Context and Narrative
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Appendix
Photography is a visual language. As with any other language, it’s important to understand its structure and vocabulary in order to express yourself and communicate effectively. The more fluent you become, the more playful and experimental you can be in expressing yourself creatively.

Photography 1: Context and Narrative aims to help you to create meaningful imagery by looking at photography applied in context. You’ll spend time looking at how practitioners use some of the ideas surrounding contemporary photographic practice. You’ll be encouraged to adopt an experimental and personal approach to your own image-making, taking your lead from the inspiration provided by others.

You’ll also think about how visual narratives are formed, for example the use of image and text, sequencing and editing in constructing stories. You’ll consider some photographic myths, such as whether photographs are ‘real’, and think about fact and fiction and the difference between taking and making a photograph. You’ll explore semiotics as a key principle in the creation and consumption of photography.

You’ll be encouraged to critically reflect upon all these issues – and more – in your practice and research.

Before you go any further, read the introduction to each part of the course to give yourself an idea of the course content.

Each part of the course represents roughly 80 hours of study. In each part you’ll be asked to complete a variety of exercises and research tasks, make notes on the subject matter, and also to reflect on your learning. It’s important to complete all of the exercises as they often build important skills or knowledge that you’ll draw on for the assignments.

Remember, too, that there are other students doing the course so you’re not on your own. Use the online forums to reflect on your findings and discuss issues with other students. Go to www.oca-student.com/forum

At the end of each part of the course you’ll complete an assignment and send it to your tutor for feedback. Reflect carefully on your tutor feedback and, if appropriate, go back to the assignment and make adjustments to it based on your tutor’s comments. If you submit for assessment, making such adjustments demonstrates responsiveness and learning and will help improve your mark. Note down what you’ve done differently, and why, in your learning log.
Exercise

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you’re clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your Student Handbook.

If you haven’t already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date (your profile). Mention any skills you already have that you think are relevant to the course. Comment on why you want to study this particular course and what you hope to achieve as a result of taking the course. Email your profile to your tutor using your new OCA email address (maximum 250 words). Your profile will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Also arrange with your tutor how you’ll submit your assignment work (e.g. whether you’ll email images as JPEGs or send prints in the post) and how you’ll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

It’s a good idea to get into the habit of submitting at least some images as prints to help you prepare for assessment, if you choose to go down this route.

Studying with OCA

If you haven’t already done so, now is a good time to work through the free introductory course ‘An Introduction to Studying in HE’ on the OCA student website: www.oca-student.com/study-guides/introduction-studying-he

Don’t be tempted to skip this introductory course; it contains valuable advice on study skills (e.g. reading, note-taking), research methods and academic conventions which will stand you in good stead throughout your studies.

Exercise

The OCA website will be a key resource for you during your studies with OCA so take some time to familiarise yourself with it. Log onto the OCA student website and go the link below. Watch the video and make notes.

www.oca-student.com/study-guides/using-website
Learning log

Whether you call it a journal, logbook, workbook, notebook or something similar, they are essentially the same thing. The learning log is something you create to record and support your learning and is an integral element of study with the OCA.

Your learning log is where you record your experiences, thoughts, feelings, and reflections on your learning activities. These activities can include courses you went on, exhibitions visited, books read, discussions had, internet sites browsed, TV programmes watched etc. As well as documenting what you’ve been doing whilst studying this course unit, it’s important to add your personal comments, to reflect critically on the work of others as well as your own. You can say what you think about the material you have encountered and how it has helped you with your studies.

If this is your first course unit with the OCA, see the study guide Introducing learning logs on the OCA student website, located in the ‘Resources’ section, for further guidance on what a learning log is and how to keep one.

Using an online blog

You’re strongly recommended to use an online blog instead of (or in addition to) physical logbooks/notebooks/folders. This will be a requirement for students from 1 August 2017. For more details see this document from the OCA student website - www.oca-student.com/sites/default/files/oca-content/key-resources/res-files/sg_change_in_photo_reqs_221216.pdf

A blog is a great way to consolidate and present your course work, as well as providing your tutor and peers with a live view of your learning and reflections. Blogs can be sectioned off into various categories and can make your recorded learning more navigable to these external viewers.

Setting up a blog can be done for free through websites such as Blogger, Tumblr or Wordpress. If this is your first course unit with the OCA, see the study guide Keeping an Online Learning Log on the OCA student website, located in the ‘Resources’ section. There is also a OCA wordpress blog template in the same section of the OCA student website.

It’s also strongly recommended that you keep a separate blog for each of the course units you study, just as you would your coursework, sketchbooks, notebooks and learning logs. However if you insist on keeping the same blog for each course unit, you must separate all entries/posts from one another in order to clearly distinguish what learning was undertaken for a given course unit, otherwise your work could be at risk of being viewed as self plagiarism.
Course learning outcomes

You’ll probably have an idea of what you hope to get from the course already. Have a look through the following learning outcomes for the course and check if they match up with your aspirations. On successful completion of the course you should be able to:

• create images that demonstrate a practical and conceptual understanding of the appropriate use of techniques

• demonstrate an emerging critical awareness and ability to translate ideas into imagery

• conduct research, development and production in response to the themes raised in this course

• show a critical understanding of contemporary imagery in relation to historical practice and theory.

