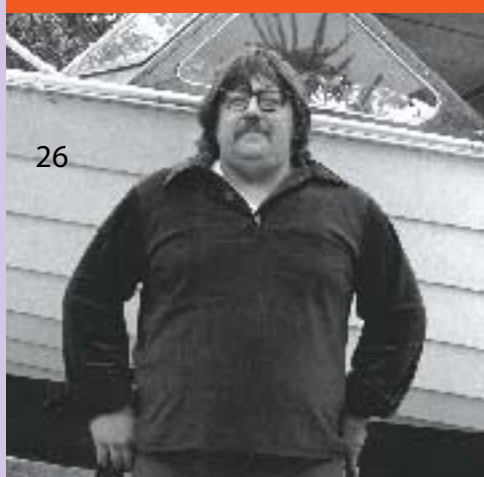
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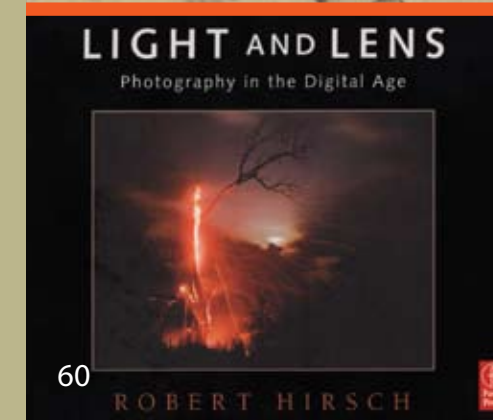
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ROBERT HIRSCH

# Photography & Writing A Pedagogy of Seeing

Janet Zandy

“It is almost as unusual to pass a day without seeing a photograph as it is to miss seeing writing.” —Victor Burgin

Photography and Writing is a balancing act of a course. It navigates the interrelationship between seeing and writing as it explores questions about the cultural work of photographs. An offering within the required general education category of “Arts of Expression” at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), Photography and Writing is a ten-week course designed for undergraduates and non-majors. Although I encourage photo students to leave their intense and often insular worlds of fine art, advertising, photojournalism, or biomedical photography and take music or film or literature to satisfy this requirement, they resist the unfamiliar. And so the photo students tend to outnumber engineers and other majors in the class, whose minority perspective can usefully trouble easy assumptions about photographs. **While many students have a familiarity with the history of photography and some have definite opinions about what constitutes art and what doesn’t, they are not, necessarily, strong writers, nor have they thought deeply enough about how photographs work in the world and about the worlds inside photographs.**

This course requires students to complicate the act of looking by writing about photographs. It has a discernable narrative, a beginning, middle, and end, and is designed to take students from the quick consumption of images into a deeper self and cultural consciousness, a more acute visual intelligence. While students may initially perceive the course as writing about a string of photographs that they may or may not find interesting, they soon become



Figure 1, Above: *Photographer Unknown*, Tintype of 2 textile workers (male & female), ca. 1880, held and owned by American Textile History Museum, Lowell, MA 01854

aware that something else is underfoot, some more complicated and challenging intellectual frame. That frame is a dialectical mode of operation, a modest antidote to the compartmentalization of institutionalized knowledge. The course builds, conceptually and structurally, on a dynamic relationship between parts to the whole, a visual, historical, and aesthetic relationality.

Writing is the lynchpin of the course. Five assignments and nearly daily, in-class written responses signal to students how writing is integral to the process of interpreting and understanding photographs. Students begin with an accessible assignment—a written response to a photograph of themselves where they comment on why they chose this particular photograph and what it conceals and reveals about them. These have ranged from carefully-shot staged self-portraits to baby snapshots to college IDs. This simple exercise begins a conversation about what lies outside the frame, about absences and presences in any image, and about the meanings of snapshots in relation to changing technology.

