



Open College of the Arts

# Learning Log

## Photography 2

### Documentary



**This is part 2 of 5:  
Part Two: The B&W document**

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Cover photo

*Eddy Out recovered after a treatment against leukaemia: 38mm, f/2.8, 1/40s, ISO200*

# 1. Part Two: The B&W document

## Introduction – 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2016

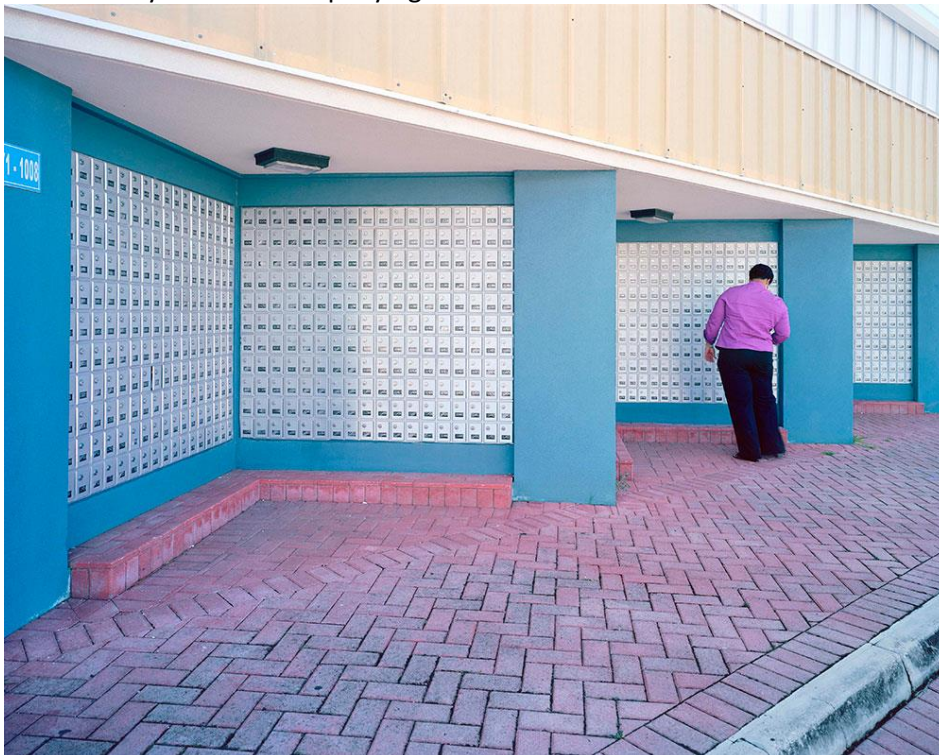
This document is part four of my learning log which I keep for the course Gesture and Meaning. This course is part of the BA (hons) Photography degree programme of the Open College of the Arts (see [www.oca-uk.com](http://www.oca-uk.com) for more information). This learning log is like a journal, a logbook, a workbook, or a notebook I created to document my learning.

- This learning log is structured according to the chapters of the course-book (OCA, 2012). Also, each entry in the log is dated and the entries are mostly in chronological order.
- All images in this learning log are my own work (© Maurice Timmermans) unless stated otherwise.
- Focal lengths are always 35mm equivalent focal lengths (efl) unless stated otherwise.

## Exhibition: *Show us the money* – 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2016

Last weekend I visited the Photo Museum in Antwerp, Belgium ([www.fotomuseum.be/en.html](http://www.fotomuseum.be/en.html)). The exhibition *Show us the money* is about the world's off-shore tax havens and corporate financial nerve centres. The exhibition consists of three projects each using a different artistic strategy to expose this global issue.

When I first heard of this theme I was very curious to learn how one would photographically depict this theme, which is not very visual. I was impressed to see the three projects. The first project *The Heavens* by Paolo Woods (Netherlands, 1970) and Gabriele Galimberti (Italy, 1977) is a blend of investigative journalism and photography. The photographers registered their own company, The Heavens, in Delaware and travelled the world to produce photographs of tax havens. *The Heavens* relies heavily on the accompanying text.



