

General info

Research Through the Lens: Photographic Methods in Social Sciences

MA level course, 2 US Credits / 4 ECTS Credits

Winter Term 2025/26

Lecturer: Daniel Halasz

Schedule: Fridays 8:50 - 10:30 @ C 120 Media Lab

Office hours: by appointment

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[\[OneDrive for the course\]](#)

Course Description

Photography is often treated in the social sciences as tool of illustration, a way to show what has been written. This course challenges that view. We approach photography as an active method of inquiry, a mode of data collection, and a rigorous way to create knowledge. Suitable for any level of previous visual experience, the course connects artistic, documentary practice to academic research. We move beyond "how to take a picture" to practice "how to see socially." Through workshops, discussions, fieldwork, and personal projects, you will learn to use the camera to reflect on social phenomena and construct visual narratives that support or challenge your academic work.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, students will be able to:

1. Understand and apply basic photographic techniques and post-production skills
2. Develop a personal visual project from concept to final presentation
3. Critically analyze and discuss photographic works in a social science context
4. Address the technical, aesthetic, and ethical implications of photo projects
5. Engage in ethical, collaborative relationships with subjects and audiences
6. Apply visual research methods to their academic work

Course Structure and Group Work

You will work in groups of 2 or 3 for the exercises, to get peer support and feedback outside of class, to encourage learning together and to share multiple perspectives. However, the final project will be individual work, allowing you to develop the series according to your own research interests.

Course Requirements and Assessment

1. Methodological Exercises (30%): Three short assignments applying specific visual research methods
2. Project Proposal (10%): A concise written pitch and presentation of the final project idea
3. Final Project (50%): A substantial photography series (8-12 images) accompanied by an artist/researcher statement
4. Participation and Peer Feedback (10%): This is a seminar/workshop, your voice in critiques and discussions matters

Exercise prompts

Exercise 1: The Survey

Method: Observation & Mapping

Working with your group, choose a specific social space (a market, a transit hub, a gentrifying street corner, etc.). Your goal is not just "good composition," but detailed observation. What are the patterns of movement? How is the space organized? Who belongs here, and who is excluded? Make 5 images that map the social logic of this space.

Exercise 2: The Encounter & The Gaze

Method: Portraiture & Ethics

This is an exercise on the politics of representation. You must approach a stranger (or a specific subject related to your research) and negotiate a portrait. This is a collaboration. You are required to submit the portraits and a short reflection on the power dynamic of the encounter: How did you gain consent? How did the subject want to be seen versus how you saw them?

Exercise 3: The Visual Essay

Method: Narrative & Sequencing

Using images from your developing Final Project, create a series of 5-7 images. Consider sequence, narration, sizing, color, etc. How does image A affect image B? This is a test for your final presentation, allowing you to experiment with narrative flow before locking in your project.

Final Project Description

The final project is the culmination of your visual research. It is an individual endeavor that synthesizes the technical skills, theoretical knowledge, and conceptual thinking developed throughout the course. You are asked to create a documentary photography series (8-12 images) that explores a topic related to your research interests or a pressing social issue.

Components of the final project include:

- A curated series of 8-12 high-quality photographs
- A written statement (500 words) explaining the concept, contextualizing the work, explaining your methodology
- A brief presentation of the work to the class (physical prints arranged on tables in a preplanned arrangement)
- A PDF with a short, one paragraph description and the photography series

The final project will be evaluated based on:

- Conceptual depth and relevance to social science research
- Technical execution and visual cohesion
- Effectiveness of visual storytelling
- Quality of the written statement and presentation

Diversity of perspectives

Course materials and examples are selected with an effort to try represent a wide range of cultural, political, and various other perspectives in art and media. The canon of art is Western-dominated, so participants are encouraged to bring examples showcasing more diverse perspectives and to discuss how different cultural contexts might influence interpretations of the works we study or create. Exercise prompts are also designed to allow you to explore themes relevant to your own identities and experiences.

[Main Course Forum](#)[Attendance Checklist](#)**Course Schedule****Week 1: The Camera as a Research Tool**

- Theory: Photography as data vs. photography as art. The subjectivity of the lens.
- Practice: Crash Course: The Exposure Triangle (aperture, shutter, ISO).
- Activity: Campus "visual note-taking" walk.

Week 2: Visual Ethnography & Observation

- Methodology: Topographic & Mapping-based Documentary. How to document a space without intervening.
- Case Studies: Lewis Hine (historical context) vs. Mishka Henner & Trevor Paglen (contemporary surveillance/mapping).
- Assignment: Exercise 1 Introduced: The Survey.

Week 3: The Politics of Representation

- Methodology: The portrait as a social document.
- Theory: Who has the right to photograph whom?
- Case Studies: Dorothea Lange vs. Laia Abril.
- Practice: Lighting basics (Natural light) & navigating the "Encounter."
- Assignment: Exercise 2 Introduced: The Encounter & The Gaze.