Your tutor will be looking for evidence that you’re beginning to demonstrate these outcomes in your work. It’s a good idea to apply these to your progress at the end of each part of the course and reflect in your learning log on whether or not you feel you’re beginning to develop these skills.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your Student Handbook at an early stage in the course. You’ll also find the Assessment and How to Get Qualified study guide on the student website: www.oca-student.com/content/assessment-and-how-get-qualified-1

For assessment you’ll need to submit a cross-section of the work you’ve done on the course:

• Assignments Two to Five, together with the original tutor-annotated versions
• your learning log or blog url
• your tutor report forms.

Assignment One is a diagnostic assignment designed to give your tutor a feel for your work and help them decide how best to help you. It won’t count towards your final mark if you decide to go for formal assessment, but the assessors may want to see it so that they can gauge your progress.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.
Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you’re going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you’ve completed in your learning log, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

Assessment criteria points

- **Demonstration of technical and visual skills** – Materials, techniques, observational skills, visual awareness, design and compositional skills. (40%)
- **Quality of outcome** – Content, application of knowledge, presentation of work in a coherent manner, discernment, conceptualisation of thoughts, communication of ideas. (20%)
- **Demonstration of creativity** – Imagination, experimentation, invention. (20%)
- **Context** – Reflection, research, critical thinking. (20%)

Basic research tools and skills

In your studies you’ll be expected to do research on the topics you cover. As this is a Level 1 course, many of the materials you’ll use will be identified for you in the form of extracts from texts or links to online sources. Unfortunately, links do go out of date from time to time. OCA check and update these regularly but if you do find that a link no longer works, please let your tutor know immediately so that they can feed this back to OCA. In the meantime you can try a general search online in the subject area and see what else you can find relevant to the topic you’re studying. Often the same information may be available with a slightly different address as websites are updated.

As you progress through the course you may wish to do further research and here are some starting points. (Research tools and skills, and study skills in general, are covered in some detail in the introductory course ‘An Introduction to Studying at HE’) You should also try to visit as many galleries and exhibitions as you can during the course.
At a library

- handouts on how to use library facilities
- use of the internet and help in developing internet search skills
- academic journals
- specialist collections
- specialist magazines/newspapers/back editions
- photocopy services
- videos, CDs, microfiche and slides.

Using booklists

Booklists can be daunting even if you recognise some of the titles on the list. There’s a further reading list at the end of the course and your tutor may recommend other titles. You’ll need to assess the importance of some books over and above other books – you can’t read everything! Your tutors (and in some cases the course guide) will let you know which books are ‘essential’ for you to read and which are of a more general nature. All book publications are in print at the time of the course guide being published but of course this can change from year to year – OCA will republish booklists when possible.

The internet

The internet has a huge range of information and allows you to browse across an enormous range of sources. The internet should be your key research tool. If you don’t have a computer with internet access at home, make sure you set up time to use the internet at the library or at a friend’s house. Via the internet you can have access to:

- newspapers and magazines
- gallery and museum collections
- OCA website
- library catalogues and information
- relevant TV and radio programmes
- government papers
- access to specialist providers
- videos (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo)
- artists’ websites.

It’s important to be aware that not all internet sources are reliable. You’ll need to exercise judgement and at times cross-reference the information you find. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is the author of the article/information?
- Do they mention their qualifications or experience in the topic?
- Is there an obvious sponsor for the site who may have a reason to promote a particular view point?
• How old is the page and is the information updated regularly?

Have a look at any bibliography links given at the end to double-check that the information can be verified through another avenue.

There is also a great deal of information available through the OCA website and you can begin to explore this in the following exercise.

Exercise

Log on to the OCA student website. Go to ‘Research,’ then ‘Resource types’ in the drop-down menu and then ‘Online libraries.’ Explore at least one of the libraries listed.

Next, take a look at the range of study guides available on the student website. Here are just two examples:

• Many new students feel a bit apprehensive about having to write essays, especially if they haven’t done any writing of this sort since school. Take a look at the guide to Academic Essay Writing: www.oca-student.com/content/academic-essay-writing-1

• If you quote another person’s words in your essays, you must indicate the source of the quote, even if it’s from the internet. Similarly, at the end of your essay, you must provide a reference list or bibliography listing any texts or websites you’ve used. You’ll find much more about this in the guide to the Harvard referencing system on the student website: www.oca-student.com/content/harvard-referencing-system-1

Print out a copy and keep it to hand. Referencing can seem a bit daunting if you’ve not done it before, but if you take the time to learn how to reference properly now, it’ll save you a lot of time and trouble – and lost marks – later on in your studies.

Exercise

This exercise is about planning your studies. The course amounts to 400 hours of study. This works out at around eight hours a week over a year.

• Draw up a study schedule. When are you going to work?

• Where are you going to work?

• Get in touch with your tutor and arrange a date for the submission of your first assignment – and subsequent assignments if appropriate. You can also plan your study online at: www.oca-student.com/studies
Research - managing your time

As you move through OCA courses and you begin to look in more depth into your subject, the amount of reading and research required understandably increases. Having an understanding of the key issues in photography’s (relatively short history) is a fundamental part of working towards a qualification in photography. However, incorporating this research into your study schedule can be a challenge. ‘When am I going to have time to take actual photographs?’ and ‘All I seem to do is read!’ are common complaints when visual arts students first begin to struggle with significant reading lists. At the beginning of each course assignment for C&N, consider making a chart planning and plotting your time. Decide how much time you are going to allocate to your reading, to your learning log and to your final assignment and try to stick to this as much as possible. There will be times where either your reading or your photography dominates completely. But as a whole, apportioning your time in a deliberate way will ensure that you don’t feel overwhelmed by the various requirements of the course.