*The Heavens: Paolo Woods and Gabriele Galimberti*



*Paolo Woods and Gabriele Galimberti : The Heavens*

The second project *You Haven't Seen Their Faces* by Daniel Mayrit (Spain, 1985) consists of images of the 100 most powerful people of the City of London (according to the annual report by Square Mile magazine). Mayrit appropriates the imagery of surveillance cameras to call on them to account for their role in the 2008 financial crisis. The series focuses therefore on how a given image-production system such as surveillance cameras determines the way the viewers interpret the context surrounding the images. The viewer has no context or explanation of the facts, but almost inadvertently assumes their guilt because they have been 'caught on CCTV'.



*Daniel Mayrit: You Haven't Seen Their Faces*

The third project *Wealth Management* by Carlos Spottorno (Hungary, 1971) guides us through the visual world of his fictional WTF Bank (a fictional private bank). This fictional bank does not only know the rules for tax avoidance, this bank also influences the rule makers (politicians, world leaders). The project reads like an advertisement and comes across very real (<http://spottorno.com/web/wealth-management-0>). The project has an ironic undertone (I read WTF as internet slang for What The Fuck).



*Carlos Spottorno: Wealth Management*



Carlos Spottorno: *Wealth Management*

These projects make me think about what is documentary. Difficult to define. The first project is documentary for me. The second project is fictional (these images are not real surveillance images, they are created by the artist) but it can be seen as a documentary about image making devices, about the institutions distributing images and about how these influence the viewer's interpretation. The third project is also fictional, but makes a statement about the real world. I've read *When Is a Documentary?* (Eitzen, 1995). Eitzen states that the question "Might it be lying" is the key to figuring out whether and when something is a documentary (fiction cannot lie). Using this question I must conclude that only the first project is documentary, an outcome which is in line with my own feelings about it.

### Exercise: Reading McCausland – 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 2016

McCausland's main points:

- The rise of documentary photography does not spring from fashion, but evolves from other movements in (the history of) photography.
- Documentary photography is an application of photography direct and realistic, dedicated to the profound and sober chronicling of the external world.
- Documentary is not about pretty pictures but about scientific, uncompromisingly honesty (although the camera usually does nothing but lie).
- Photography is art, but not in the old sense: it is bound to realism.
- As society changes the arts change. Now we want truth, not rationalization, idealization or romanticization. A work of art must have meaning and content. It must communicate, speak to an audience.
- The personality of the photographer should not be montaged over the subject for this will defeat the serious aims of documentary photography.

Why is this article relevant to this course?

- This article is an opinion about what (documentary) photography should be. It is an opinion from 1939. After reading the student will be able to place this opinion in history, realise that opinions about photography are different from person to person and change over time. And will learn to think critically about these opinions, form his own opinion and incorporate this into his own photography (work).

**Exercise: Reading David Campany – 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 2016**

- In 1936 Bill Brandt published *The English at home*. It contained 63 photographs showing different social classes (many juxtaposed). The English in 1936 were not ready for such a book. It had little impact.
- Part of this book was the photograph for which Bill Brandt is well known: *Parlourmaid and Under-parlourmaid Ready to Serve Dinner*. It is regarded as a milestone in documentary photography and in art photography.
- After the second world war England was no longer a country of marked social contrast. Appearances were levelling out and 'reading' people from their surfaces had become much more difficult.
- Brandt did surrealism, nudes, landscapes and worked as a photojournalist for the magazines (reportage). His preference however was for the self-contained image.
- Later in life he was 'discovered' by the big audience. The audience perceived him as a photographer who made a shift from documentarist to artist.



*Bill Brandt: Parlourmaid and Under-parlourmaid Ready to Serve Dinner, 1933*

The article does not tell how B&W became such a trusted and respected medium in documentary. But I guess:

- All photography was B&W. In the 1930's and earlier B&W became associated with documentary. Many people (up until one or two decades ago) learned to equate B&W with 'realism' and the authentic. Until the 1970s B&W photography was people's window on the world (via the illustrated magazines).