Week 4: The Archive & Re-Interpretation

- Methodology: Appropriation, archive-based & forensic strategies. Using images as evidence.
- Review: Group critique of Exercise 1 (The Survey).
- Case Studies: Broomberg & Chanarin (War Primer 2), The Atlas Group, Taryn Simon.
- Practice: "Forensic Reading" workshop—analyzing an image as data.

Week 5: Participatory & Performative Methods

- Methodology: Collaborative photography. Giving up control to the subject.
- Case Studies: Jim Goldberg (Raised by Wolves), Wendy Ewald, Max Pinckers.
- Discussion: The ethics of "giving voice" vs. "amplifying voice."

Week 6: The Visual Essay & Photobooks

- Methodology: Narrative structures in social research. Linear vs. non-linear storytelling.
- Review: Group critique of Exercise 2 (The Encounter).
- Activity: Photobook analysis: how is a book like a thesis?
- Assignment: Exercise 3 Introduced: The Visual Essay.

Week 7: Project Proposal Workshop

- Focus: Connecting the visual project to your academic research interest.
- Activity: "Pecha Kucha" style pitches of Final Project concepts (fast, 3-minute presentations).
- Peer Feedback: Is the scope feasible? Is the research question clear?

Week 8: Individual Consultations

- Review: Digital submission of Exercise 3.
- Focus: One-on-one meetings to refine the methodology for the Final Project.

Week 9: Editing as Analysis

- Practice: How sequencing changes meaning. The "Kuleshov Effect" in documentary.
- Workshop: Printing out small drafts and editing on tables. Moving physical images to find the narrative.

Week 10: New Media & The Future of Evidence

- Theory: AI, deepfakes, and the crisis of truth in visual media.
- Case Studies: Mathieu Asselin (Monsanto), Forensic Architecture.
- Activity: Small group critiques of work-in-progress.

Week 11: Presentation & Dissemination

- Focus: How to present visual research in an academic context vs. an artistic context.
- Practice: Writing the artist/researcher statement. Final sequencing polish.

Week 12: Final Symposium

- Event: Final project presentations.

Resources on visual artists

2023 ICP Infinity Awards: Contemporary Photography and New Media - Poulomi Basu
<https://vimeo.com/805788573>

Poulomi Basu - Centralia
<https://vimeo.com/389995605>

Laia Abril - On Abortion
<https://vimeo.com/243104473>

Mathieu Asselin - Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation

<https://vimeo.com/237878875>

Mathieu Asselin interview

<https://vimeo.com/257121909>

Alec Soth - Sleeping by the Mississippi

<https://vimeo.com/229834973>

Photographers in Focus: Alec Soth

<https://vimeo.com/391953487>

Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse Interview

<https://vimeo.com/125286818>

Mikhael Subotzky: The Excuse of Photography

<https://vimeo.com/779297821>

Dana Lixenberg interview

<https://vimeo.com/207490549>

2022 ICP Infinity Awards: Lifetime Achievement - Sebastião Salgado

<https://vimeo.com/685086977>

2023 ICP Infinity Awards: Critical Writing, Research, and Theory - Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

<https://vimeo.com/808497816>

<https://americansuburbx.com/2018/05/antoine-dagata-dishonesty-codex-vitriol.html>

<https://www.maxpinckers.be/projects/lotus/>

<https://www.nadavkander.com/works-in-series/dream-girls/single#1>

William Eggleston - TateShots

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcJxRYb57_Y

Joel Sternfeld – NY Voices

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk>

Martin Parr's Advice to Young Photographers | Louisiana Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bs49pTOLDo>

Martin Parr – 'Photography is a Form of Therapy' | TateShots

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIKrnYWXEK8>

Broomberg & Chanarin | TateShots

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ra1jgPTo1A>

2014 ICP Infinity Awards: Publication - Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRfE2HG6dOo>

Thomas Demand Interview: A World of Models

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09gZg9xOano>

"I'm not a political artist. But it is political." | Artist Mohamed Bourouissa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9k_z2B8DfWw

Taryn Simon photographs secret sites

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKI0tb3VmfQ>

Taryn Simon: The stories behind the bloodlines

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvhiN_qq6oo

Masters of photography - Diane Arbus (documentary, 1972)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_0sQI90kYI

Preserving Russia's Pre-Olympic History

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QICISHP40tI>

Further inspiration:

Laura Letinsky (to say it isn't so), Peter Puklus (Handbook to the Stars), Sam Taylor-Wood (Still Life), Taryn Simon (Political Flowers), Thomas Demand, Stephen Shore (Uncommon Places), Alec Soth (Last Days of W, Dogs Days Bogotá), Gregory Halpern (ZZYZX), Thomas Albdorf, Maisie Cousins, Csilla Klenyanszki, Cindy Sherman, Frida Kahlo, Vivian Maier, Lee Friedlander, Dorottya Vékony, Kincső Bede, [Emese Miskolczy](#), [Luca Gőbölyös](#)

Resources on technique

Technique:

Camera basics – focal length

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CoEsqePADw>

Camera basics – aperture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YojL7UQTVhc>

Camera basics – shutter speed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R9ZTxoTOSk>

Camera basics – ISO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8cj9Lj9w-g>