Summary

By now you should have:
- familiarised yourself with some of the online support that is available through the OCA website,
- written your student profile and emailed it to your tutor
- set up a learning log or blog
- drawn up a study timetable and arranged at least your first assignment deadline with your tutor
- accessed an online library and taken note of the OCA study guides that are available to you.

Now you’re ready to make a start on Part One of Photography 1: Context and Narrative. We hope you enjoy it!
Introduction

OCA student Stephanie D’Hubert, Presence of Absence series
“I think it’s certain that one doesn’t only photograph with the eyes but with all of one’s intelligence.”

Brassaï (interview with Tony Ray Jones, 1970, quoted in Brittain, 2000, p.39)

**Context: noun (Oxford English Dictionary)**
the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.

The context of a photograph and its surroundings (i.e. what’s outside the frame as opposed to what’s inside the frame) are fundamental to how it comes to exist and how it is consumed. No photograph exists without a purpose, background or context. Whether on a billboard, on a gallery wall, or in a family album, the meaning of a photograph is influenced by what surrounds it – and not just its physical location.

Most of the photography we see around us is telling us something, albeit on a subliminal (or subconscious) level. By telling us what socks to wear, where to eat and how to feel when we look in the mirror, photography impacts our subconscious state from extremes of feeling good about ourselves to feelings of dissatisfaction that prompt us to indulge our ‘needs’ because we’re ‘worth it’. The distribution of these messages is part of our society and as intelligent beings it is our responsibility to be aware of these messages.

It’s also important to be alert to the messages contained in your own images so you don’t transmit unintended meanings or fail to recognise your own visual narrative. In your development as a photographer you should aim to become a thinking photographer rather than join the masses of sleepwalking photographers who adopt every trend, new camera or filter that is thrown at them.

Context is not only the geographical placement of the photograph (Twitter, billboards, gallery), although that is very important. Context also means the ideological positioning of the photograph or series of photographs. For this reason, looking at other artists’ work, both individually and in relation to that of other practitioners, is an important element of your research and will help you to position yourself within contemporary photographic practice. Reflections of this nature are of key importance in your quest to understand the work you go on to make, what you want to communicate, and where it belongs.
Thinking about who, what, why, where and how is always a good starting point to getting beneath the surface of photography. Judith Williamson’s ‘Advertising’ articles in *Source* photographic review provide an excellent example of a critical approach. Each issue she takes a currently distributed advert and writes about it from a visual, cultural and theoretical point of view, often leaving one dumbfounded at the depth of manipulation that seems to be going on behind the scenes. You’re encouraged you to read these and comment on them as part of your studies. See: www.oca-student.com/content/her

Joachim Schmid is an example of an artist who adopts a thoughtful approach to photography. He is a German artist who had been buying photographs in large quantities from flea markets for years (he has over 100,000). When Flickr was invented he moved from collecting on the street to collecting online. (He includes his own pictures in the archive.) Schmid spotted common features among the images he collected and categorised his findings into 96 books on various themes such as feet, groups of friends, married couples on steps, etc.
As the books build upon each other, the overwhelming amount of crossovers begs the question ‘why do we all take the same picture?’ Without Schmid’s critical awareness of photography in context and obsessive collecting habit we wouldn’t have such an eloquent presentation of a shared and absurd human compulsion to record the same events in the same ways.

You can read an interview with Schmid on weareoca:
[accessed 24/02/14]

Erik Kessels is another example of someone working with the interesting question of why we all take the same pictures and what happens to them all. You can read a blog about it here and you may wish to blog about it yourself.
www.weareoca.com/photography/people-are-hungry-for-stories/
[accessed 24/02/14]

By understanding the context of particular photographs it becomes possible to obtain the fullest appreciation of the narrative(s) they convey.

**Narrative:** noun *(Oxford English Dictionary)*
- a spoken or written account of connected events; a story: a gripping narrative
- the practice or art of telling stories
- a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values.

Individual photographs and series of photographs hold within them their own narratives (i.e. what’s within the frame). This course will refer to narratives both within single pictures and series of photographs. By ‘narrative’ we mean the visual flow, the coherence of the set of images, or the construction of the single image.
Within the frame of the photograph are the elements that make up the narrative. In a series, the photographer builds upon these elements to back up the general flow of the narrative but this isn’t necessarily linear; the photographer may manipulate the elements to cause disruptions in the story line, much as a writer might in a literary narrative. The overall narrative within a series of photographs should be consistent, however. You should be able to see patterns in your images that uphold your overarching set of aims or values and you should have a means of linking the images together to create this narrative. This is why photography holds such a close relationship to film and literature; the narrative has to hold together, otherwise it would be like watching the beginning of one film and the end of another. If you’re going to challenge this – as some progressive film-makers do – you need to have a good reason for it. You don’t have to conform to standard narrative approaches, but if you’re to push the boundaries it’s important to understand why you’re doing so rather than submitting a random selection of disparate images that don’t hold together as a narrative.

Single photographs contain within them visual codes that carry meanings. Photographers such as Jeff Wall have become renowned for their painstaking attention to detail when creating the narrative of the individual image. (A better word in this context is mis-en-scène, a term used in film for the set and construction of the scene.) As on a film set, every prop, dress and character is there for a reason: all contribute to the overall narrative of the image. (There’s more on this in Part Five.)
The elements within pictures are generally there for a reason. Even in straight documentary (i.e. where elements may be there by chance rather than design) they become significant to the final reading as they become fixed in the frame and subject to lifelong scrutiny.