*Bill Brandt: Nudes, Landscapes, Documentary ([www.billbrandt.com](http://www.billbrandt.com))*



### Exercise: Reading Maartje van den Heuvel – 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2016

Short summary:

- In Western society is an increased role of the media in how we experience reality. Our world view is no longer solely determined by experiences that we ourselves have directly; Our experience of the world increasingly takes place via the media.
- There is an increased visual literacy. Visual literacy refers to the competence of image-makers in employing more and more complex visual language and of viewers in being able to understand, fathom and interpret this.
- The competence visual literacy is not developed today by reading about it, or by being taught orally. It is developed almost exclusively by looking a lot at mass media. Or, if you are an image maker through making your own images.
- Two historical documentary traditions: From the West: the Anglo-Saxon line of 'human interest' photography and film and from the East: communist and socialist photography and film. Documentary in these traditions has a function: that of militant eye-witness.
- Anglo-Saxon: Documentary was meant to describe things from actual life objectively and realistically. Lewis Hine, FSA project, illustrated magazines, Magnum.
- Communist and socialist (Russia, Germany): against the bourgeois medium of painting. Portraying the struggle of the working class (every day, heroic).
- In the 1960s and 1970s the documentary photographer was a left-wing activist, 35mm camera, coarse-grained, high contrast.
- From the 1970s the viewer's belief in the transparency and objectivity of the documentary has been increasingly undermined by attempts being made to reveal the manipulative effect of media images. Television has taken over the role of window on the world. Emergence of docudrama and realityTV. Documentary moving into art.
- Documentary frees itself from classical documentary tradition. Trends:
  - Technical/stylistic: sharpness of detail and colour (Düsseldorf Art Academy, Struth, Gursky, Ruff).
  - Narrative structure: from picture story with accompanying text to typological series.
  - Subject: also middle class (Parr), upper class (Knorr), porn industry (Sultan).
  - Distance between image maker and subject: subjective photography (Goldin, Van Manen).
  - Speed and routine: also more in-depth, long-running projects (Sekula, Sheikh).
  - Limits of ethical norms: explicit and less censored (Peress).
  - Use of internet as distribution channel.
  - Combining photographs with existing, historical ones (Germain, Grimonprez).
  - Investigate the language of documentary, how the suggestion of reality is constructed (Sugimoto, Wall).
  - Imitation of journalistic and documentary images (Hondius).
  - Re-enacting (Huyghe, Draeger).
- For some artists the reflection on the documentary tradition is the main aim in their artistic work (Hondius, Draeger).

Research point: Socially committed photographers – 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2016



(1982)

Paul Trevor, Chris Steel-Perkins, Nicholas Battye (the Exit Photography Group): *Survival Programmes in Britain's Inner Cities* ([www.amber-online.com/exhibitions/survival-programmes-in-britain-s-inner-cities\\_2](http://www.amber-online.com/exhibitions/survival-programmes-in-britain-s-inner-cities_2))



Chris Killip: *In Flagrante* (1988)



*Nick Danziger: The British (2001)*



*Jacob Riis: How the other half lives (1888)*



*Lewis Hines: Child Labor, Construction of the Empire State Building*

For some of these photographers social documentary could be their prime focus. Most had other activities as well (photography (editorial, corporate), editor, ...).

### Exercise: Martin Shields – 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2016



*Martin Shields: Young footballers (Glasgow, 2002)*

#### Denotations (what we see):

- Two young boys dressed in football outfits, each with their own ball, walking arms around each other in run-down residential area (apartment buildings). They face away from camera.
- The street is empty. There are no other people in the frame.
- The football outfits are from different teams.

#### Connotations (what we infer):

- The photograph is about the friendship between the boys.
- The children like playing football in this run-down area. The area is suited for play.
- The photograph is about sportsmanship. After the game members of opposite teams walk away in a friendly manner. The outfits seem very clean though. Something does not feel right with this photograph.