Aperture & Depth of Field

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdxKl5np9KE>

Top 10 Composition Tips

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5V4uuNdmRHc>

Photography mapped – exposure triangle simulator

<http://photography-mapped.com/interact.html>

DoF simulator

<https://dofsimulator.net/en/>

Camera Sim

<https://www.camerasim.com/original-camerasim>

Country specific consent requirements

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Country_specific_consent_requirements

Resources on editing

Tutorials by Daniel for the course:

[Saving to Nexis, editing & exporting in the CEU Media Lab](#)

[Lightroom Classic // Importing, cataloging, editing & exporting images](#)

Further videos:

[Everything you need to get started with Lightroom Classic](#)

[How to organize in Lightroom Classic](#)

[Export settings in LrC](#)

[2hr Lightroom Classic Tutorial](#)

[Other long LrC tutorial](#)

High-level overview, using a 10-step workflow

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwVEbEpGTkY>

Develop module - Basic tab (3:00 - 8:00)

<https://youtu.be/qJyWjMzRuls?t=1626>

Exporting images from Lightroom (0:30 - 3:20)

<https://youtu.be/kvCxMYDC5io>

Photographic methodologies

1. Participatory & Collaborative Methods

Description: The subject is actively involved in the creative process, influencing the narrative and framing.

Artists & Examples:

- **Lucia Nimcova** – "**Bajka/Tell Tale**" (Incorporates oral histories and personal archives.)
- **Alessandra Sanguinetti** - "**The Adventures of Guille and Belinda**" (Tale of two cousins in Argentina.)

Common Topics: Community representation, oral histories, marginalization.

2. Appropriation & Archive-based Strategies

Description: Utilizing existing images, documents, or fictional archives to reinterpret history.

Artists & Examples:

- **The Atlas Group (Walid Raad)** – "**The bleeding heart cookbook**" (Fictional archives exploring historical truth.)
- **Cristina de Middel** - "**The Afronauts**" (Fictional story on a Zambian space program.)
- **Joan Fontcuberta** – "**Sputnik**" (Creates a fictional cosmonaut using found imagery.)

Common Topics: Historical memory, propaganda, media critique.

3. Topographic & Mapping-based Documentary

Description: Using landscapes, maps, and infrastructure to reveal hidden or overlooked narratives.

Artists & Examples:

- **Trevor Paglen** – "**Limit Telephotography**" (Documents military and surveillance structures.)
- **Mishka Henner** – "**No Man's Land**" (Explores sex work through Google Street View.)
- **Donald Weber** - "**War Sand**" (Complex project on the beaches of Normandy.)

Common Topics: Geopolitics, urbanization, surveillance.

4. Sequential Narrative & Photo-Text Experiments

Description: Integrating text, interviews, or personal writing to expand the meaning of images.

Artists & Examples:

- **Sophie Calle** – "**Take Care of Yourself**" (Breakup letter interpreted by different women.)
- **Jim Goldberg** – "**Raised by Wolves**" (Handwritten text and snapshots about street youth.)
- **Bieke Depoorter** – "**As It May Be**" (Intimate, chance encounters in Egyptian homes.)

Common Topics: Personal narratives, memory, social issues.

5. Performative & Re-enactment-based Photography

Description: Staging scenes or performances to examine identity, history, or social constructs.

Artists & Examples:

- **Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa** – "**One Wall a Web**" (Blends staged photography with political imagery.)
- **Samuel Fosso** – "**African Spirits**" (Re-enacts historical figures in self-portraits.)
- **Max Pinckers** - "**State of Emergency**" (Re-enactment of colonial atrocities in Kenya.)

Common Topics: Identity, colonial history, political representation.

6. Conceptual & Speculative Documentary

Description: Uses staged or manipulated images to challenge reality and truth in documentary work.

Artists & Examples:

- **Max Pinckers** – "**Margins of Excess**" (Blends fiction and reality in documentary.)
- **Thomas Demand** – "**Model Photographs**" (Recreates media imagery using paper models.)
- **Broomberg & Chanarin** – "**War Primer 2**" (Uses Google Images to recontextualize war)

Common Topics: Media influence, perception vs. reality, truth in photography.

7. Forensic & Investigative Photography

Description: Uses photographic evidence and research-based approaches to uncover hidden realities.

Artists & Examples:

- **Matthieu Asselin** – "**Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation**" (Corporate environmental impact.)
- **Edmund Clark** – "**Control Order House**" (Examines counterterrorism laws through spaces.)
- **Taryn Simon** – "**An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar**" (Hidden places in the U.S.)

Common Topics: Corporate power, environmental issues, legal systems.

8. Socially Engaged & Activist Photography

Description: Photography as a tool for activism and social change, often working with communities.

Artists & Examples:

- **Laia Abril** – "**On Abortion**" (Documents the consequences of restricted reproductive rights.)
- **Lisa Barnard** – "**The Canary and the Hammer**" (Investigates global gold economies.)

Common Topics: Human rights, gender issues, climate justice.

Section 6

Section 7

Section 8

Section 9

Section 10

Section 11

Section 12