The next assignment moves students from the personal to the public through an analysis of iconic images. Students choose and make a case for a photograph’s iconicity, why it is easily identifiable and reproducible. Here we explore some of the space between the original context of an image and its circulation in popular culture. Students probe the currency of an image, how it may reinforce or undermine dominant ideologies. Twenty-first century high-tech students still find meaning in “The Times Square Kiss,” the 1969 moonwalk, and that ubiquitous beret and star on the handsome, endlessly reproduced image of Che Guevara, although the revolutionary politics of the original may have slipped away.

The following assignment explores the complexity of documentary and representational work. Students read Ken Light’s excellent collection, *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers*. Light includes photographs, personal reflections, and first-person interviews with eighteen photographers who have practiced or currently practice documentary photography. Most students appreciate the ethos of engaged photography and almost all welcome photographers’ own commentary about their process of shaping a body of work. This collection raises critical questions about the necessary relationships between photographers and their subjects, about audience and the distribution of images, and about discerning differences between witnessing and appropriating. Students gravitate toward the domestic violence images of Donna Ferrato; the drug culture photographs of Eugene Richards; or the arresting, epic images of Sebastião Salgado. Only a rare few will focus on representations of labor in the work of Hansel Mieth or Earl Dotter.

As part of the dialectic of seeing and not seeing, the ubiquitous and the hidden, students’ next assignment involves presenting an

image of *unseen* America. This could be one of their own photographs or based on the assigned book, *Unseen America: Photos and Stories by Workers*, edited by Esther Cohen. This book foregrounds a rarely identified aspect of cultural agency—how labor unions have advanced human creativity, presently and historically. Cohen is the executive director of Bread and Roses, the cultural wing of local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union. “Unseen America” projects place cameras in the hands of ordinary working people who, with some training from professional photographers, take photographs of their worlds of work, leisure, community, family, and varieties of cultural expression important to them. Despite my concern that RIT students might dismiss these grainy, direct images from and about people whose material circumstances may be far different from their own, the book and assignment have been remarkably evocative—and the writing more fluid and coherent. It is a turning point in the course where vague concepts of subject and object, agency and appropriation coalesce in thoughtful papers.

For their culminating paper students are free to shape their own projects. These have included: a focus on a single photographer, an analysis of photographs appearing on the front page of *The New York Times*, an oral history about family snapshots, a comparative reading of the work of a poet and a photographer, commentary about new technology shaping photography, and an exploration of the cultural meanings of social networking websites Facebook and mySpace, to name a few. In addition to the readings and written assignments, students view two documentaries, *James Nachtwey: War Photographer* and *Born into Brothels*, and visit RIT’s Cary Library Collection of Artist Books and current exhibits at the International Museum of Photography and Film at George Eastman House.

Those are the bones of the course; its muscle and deeper meaning emerge from the juxtaposition of photographs and students’ responses to them. In nearly every class students view a photograph on a screen. I identify the photographer but provide no context for the image or additional explanation. Students then write brief responses to the following questions:

- What does the photograph depict or literally show?
- What does the photograph tell you about its subject?
- Can you speculate about the intentions of the photographer?
- What is strange about the image?
- What is familiar?
- How do you make sense of what you’re seeing?

After they write their responses, students discuss them in groups and as a class. Following the discussion, I show six to twelve photographs by the same photographer or from the same collection and provide more contextual and biographical information. Students also have short readings accompanying each set of images. As might



What I do bring to the class, and perhaps which is most challenging to convey, is a consciousness of economic and social class in relationship to photographs and the formation of culture.

be expected, students who have had a history and aesthetics course move beyond identification to more analysis and critique. Other students draw on popular culture to make sense of what they're seeing. Most write straightforwardly about what they literally see. In response to Mary Ellen Mark's photograph of Tiny (Seattle, 1983) in a dark dress and veiled hat, many students read it as "a woman in mourning, tightly clinging to her arms." One added,

"She is staring directly into the camera, with a very sad, yet angry look on her face. She appears to be standing alone outside, possibly directly after a funeral. It is a very depressing photograph[...]I personally feel the pain of the image."

It is interesting to note that even though it is actually a photograph of the very young Tiny in a Halloween costume dressed as a French whore, students respond to the mood Mark conveys.