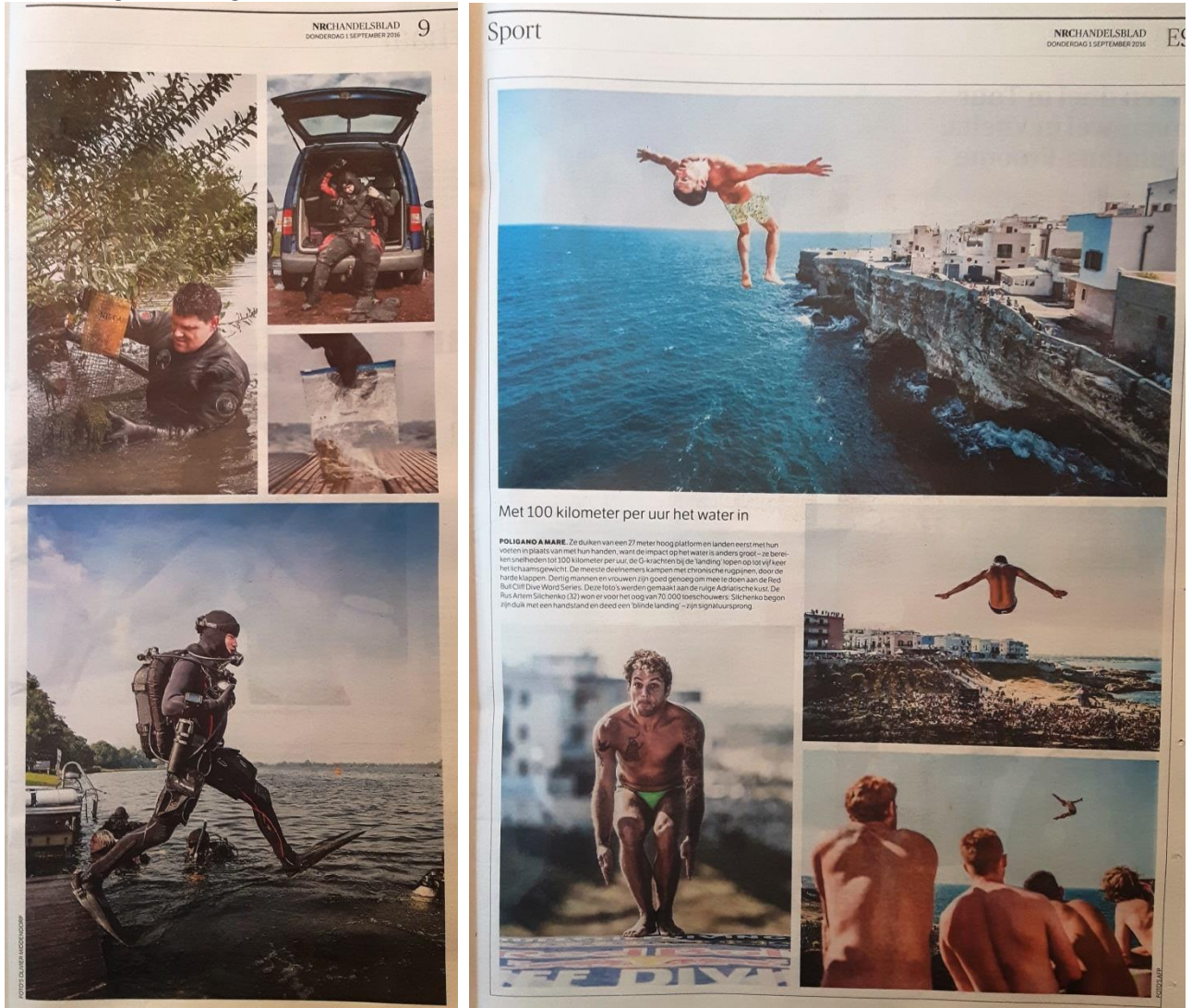
After reading the tear sheet of the newspaper I understand the editor needed a photograph to go with this news item. I do not think the photograph adds relevant information to the news item. I think it is only confusing. Why does the editor want us to show a photograph of the boys? The photograph is more about the boys than about the council estates. Does this photograph say people are happy in the dilapidated council estates? Does the photograph have a political meaning, saying nothing should be changed? Is the photograph staged? The outfits are clean, why do the boys carry two balls?

Perception of an image is very much influenced by the accompanying text and by knowing what the function is of the photograph (art, news, advertising, family album, social media, ...).