The implication here is that as photographers we’re aware of what we’re photographing and, even if we see something in our images that wasn’t intended, we’re critical enough to make sense of it later. Either approach is evidence of a thinking photographer.

To sum up, by being alert to both the broad context (outside the frame) and specific narratives (within the frame) of photographs, you’ll develop the means to delve deeper into creating and understanding meaningful photography. The aim of this course is to use both context and narrative to enable you to produce projects expanding upon your vision and to begin the early stages of formulating your personal voice. The course assignments are there to help you put into practice the issues discussed and to enhance your comprehension of photography and ability to create successful imagery.

Dispelling common myths about photography is an important part of this discovery. If you’ve studied Photography 1: Expressing Your Vision you’ll already be aware of the many technical myths that can be rightfully disputed, such as ‘the correct exposure’ or ‘horizons must be straight’. In much the same vein, you should be prepared to reflect on and challenge some of the conceptual myths about photography – ‘the camera never lies,’ ‘photographs are records of reality’ or ‘fact is stranger than fiction,’ for example.
Reflective writing

As you develop as a photographer, it’s important not only to develop strong technical skills but to use them effectively to promote your ideas and intentions. Your practical work should reflect what you’ve been learning both in terms of technique and your conceptual intentions.

Self-reflective writing will help you to order your own thoughts but will also help your tutor and course assessors (if you go down this route) to understand your intentions, how you intend to carry them out and how the result meets, or fails to meet, your intentions. Keep your reflective accounts relevant and concise. Be critical of your own practice – not necessarily negative, but thoughtful and reflective, perhaps with a little distance. Write factually about how your technical decisions, ideas and contextualisation have come together to create a successful (or, in some cases, not so successful) final outcome. Give reasons as to why you believe the outcome is successful/unsuccessful; this will help you progress next time and will provide a basis for discussion with your tutor. At assessment it will also demonstrate how well you understand your own work, which is very important.

Ideas books and diaries can be useful adjuncts to the learning log that records your artistic journey. Get into the habit of making notes as you go about your normal routines; these may prove very useful when you look back on them later. You’ll be using a diary in Part Three so you may wish to get a head start by keeping one from the beginning of the course.

Overall it is our hope that you’ll combine technique, personal intention and contextualisation in the final outcome to produce compelling and coherent practical projects that evidence a depth of research and personal vision.
Part one
The photograph as document

OCA student Simon Taylor, Buckingham Palace
“...it is a different nature that speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye.”

Walter Benjamin (from 'Art in the age of mechanical reproduction', 1936)

In each genre the work is situated within a certain context and the issues surrounding these contexts are the focus of Parts One to Five of this course. The narratives within images are also situated within – and to some extent determined by – their contexts. How we read a work is affected by how it’s positioned: we read a news picture in a very different way to a photograph on a book cover. All this information adds to the discussion around individual images and how they’re positioned within photography as a wider discipline, and therefore how we can understand them.

The aim of Part One is to help you engage in the debate about ‘photography and truth’. You’ll think about the extent to which straight documentary is a record or document, i.e. whether a photograph is an accurate representation of an event. Through looking at historical and contemporary examples, you’ll consider how trustworthy photographs actually are. You’ll look at some different definitions of documentary photography, and consider the place for the documentary photograph within art photography. Finally, you’ll be challenged to use documentary photography to speak about something that isn’t true or to use it in a way that emphasises the point that a photograph doesn’t tell the whole story.
A photograph gives us the impression that we were there. By offering us a point of view on an event or scene, we are tricked, however momentarily, into believing that we’re looking at the scene rather than a photograph of the scene. We’re not eyewitnesses, only the photographer was there, but the photograph gives us the impression that we are. Once we realise that we’re looking at a piece of paper with a version of reality on it, rather than reality itself, we can begin to understand more fully the information we’re being offered, try to uncover its context, and reconsider our position to it in a more informed and critical manner.

The notion of photography as evidence is problematic because of many factors that are beyond our control as viewers. Who was taking the photograph? What was their agenda or intention? What did they choose to omit? When did they decide to press the button?

It is common practice today to use citizen journalism in newspapers. The rise of Twitter and other social networking means that images are instantly sent across the world, even in times of extreme emergency, direct from the centre of the action. Think of Syria, for example, and Abu Graib (Bull, 2009, p.120). The very accessibility of cameraphone photography means that the images they produce can be swiftly distributed in the most extreme of circumstances. This same quality means that ‘private’ images taken by those who happen to be present can also make their way into the public realm. What and who can we believe?

### Exercise

Find some examples of news stories where ‘citizen journalism’ has exposed or highlighted abuses of power.

How do these pictures affect the story, if at all? Are these pictures objective? Can pictures ever be objective?

Write a list of the arguments for and against. For example, you might argue that these pictures do have a degree of objectivity because the photographer (presumably) didn’t have time to ‘pose’ the subjects, or perhaps even to think about which viewpoint to adopt. On the other hand, the images we see in newspapers may be selected from a series of images and how can we know the factors that determined the choice of final image?