Occasionally, the response is, "I don't know what this is." (The Tina Modotti photograph of a church interior stumped nearly everyone.) Even the most experienced third-year RIT photographers have not seen everything I show, nor have they necessarily thought hard about images in juxtaposition or in pairings as a way of reading history and culture.

The process of selecting photographs places the instructor in the role of visual editor and anthologizer, comparable to the pleasurable and frustrating process of selecting from too many rich and important texts for a literature course. I try to recognize students' occasional suggestions for including certain contemporary

Figure 2, Opposite: Milton Rogovin, Frank Andrzejewski, Jr.: At home with his boat, Working People, Atlas Foundry, 1976-1979, photograph © Milton Rogovin, courtesy The Rogovin Collection

Figure 3, Above: Milton Rogovin, Frank Andrzejewski, Jr.: At work, Working People, Atlas Foundry, 1976-1979, photograph © Milton Rogovin, courtesy The Rogovin Collection

photographers they favor. Rarely do students ask for a canonical photographer nor are they particularly interested in photographers associated with the Photo League or Farm Security Administration (with the exception of Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother”). In a recent course students viewed (in more or less sequential order) photographs by Bernie Boston, Richard Avedon, nineteenth-century occupational tintypes, Milton Rogovin, Mary Ellen Mark, Robert Frank, Robert Capa, Alfred Stieglitz, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Edward Burtynsky, Sabastião Salgado, Tina Modotti, Taryn Simon, David Levinthal, lynching photographs from *Without Sanctuary*, Duane Michals, and Jeffrey Wolin. It’s not an arbitrary list, but rather reflects the relational dialectic of the course. While it is grounded in American culture, it offers a small glimpse into the transnational dimension of contemporary photography. What I do bring to the class, and perhaps which is most challenging to convey, is a consciousness of economic and social class in relationship to photographs and the formation of culture.

This is evident in the first set of juxtaposed images: a nineteenth-century occupational tintype of textile workers, Richard Avedon’s portrait of an oil field worker, and Milton Rogovin’s photograph of a steel worker on the job. (Figs. 1–4) I call this cluster “seeing dirt” and have discovered that students react differently depending on whether I show the Avedon before or after the occupational tintype. They tend to be more dismissive of the tintype if it appears *after* the starkly contrasted black and white Avedon image. Also, unlike the contextual and gritty steel mill photograph where the worker positions him or herself, Avedon’s oil-drenched laborer posed against a sheet of white paper without occupational context is more aesthetically palatable to students, perhaps because they can consume without engagement, unlike the relational demands placed on them by Rogovin’s work. What’s distinctive about the occupational tintype is the value placed on the workers’ tools—loom shuttles, in this case—and where these artifacts are positioned in the photograph. I wonder silently rather than aloud whether students’ reactions reflect their own proximity to manual labor. Regarding the tintype couple, one student wrote, “They want to appear respectable, even though their clothes or occupation may not warrant it.” Many students commented on their unsmiling countenance, noting that they can’t be happy because they are not smiling. Encouraged to “say cheese” as toddlers, students sometimes interpret no smile as a lack of “happiness,” a collapsing of interior well being with exterior smiling brightness. Responses to Avedon’s photography included: “He is empty and not clean.” “It shows that labor is not easy or fun.” “A man covered in some sort of filth.” Regarding Rogovin’s

steelworker, one student wrote, “It’s strange[...]he feels more like a person than a working machine. He has been humanize[d] rather than iconized [sic] like in Avedon’s work.” Someone summed up this sequence of images with, “too many workers!”

In pairing Alfred Stieglitz’s “The Steerage 1907” with Lewis Hine’s “Looking for Lost Luggage, Ellis Island, 1905” nearly all students—whatever their knowledge of the history of photography—drew distinctions between the distance in Stieglitz’s perspective and the relational intimacy in Hine’s portrait. Although students may not know whether the ship is departing or arriving, or immigration statistics at the turn of the century, students recognize the aesthetic framing of Stieglitz’s image, and the mood and atmosphere of Hine’s Ellis Island portraits. These are familiar images from other classes and textbooks, part of students’ visual memory—and a good opportunity to discuss how economic and social class, both the photographer’s and his subject’s, is evidenced in photographs.