## Extracurricular: *Sugar* – 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2016

This part of the course has too little actual photographing in it. I compensate by executing some extracurricular photo projects.

In *NRC Handelsblad*, a Dutch newspaper, small photo essays are regularly published. Often in the form of a grid / collage.



Examples of presentations of photo essays in *NRC Handelsblad* (1<sup>st</sup> of September 2016)

As an exercise I made the following photo essay *Sugar* about the craving for something sweet in an *NRC Handelsblad* –like format.

For these images we really need colour as the B&W version shows.



# SUGAR

The craving for something sweet



*Sugar: 35mm, f/1.8-f/3,5, 1/100s-1/40s, ISO100-ISO125*



*Sugar (B&W version)*

Reflection:  
Maybe the images should be different sizes.



*Sugar: 35mm, f/1.8-f/3,5, 1/100s-1/40s, ISO100-ISO125 (alternatives)*



*Sugar: 35mm, f/1.8-f/3,5, 1/100s-1/40s, ISO100-ISO125 (alternatives)*

I think I like the last alternative best.



**Just practicing: *Fear* – 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

As an exercise I produced the following image in the studio. This is not documentary. This is not B&W. It depicts a feeling of fear.



*Self-portrait, Fear: 50mm, f/8, 1/125s, ISO100*

**Exercise: Symbols – 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

A symbol is something that represents something else. It is a signifier which does not resemble the signified.

I think Robert Frank meant all his photographs in *The Americans* to have symbols in them. For the viewer however it is not always easy to see and understand the symbols he used. Of course all words, flags and traffic signs are symbols. There are many photographs in the series which depicts these. But there is more.



*Robert Frank: Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey, 1955, from the series The Americans*

The flag itself is a symbol. But the fact that the flag blocks the view of the woman looking at the parade is a symbol too. National emblems like a flag may provide a focus, but they also stand in the way of seeing. Nationalistic feelings prevent people from seeing the world in perspective, blocks different ways of looking at and understanding the world? Does Frank critique McCarthyism?



*Robert Frank: Trolley, New Orleans, 1955, from the series The Americans*

The facts that the white people sit in the front and the black people sit in the back stands for racial segregation.



*Robert Frank: Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1955, from the series The Americans*

The word is of course a symbol. But the word "save" also has a religious connotation. In this photograph it symbolizes religion. The pumps look like people attending a worship service. The photograph is ironic. Frank is telling us spiritual values are replaced by materialism?



*Robert Frank: Movie premiere, Hollywood, 1955, from the series The Americans*

In this photograph the movie star is a symbol for what average people want to be or want to achieve, or want to have (famous, rich, beautiful). The movie star is not important in this image (blurred), it's about the average people in the background looking at the movie star.



*Robert Frank: Rodeo, New York City, 1955, from the series The Americans*

In this photograph the cowboy symbolizes individual autonomy and American nationalism. This cowboy however is far away from nature, he is in the city. Does Frank mean the old values and beliefs do not fit modern society, are out of place, do not fit anymore?

<https://artblart.com/2015/01/20/images-from-the-americans-by-robert-frank/>

**Exercise: Salgado – 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

Work by Salgado to which Mraz refers:



*Sebastião Salgado: Guatemala 1978, from the series Other Americas*



*Sebastião Salgado: Brazil, 1981, from the series Other Americas*

Sadness, misery and doom. Alienation. Estrangement is conveyed through formal structures such as windows. Gazes do not meet.



*Sebastião Salgado: Mexico 1980, from the series Other Americas*

Día de los Muertos is essentially the opposite of what Salgado represented in this image.



*Sebastião Salgado: Mexico 1980, from the series Other Americas*

In Salgado's image, an agave isolates the Mexican children, who are photographed within the sharp points that seem to threaten and imprison them, a symbol for the quotidian pain of living in this part of the world.





*Sebastião Salgado: Gold miners of Serra Pelado, Brasil, from the series Workers*

It represents a significant advance over *Other Americas*, for here estrangement is not mysterious; rather it derives directly from the manifestly horrible conditions in which these poor devils live and work.