Think about objectivity in documentary photography and make some notes in your learning log before reading further.
Documentary and social reform

The Farm Security Administration (FSA), 1935–44, was set up as an agency to look out for the good of farmers who had been badly affected by the Great Depression. The men who set it up, Rexford Tugwell and Roy Stryker, “were convinced of the power of photographs to give a human reality to economic arguments…” (Dyer, 2006, p.3). Among the photographers working for the FSA were Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, who produced some of the most iconic images from the period.

![Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, 1936](via Wikimedia Commons)

*Migrant Mother* came not only to represent the particular family in the picture but all the other families suffering the same plight. Perhaps because of its direct resemblance to images of the Madonna and child, it became emblematic in its own right, creating problems of ownership and payment rights for the people in the picture. Although there’s no doubt that the FSA’s expansive photography project raised awareness of the situation across the country, there was scepticism around how the images were commissioned.
Stryker would give the photographers lists of photographs he wanted them to find, for example. One such list for ‘Summer’ (Dyer, 2006, p.4) included:

Crowded cars going out on the open road. Gas station attendant filling tank of open touring and convertible cars.

Rock gardens: sun parasols; beach umbrellas; sandy shores with gently swelling waves; whitecaps showering spray over sailboat in distant horizon.

People standing in shade of trees and awnings. Open windows on street cars and buses; drinking water from spring or old well; shady spot along bank – sun on water beyond; swimming pools, rivers, and creeks.

Such a controlled approach to photography leaves the integrity and altruism of the FSA open to suspicion. Dorothea Lange herself believed that “to know ahead of time what you’re looking for means you’re then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting” (ibid., p.6).

See Martha Rosler’s 1981 essay ‘In, Around and Afterthoughts (on documentary photography)’ for a more in-depth discussion. This is available to read online.

Lewis Hine (1874–1940) believed that photography should be a vehicle for social reform. As a political activist Hine used photography, particularly photographs of children in factories and enduring poor working conditions, to raise awareness and promote social change. Combined with captions provided by Hine highlighting the perils the children experienced on a daily basis, the images helped achieve a convincing condemnation of the law on child labour.
Three critical viewpoints

1. Charity – Martha Rosler
   “…which political battles have been fought and won by someone for someone else?”
   Martha Rosler believed that the social conscience of well-meaning photographers such as Lewis Hine was not helping the social situation because it reinforced the gap between rich and poor. She argued that the need for the poor to rely on the rich for sustenance and social change is not beneficial in the long term and that it’s simply a way of reinforcing hierarchical structures imposed by capitalism.

2. Compassion fatigue – Susan Sontag
   “In these last decades ‘concerned’ photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.”
   (Sontag, 1979, p.21)
   Sontag argued that bombarding the public with sensationalist photographs of war and poverty was a certain way to numb the public’s response. She believed that the more distressing images people saw, the more immune they became to their impact; viewers became reduced to inaction, either through guilt or a dismissive lethargy towards making a difference.
   Sontag reversed this view in Regarding the Pain of Others (2004), but ‘compassion fatigue’ is still used as an argument against war imagery today.
3. Inside/Out – Abigail Solomon-Godeau

In her 1994 essay ‘Inside/out’, Solomon-Godeau argues against a binary insider/outsider approach to documentary photography: either voyeuristic and objective on the one hand or subjective and ‘confessional’ on the other. A way forward would be to avoid both these positions and produce work which provides a distanced look at the subject as well as offering some sort of ‘truth’, which may not be the truth. She offers Robert Frank’s *The Americans* and Ed Ruscha’s work as good examples. She also believed that Martha Rosler’s way of depicting the Bowery was shifting the debate from an inside/outside one and into the realm of representation, which she saw as stemming from art photography.

This essay is quite hard to find, but you can read a summary/discussion of it in *La Grange*, 2005, Chapter 6 (p.125). This volume also contains a summary of the first part of Martha Rosler’s essay (Chapter 5, p.113).

**Research point**

If you’re interested in the critical debates around photojournalism, try and make time to find out more about at least one of these critical positions during your work on Part One. Here are some questions to start you off:

- Do you think Martha Rosler is unfair on socially driven photographers like Lewis Hine? Is there a sense in which work like this is exploitative or patronising? Does this matter if someone benefits in the long run? Can photography change situations?
- Do you think images of war are necessary to provoke change? Do you agree with Sontag’s earlier view that horrific images of war numb viewers’ responses? Read your answer again when you’ve read the next section on aftermath photography and note whether your view has changed. See also: http://lightbox.time.com/2014/01/28/when-photographs-of-atrocities-dont-shock/#1 [accessed 24/02/14]
- Do you need to be an insider in order to produce a successful documentary project?
Aftermath and aesthetics

Recent years have seen a shift from an action-based and highly visceral kind of war photography towards ‘aftermath’ photography – quiet, contemplative, often large-scale and aesthetically beautiful images of places of devastation. In fact this approach is reminiscent of the work of one of the earliest war photographers, Roger Fenton, who photographed battle scenes with dead bodies and took portraits of soldiers in quieter moments. Contemporary versions of this form are usually devoid of people and engender a pensive mindset in the viewer.

In his 2003 essay ‘Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on the problem of ‘late photography”, David Campany sets out his concerns about the ability of aftermath (or ‘late’) photography to convey the complexity of political events. In particular he considers Joel Meyerowitz, the official photographer selected to photograph scenes after 9/11, whose work he considers too safe and beautiful and therefore not fitting for depicting the horrific scenes of terrorism.
Campany argues that these large-scale contemplative works become a monument to national grief that deadens the desire to seek a political explanation:

“Certainly the late photograph is often used as a vehicle for mass mourning or working through ... The danger is that it can also foster an indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as concern. Mourning by association becomes merely an aestheticized response.”