An interesting dialectic between the familiar and the shocking emerges by juxtaposing David Levinthal’s “The Wild West” images with selected photographs of lynchings from the collection *Without Sanctuary*. Students quickly discern that Levinthal is staging action figures within a recognizable and implicit narrative. The cowboy is attempting to lasso the white stallion, or as one student writes, “posed to gain control of a wild animal,” the unreal as real. The lynching photographs (some are accompanied by postcards) depict the real as unreal. Many students are unmoored by the photograph of a smiling young girl gazing at the dangling body of a hanged black man above her. Several students commented that “the hanged man must have done something very wrong to deserve his fate” and I have to remind them that lynchings were not about judicial process. **Out of this dialectic of the toy and the real emerges a conversation about photography and power, and the necessity of a double seeing—a consciousness of the past in the present—and a self-consciousness about not participating in a voyeuristic pornography of violence.**

The concluding set of images—Duane Michals’s “Pittsburgh remembered” sequence and Jeffrey Wolin’s portraits and oral histories of Holocaust survivors—bring the course full circle and open a larger conversation about the interdependency of words and images, at least in this particular set of photographs. Students agree that Michals’s images take on fuller meaning when they appear above his unsophisticated handwriting and sophisticated memoirist observations. Likewise, Wolin’s writing on the walls and other plain spaces surrounding each individual creates a necessary tension between the benign, even banal, portraits and the horrific tales the survivors tell. The precious rescued pictures—of a missing child, of