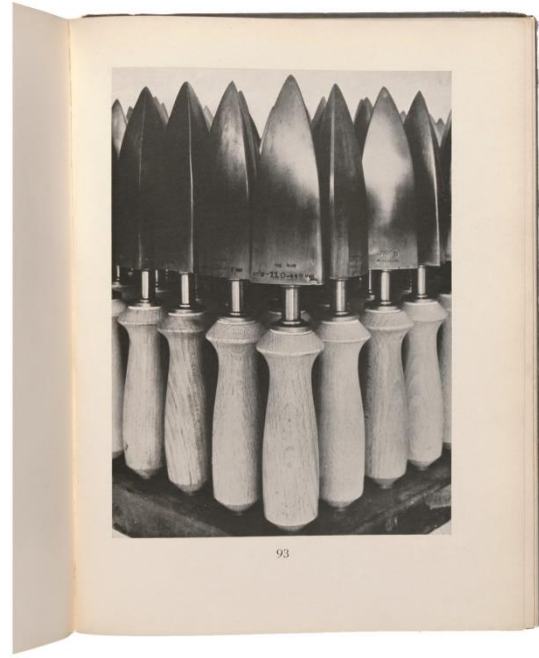
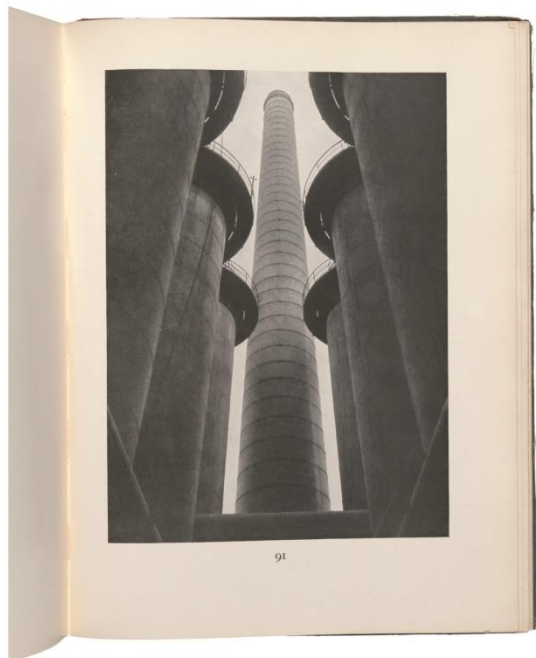
*Sebastião Salgado: Terra*

The final image of the section, 'Migrations to the Cities': a conglomeration of abandoned toddlers and the cityscape behind them serve as mutually reflecting mirrors of, and metaphors for, the future.

**Exercise: August Sander – 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

*People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* can at the same time be seen as a sociological project, a historical document and a photographic masterpiece. Some see it as one of the earliest photographic typologies. Sander's aim was to photograph the representatives of every social class, profession and roles of German people roughly between the years 1910-1935. By omitting the names of the subjects he attempted to induce the viewer to move from the particular to the general when studying his typology (Freidus, 1991). Sanders formulated his typologies (without the help from social scientists) in a so-called semi-medieval guild system, a seven-category mental construct of his own (Incirlioglu, 1994).

Sander's project was inspired by the *New Objectivity*, a return to order after the First World War and a reaction against expressionism. In photography this *New Objectivity* became known as the *New Photography* movement. It's style is sharply focussed and matter-of fact (a reaction against pictorialism and more poetic styles). Examples of photographers associated with *New Objectivity* and *New Photography* are Albert Renger-Patzsch and Karl Blossfeldt.



*Albert Renger-Patzsch: Die Welt ist schön (1928)*

In Sander's *People of the 20th Century* people are understood as the product of environment and occupation which is a clear challenge to the middle-class ideal of the autonomous personality (Incirlioglu, 1994). Sander's typology makes a statement about society and the German people which was not approved by the Nazi-authorities. They forced him to stop working on the project, thousands of his glass negatives were confiscated and destroyed.