Campany’s essay is easy to follow and worth a read. You’ll find it online at: http://davidcampany.com/safety-in-numbness/ [accessed 24/02/14]

In combining the horror of the situation and the aesthetic pull of the image, the 9/11 ‘falling man’, like Migrant Mother, came to sum up a whole epoch.

In 2002 Paul Seawright was commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to make a series of images of the war in Afghanistan. He adopted an aftermath approach: devoid of action, a lingering threat lurks behind the stillness of these images. The title Hidden also directs us to an invisible danger.
Although not in the context of war, Edgar Martins pushed the boundaries of aftermath or late photography when he produced a photo essay for the New York Times of the house price crash in America, *Ruins of the Second Gilded Age* (2009). Martins went to abandoned and often half-finished housing projects to photograph them with a large format camera. The quiet images were symbolic of the collapse of the housing market and the aftermath approach emphasised the lack of movement in economic recovery. This work also became the subject of a heightened debate surrounding digital manipulation. (You’ll return to this later in Part One.)
The term ‘documentary’ has come to cover a variety of genres (news, journalism, art). ‘Reportage’ has an equally ambiguous definition within the wider documentary arena.

While some news coverage may be done in a reportage manner (on the ground, close to the action), generally speaking reportage is more closely related to a subjective way of storytelling than the more objective intentions of photojournalism. In reportage what is implied is a story from the point of view of one person, showing expression and movement, as though one is experiencing the story for oneself. This is in contrast to a more distanced style, often described as cold, which lends itself better to typology and other categorical and informative uses of the medium. (See Eugene Atget’s frontal views of Parisian buildings and their inhabitants.)

The ‘decisive moment’, Henri Cartier-Bresson’s famous phrase, fits well in the context of reportage. The decisive moment is not simply the right moment caught by the photographer that makes a good picture, although that could be part of it; it’s the ability of one picture to tell a bigger story about an event or issue. It’s about all the components coming together within one frame to speak of something beyond the frame.

In the image above, Bresson photographs a Belgian Gestapo informer being revealed to the crowd before she could hide among them. The elements of the picture, the reversed roles it reveals, and the anger in the accuser’s face, have become symbolic of the Allied victory in Europe in 1945. This is a decisive moment, when the press of a button tells a much wider story in an instant.
Nan Goldin (b.1953) is an example of a very personal and subjective use of reportage photography. Depicting her personal friendship circles in very intimate settings (including scenes with sex, alcohol and drugs), Goldin portrays herself as an insider within this group and therefore shows us an experience of life through a reportage or snapshot style, albeit a very well developed aesthetic one.

**Colour and the street**

Street photography began life in black and white, in an age when colour photography was deemed unrealistic because it carried connotations of advertising. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Eve Arnold, Robert Frank and Walker Evans, amongst many others, paved the way for reportage to be used in an artistic way, with no functional purpose other than to tell viewers about life from the point of view of the photographer. As colour photography began to be accepted as an art form in the late twentieth century, street photography followed suit.

**Research point**

Do some research into contemporary street photography. Helen Levitt, Joel Meyerowitz, Paul Graham, Joel Sternfeld and Martin Parr are some good names to start with, but you may be able to find further examples for yourself.

- What difference does colour make to a genre that traditionally was predominantly black and white?
- Can you spot the shift away from the influence of surrealism (as in Cartier-Bresson’s work)?
- How is irony used to comment on British-ness or American values?

Make notes in your learning log.
Exercise

Find a street that particularly interests you – it may be local or further afield. Shoot 30 colour images and 30 black and white images in a street photography style.

In your learning log, comment on the differences between the two formats.

What difference does colour make? Which set do you prefer and why?
A brief review of some major exhibitions that happened in New York and London between 1967 and 2008 demonstrates not only how photography was changing, both in how it was made and how it was presented to the public, but also how notions about ‘documentary photography’ shifted during the same period.

In 1967 John Szarkowski curated the show *New Documents* at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). His aim was to demonstrate a new kind of documentary photography in America and he selected Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand to make his point. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, general opinion had regarded all photographs as documents. After photography began to be accepted as art, Szarkowski saw the need to differentiate.

The press release from MoMA in 1967 said:

“In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it.”

In 1978, also at MoMA, Szarkowski curated the exhibition *Mirrors and Windows* with the aim of providing a critically balanced view of the development of art photography in America over the previous two decades. Within ten years MoMA had expanded its understanding of photography, seeing it as moving out of the realm of documents and into art.

The UK finally caught up with America in 2003 when Tate Modern put on its first exhibition devoted to photography. *Cruel and Tender* was the first of its kind in Britain and examined photography’s relationship with realism. Artists such as August Sander and Lewis Baltz were shown alongside Philip-Lorca DiCorcia and William Eggleston to demonstrate the diverse nature of photography and its relationship with truth. Accepted notions of photography as a factual recording device were challenged, allowing photography to enter into the currency of ‘art’.

Project 4
The gallery wall – documentary as art
The Tate’s fourth exhibition dedicated to photography, *Street and Studio* (2008), amongst other things questioned perceived notions of candid moments or real events (traditionally linked with the street) and staged moments or made-up events (traditionally linked with the studio) and how such distinctions were becoming blurred. In interrogating preconceived notions of what is real (candid street photography) and not real (staged imagery), this exhibition assumed that photography was an art form and was no longer trying to convince us of the case. We had moved on and the myth of ‘the camera never lies’ was debunked.