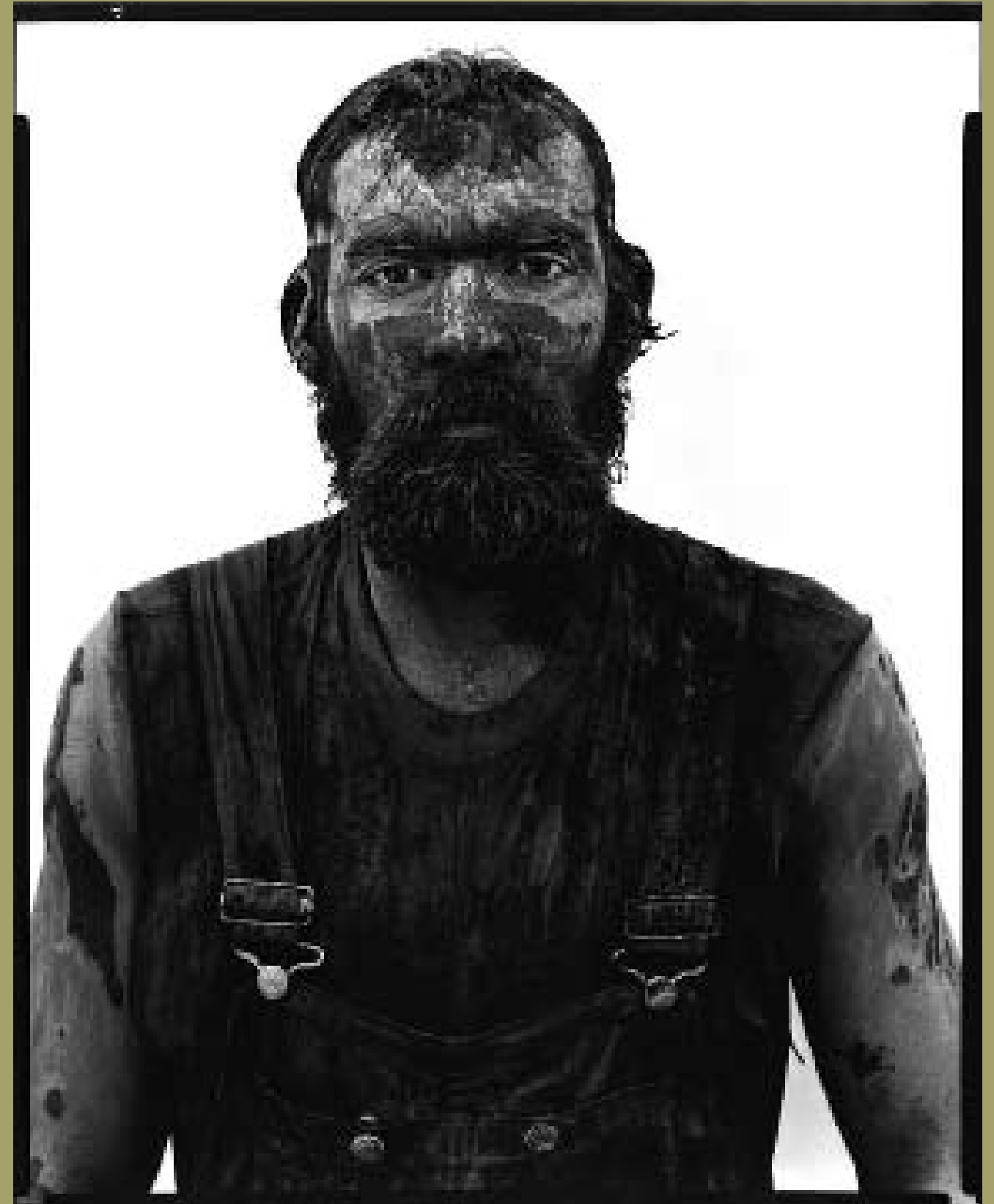


Figure 4, Opposite: Richard Avedon. Red Owens, oil field worker, Velma, Oklahoma, June 12, 1980, © 2008 The Richard Avedon Foundation, [www.avedonfoundation.org](http://www.avedonfoundation.org)

family members, of a younger pre-war self—delicately held as treasured possessions infuse Wolin's portraits with a reverence for photographs as talismans of our common humanity. I read from Jadzia Strykowska's story:

Before I smuggled out from the ghetto to join the underground my mother gave me a little celluloid tube and I put there in a poison pill and my mother gave me some valuable stones to put in there[...] After my capture I was sitting in the cattle car cutting out my pictures, the faces of my mother and the faces of my father. I also cut out a little picture of myself because I wanted to remind myself how I really look; And I had a picture of my brother and me[...]and I rolled them up all tightly. I left the poison pill, I took out the stones and I put the pictures in. I took my tube and put it in my rectum[...]so every day the circumstances got harder and harder. My solace were [sic] my pictures. (93)

Perhaps the most telling writing in the course is reflected in the short ungraded responses to a question or scenario I present. Early in the quarter, students describe the kinds of photos they prefer to see and why. Many love landscapes and scenes from nature. In the spirit of Rogovin's *Portraits in Steel*, where he photographed workers at work and at home, students describe what photos of their parents might look like at work and at home with the understanding that these would be public, not family, snapshots. As a prelude to seeing a selection from Robert Frank's *The Americans*, I present students with the pleasurable possibility of being awarded a Guggenheim grant to travel around the country and take photographs. Where would they go? Toward the conclusion of the course, after viewing the Levinthal and lynching photographs, I ask students to remark on the cultural work of photographs—without explaining what “cultural work” is. Their responses recognize the complex entanglement of culture—perceived as ordinary and exotic—and images: “I think photographs are a way for us to ‘hide’ our reality.” “Photographs may very well be tools for the future because they grow in power and hold on to context once there is enough distance to evaluate them.” “Photographs are[...]like a map, they[...]let us see things we wouldn't normally see.”

Although this course is not about technique or aesthetics, it is theoretically informed. My task is to use implicit and explicit theoretical ideas as praxis, a means to advance students' own agency. Photography and Writing is intended as a purposeful dialectic between the seen and unseen, a way to penetrate the pervasive consumption of images and to disrupt simplistic perceptions about what is staged and what is real.

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