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*Karl Blossfeldt: Urformen der Kunst (1929)*



*August Sander: People of the 20th Century (1910-1935)*

### Exercise: In the American East – 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2016

What do you get when you ask a fashion and advertising photographer to make portraits of the working class in the American West? You will probably end up with fashion and advertising photographs and not with documentary photographs. Richard Bolton comes across as a sour critic who expected engaged documentary photographs and is disappointed when his expectations are not met. When one photographs people against a white background using a large format camera one decontextualize the subjects. The viewer cannot learn much about the subjects other than how they look.

The relevance to documentary practice:

- The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface.
- All photographs are accurate, none of them is the truth.
- Documentary is the clash between the objective and the subjective, between description and self-expression.
- The format (the working method) communicates. If you want it or not.
- A photograph exploits its subject. A photographer exploits his subjects.
- The photographer has a social responsibility.
- When documentary is moved as art into the museum or gallery: The work is also used to promote the artist and the museum or gallery. This may change the original meaning of an image.
- The photograph is polysemic, it has no single independent meaning, but many possible meanings depending on context and use.



*Richard Avedon: In the American West*

**Practising: Portrait of Eddy Out – 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

As an exercise I produced the following portraits of my friend Eddy Out. If I would provide captions to these images they would gain in poignancy: Eddy Out, recovered after a treatment against leukaemia. Five years ago this treatment did not even exist, so if he was taken ill five years earlier he would have been dead already. These captions would make the images more documentary in character?

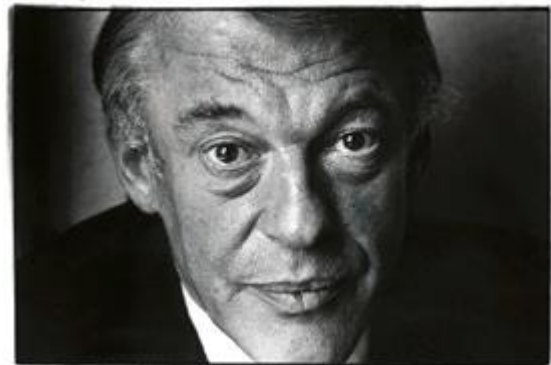


*Eddy Out: 38mm, f/2.8, 1/40s, ISO200 and ISO160*

Reference to:



*Robin de Puy: An-Sofie Kesteleyn, who had been seriously ill (Dutch National portrait prize 2013)*



*Vincent Mentzel: Hans van Mierlo (1986)*

Instead of pushing the subject to the edge of the frame, I worked with the light coming from camera's right and with a strong vignette like Vincent Mentzel often uses on his B&W portraits.

### **Research point: Humphrey Spender's *Worktown* – 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

Style and themes:

- B&W (obviously), straight, detached, detailed, everyday, no emphasis on the aesthetics, photographs grouped by theme.
- The themes are of the visible kind. The viewer can ask himself the question Why these themes? Education, housing conditions could also be themes.
- The purpose was to record everyday life ([www.massobs.org.uk/](http://www.massobs.org.uk/)). It was set out to be an anthropological study of Britain's culture.
- Spender made the photographs using a concealed camera ([www.bolton.ac.uk/Worktown/HumphreySpender.aspx](http://www.bolton.ac.uk/Worktown/HumphreySpender.aspx)). In this way it was possible to observe people more objectively (and without any form of personal interaction).
- This makes the photographed into "the other", an object of study.
- I think the invasion of people's privacy should be weighed against the scientific value of the project. My opinion is that the scientific value is (very) limited and that there are other ways to realize the same results without invading people's privacy in such a massive way.

### **Exercise: Making sense of documentary – 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2016**

Every photographer is exploiting his subjects in a way. In my opinion even when the photograph was commissioned by the subject. To me this is not a problem as long as the subjects agree with having their photographs taken and as long as the photographer is honest about the purpose of the photographs and how they will be used.

As an FSA photographer these kind of ethics would provide a problem. If a photographer would say: "Hey, hello. I'm a photographer and I would like to take your photograph to show middle-class people poverty and convince them to accept the New Deal legislation". Then many people would refuse, because otherwise they would be portrayed as being poor and needy.

I was shocked finding out that FSA photographers manipulated their scenes so often (the scene itself and/or by making use of false captions). Until now I was under the impression that the FSA photographers had strong ethics about manipulation...