The two Tate shows reveal a dramatic shift in thinking about photography in the UK over a short period of time. Photography was now recognised as an art form in its own right. Candid photography was no longer viewed as a ‘real moment’ but instead was beginning to be seen as a ‘representation’ of a real moment. Within five years, distinctions between what was real and what was not had become blurred. Staged events were happening on the street and candid moments were being captured in the studio. As styles changed, so did the understanding of what ‘real’ meant in relation to photography. As a result, photography was seen less as a record of reality and more as an expression of it and this change in perception was being presented to the public at last.

**Research point**

Look online at Paul Seawright’s work, *Sectarian Murders*.

- How does this work challenge the boundaries between documentary and art? Listen to Paul Seawright talk about his work at: [http://vimeo.com/76940827](http://vimeo.com/76940827) [accessed 24/02/14]
- What is the core of his argument? Do you agree with him?
- If we define a piece of documentary photography as art, does this change its meaning?
On first seeing Sarah Pickering’s series *Public Order* what we appear to be looking at are eerily empty houses and streets, perhaps photographed early in the morning or with an element of post-production applied to remove signs of life. Either way, we’re left feeling uncomfortable and even unsafe; destruction and danger seem to lurk there.

The uncanniness increases as we look closer. Constructs and façades emerge and things are suddenly not as they seem. Why are all the windows boarded up? Why is there so much debris? What has happened? We start to form our own narrative, based on news reports, past experiences, hearsay...

Pickering photographed police training grounds – towns set up with the sole purpose of practising for real-life emergencies. Now the mask is lifted the series makes more sense; we’re released from our unease and able to share the enjoyment of the work, safe in the knowledge that it’s a controlled environment. However what this clever piece of art documentary does is drip-feed scenarios into our subconscious. Why do these places exist? What do they do there? What else don’t we know about? It becomes disconcerting all over again but in a very different way. By using a visual strategy that makes us question and probe the work, Pickering enables us to challenge society norms that we take for granted or wouldn’t otherwise think about.
Exercise

Look at some more images from this series on the artist’s website.

- How do Pickering’s images make you feel?
- Is Public Order an effective use of documentary or is it misleading?

Make some notes in your learning log.
Alessandra Sanguinetti is a Magnum photographer. In her imaginative series *The Adventures of Guille and Belinda and the Enigmatic Meaning of their Dreams*, she documents the lives of two young girls growing up, their relationship as sisters and their lifestyle in South America. However a more complicated layer is added to this work as Sanguinetti portrays and interprets the girls’ imaginative play and dreams into visual depictions of fantasy. In one sense, it’s a documentary project as it follows the lives of these girls over a period of time, giving us insight into a different way of life. On another level, it fits within the realms of fiction and fantasy, and is perhaps more at home in an art gallery with no fixed meaning attached. The strength of this work lies in its ambiguity. By refusing to lead the viewer to which images are ‘real’ and which are not, the work itself becomes part of a wider spectrum using a documentary approach to encompass ideas of art and recording.

Both these examples show how documentary-style photography can be used to challenge what is real. Instead of claiming to give objective points of view, these photographers have used an objective style of photography to make a point about creating fictional, constructed and ultimately subjective realities.
With the increase in technological advances, including post-production software which enables relatively easy cloning or other adaptation methods, there’s now a debate about the degree to which manipulation is acceptable. This debate is not a new one, as you’ll see.

One of the first photographs ever taken was a staging of the photographer’s own death. Hippolyte Bayard (1801–87) had invented a photographic direct positive process before Daguerre and Fox Talbot (the men usually accredited with inventing photography) but hadn’t got any recognition for it. In an ironic reaction to the sense of injustice he felt, Bayard took a photograph of himself as a drowned man.
This was the text written on the back:

The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you. As far as I know this indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with his discovery. The Government which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself. Oh the vagaries of human life....! ... He has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and gentlemen, you’d better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay.

Across the Channel, Victorians were fascinated by spirit photography. Photographers would make money from unsuspecting clients by charging above the odds for a portrait with a deceased family member’s image appearing on the print. Of course the photographers knew certain techniques of blending negatives and double exposure and to a modern eye it seems unbelievable that people were taken in by this phenomenon.

The ghost of a man’s wife appears before him, c.1870

Ada Deane, Spirit photograph taken of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1922
The Cottingley Fairies, 1917, was part of a set of five pictures taken by two teenage girls, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, who claimed they played with and took photos of fairies in their garden. The press got hold of their story and it became a subject for debate for decades to come. Remarkably it wasn’t until the 1970s that the hoax was confirmed.
Oscar Gustav Rejlander (1813–75) became known as the father of art photography and a master of photomontage. His work *Two Ways of Life* was constructed using over 30 separate negatives and depicts the life of a sinner versus the life of a saint in one highly elaborate tableau.

Oscar Rejlander, *Two Ways of Life*, 1857

**Exercise**

Instead of using double exposures or printing from double negatives we now have the technology available to us to make these changes in post-production, allowing for quite astonishing results.

Use digital software such as Photoshop to create a composite image which visually appears to be a documentary photograph but which could never actually be.

To make a composite image you need to consider your idea and make the required amount of images to join together.

