The Society for Photographic Education
The Society for Photographic Education is a non-profit membership organization that provides a forum for the discussion of photography and related media as a means of creative expression and cultural insight. Through its interdisciplinary programs, services, and publications, the Society seeks to promote a broader understanding of the medium in all its forms and to foster the development of its practice, teaching, scholarship, and criticism.

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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 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 consciousness, a more acute visual intelligence. While students 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 consciousness.

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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 clenching 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 anthologist, 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 works, but I also need to be able to select photographs that follow my own curatorial purposes. 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.
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 dilettante of the course. While it is grounded in American culture, it offers a small glimpse into the transnational dimension of contemporary photography. What do I bring to the class, and perhaps which is most challenging to convey, is a consciousness of economic and social class in relationship to photography 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 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.

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family members, of a younger pre-war self—delicately held as treasured possessions infuse W olin’s portraits with a reverence for photographs as talismans of our common humanity. I read from Jadzia Strykowski’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 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.


Works Cited
Kauffman, Ross, and Zana Briski. Born into Brothels, Read Light Films, 1 hour 23 minutes, 2004, DVD.