#19

Expose the banalities of the  
new urban landscape.  
—George Georgiou



*George Georgiou: Fault Lines*

<https://www.flickr.com/groups/instruction19/discuss/72157625974185602/>  
<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/paul-d-haese-belgopolis>  
<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/claudia-eschborn-hamburg-sud>  
<http://www.danielmayrit.com/#!suburban-scenes/hgata>



## Planning the assignment – 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2016

I developed two ideas for the assignment.

### 1. *Typically Dutch*

This project is a visual study of what is typically Dutch. National identity is about:

- Language
- Landscape or streetscape
- Traditions
- Culture
- Politics
- History
- Cuisine (food)
- National symbols: flags, national colours, Dutch brands, the head of state

I have taken out factors like ethnicity and religion which in my opinion are not something typically Dutch (more something Western European).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_identity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_identity)

Top 100 of things which are typically Dutch (according to Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*):

[www.telegraaf.nl/vrij/reizen/20652134/\\_Top\\_100\\_Typisch\\_Nederlands\\_.html](http://www.telegraaf.nl/vrij/reizen/20652134/_Top_100_Typisch_Nederlands_.html)

Top 10 of typical Dutch things:

<http://archieff.ondertussen.nl/lifestyle/10-typisch-nederlandse-dingen/>

Typically Dutch:

[www.nederlandvoorbeginners.info/typisch-nederlands.htm](http://www.nederlandvoorbeginners.info/typisch-nederlands.htm)

The aim of the project is to produce eight single narrative images. Best is to produce more than eight images and make a selection of the eight best images.

Ideas for images:

- Close-up of a lunch box in a workplace (for example an office = office lunch).
- A lunch (bread and cheese, chocolate sprinkles, Calvé peanut butter) with a mug of milk, traditional Dutch china in a rural kitchen (the kitchen of my mother-in-law).
- Streetscape showing Dutch brands like Heineken, Albert Heijn and Hema (Amersfoort).
- Streetscape showing cyclists (Amsterdam).
- Landscape showing flat land, water, dykes, grassland with a windmill or a church at the horizon.
- A celebration like a birthday or Sinterklaas (interior shot).
- A streetscape showing terrace houses.
- People eating raw herring on the street (The Hague, Scheveningen).
- Interior scene of people in a meeting (the Dutch way of making a decision).
- Interior of a classroom showing how children learn Dutch.
- A national celebration like King's Day or World Championship Football.
- A portrait of a Dutch girl showing Rembrandt lighting (or is this too much about photography?).
- Landscape showing watermanagement (dykes, dams, locks).

Visual clichés like wooden shoes and tulips should be avoided. Most interesting are scenes which depict typically Dutch behaviour.

This project should be shot in colour because national symbols have colours. This information should not be lost. In general I believe that documentary projects should by default be in colour (our world also has colour). B&W may be used if there is a good reason for it.

## 2. *Fatherhood*

My father is suffering from dementia and is not able to communicate anymore. At the same time my children are growing up fast. This changes the way of me being a father and the way of me being a child of my father. This makes me think about what constitutes fatherhood. The nature of fatherhood changes over time. The project is a visual study of fatherhood.

Research:

<http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/wp-11.pdf>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2146066/pdf/canfamphys00121-0173.pdf>

<http://www.parentingscience.com/evolution-of-fatherhood.html>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father>

The idea is to ask eight (or more) people to show me their (idea of) fatherhood. This should be an everyday scene (showing reality) in which there is a child and a father. The person can be photographed with their child or with their father. This idea can be pushed to the limit when the father has passed away, or the child has not yet or never been born.

The aim of the project is to produce eight single narrative images. Best is to produce more than eight images and make a selection of the eight best images.

This project can be shot in colour and in B&W. B&W would provide visual consistency over the series of photographs. Because this part of the course is about B&W photography it would be a nice exercise to do the project in B&W (despite the fact that there is no real good reason for it). During shooting the emphasis should be on light, composition, lines and tonality.

Which idea should I chose? To me the second project seems more interesting, it's a clear-cut concept and I can meet and interview people of different ages and backgrounds.

I will ask my tutor for advice.

## 2. Reference list

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