Upload the images and decide which image you’ll use as your main image and background. Use the magic wand to select sections of image from the others you wish to move into your background image. Copy via layer and drag into the background. Do this repeatedly until you have all the pieces of your puzzle in place. In order to make it more convincing, use the erase tool on each layer to keep the edges soft and to create a better illusion. Be aware of perspective and light and shadows for the most effective results.
Technological manipulation may not be solely a modern phenomenon, but that doesn’t help us with where to draw the line. And modern use of digital manipulation doesn’t necessarily equate to a ‘lie’. In fact some artists have used it to illuminate a subject or add a different point of view.

In her Young Musicians series, Wendy McMurdo photographed children playing instruments and computer games but digitally removed the instruments and computers in post-production. This forces the viewer to look at the psychological state of the child. The subjects seem emotionally heightened and almost trance-like in appearance and the point about the impact of technology and music is strongly made.
We hope that Part One has demonstrated to you that each photograph is a ‘point of view’ that depends on the time it was taken, the person who took it (no matter how objective they try to be) and the things outside the frame, unknown to the viewer, which may add or take away from what’s revealed in the frame. In this sense every photograph, regardless of its visual accuracy, is a manipulation of reality. A photograph cannot tell the whole story and is therefore part of a wider narrative. This is an important point that is often overlooked in the dissemination of news and facts in media and popular culture. Although photography has played an important role in providing information, for example in photojournalism and historical archives, we must take its context into consideration in order to fully understand the whole story.

Now that you’ve reached the end of Part One, reflect on what you’ve learned in your learning log or blog.

• What was your idea of documentary photography before you worked on Part One? How would you now sum it up?
• What are the differences between documentary, reportage, photojournalism and art photography?

Exercise


Does digital technology change how we see photography as truth? Consider both sides of the argument and make some notes in your learning log.
Assignment one

Two sides of the story

This assignment is designed to give your tutor a feel for your work and won’t count towards your final grade if you decide to have your work assessed. However, the assessors may wish to see it so that they can gauge your progress across the course.

Create at least two sets of photographs telling different versions of the same story. The aim of the assignment is to help you explore the convincing nature of documentary, even though what the viewer thinks they see may not in fact be true. Try to make both sets equally convincing so that it’s impossible to tell which version of the images is ‘true’.

It might be interesting to consider the project as evidence for a court case. What conflicting stories can you make your images convincingly tell? Would it stand up in court?

Choose a theme and aim for 5–7 images for each set, depending on your idea. Discuss this with your tutor.

Here are a few ideas:
• You could interpret this brief by showing the same scenario from two different angles. Does this alter how we read the situation?
• You may wish to create an alter ego by using snapshots of yourself or a friend. This could involve photographing them in two very different and potentially conflicting personas.
• You could make a parody of a dating website profile picture. Create different versions of the same person looking completely different in each one. Which one represents them best and how can we know?

Or you may prefer to use your own take on the theme. However you choose to interpret the brief, ensure the images are candid and ‘taken from real life’. Be experimental and take some risks. Perhaps you could make a list of ideas and choose the most challenging or absurd option to stretch yourself.

Send your sets of images to your tutor by the method you’ve agreed. Include an introduction of 300 words outlining what you set out to do and how you went about it. Also send to your tutor the relevant pages of your learning log or your blog url.

It’s good to get in the habit of printing your work so try to send prints to your tutor where possible. This is not obligatory but will help when it comes to assessment. Developing your prints in order to achieve the best results is a long process so it’s best to start now.
Reflection

Before you send your work to your tutor, check it against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course and make sure that it meets all the criteria. Make your evaluation available to your tutor.

Your tutor may take a while to get back to you. Carry on with the course while you’re waiting but please don’t attempt the next assignment until you’ve received your tutor’s feedback on this one.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you plan to submit your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you’ve done and why in your learning log.
Part two **Narrative**

OCA student Stephanie D’Hubert, *Three unsmoked cigars in a box*, from *Presence of Absence* series
You’ll recall from the introduction to this course that narrative is about what falls within the frame. The simplest view of narrative is a story with a beginning, middle and end, but while this is a very acceptable form of storytelling, it isn’t the only way of working. You’ll start your work on Part Two by looking at the linear storyline and the challenge to this way of storytelling posed by postmodernism. Next, you’ll consider how you can use image and text together to create your chosen narrative. Finally, you’ll look at how images can be used to tell us about things we can’t see with our own eyes, for example what it’s like to live with a disability.
Linear storylines have often been used in photo essays, telling a story chronologically from an insider’s point of view. In 1948 W. Eugene Smith made a photo essay for LIFE magazine. *Country Doctor* chronicles the ups and downs in the life of general practitioner Dr. Ernest Ceriani from Colorado over 23 days.

Initially, Smith shot with no film in his camera to help Ceriani get used to his presence without wasting precious film.

Read more here:
The chronological picture or photo essay is something that is often repeated in contemporary photography and can be very compelling, like Bryony Campbell’s work documenting her father’s death from cancer, *The Dad Project* (2009).

“Being a good daughter to my dying dad was tricky. I struggled to find the balance between dedication to his needs and distraction from my grief. At first the idea of introducing a camera into this equation seemed unwise, but eventually I think it became the solution.

This is the story of an ending without an ending. And I hope it always will be. This is my attempt to say goodbye to my Dad with the help of my camera.”

"I couldn't be a photographer when this happened, I was a daughter. After I'd swept up the glass I paused, for what felt like a long while, before managing to photograph the milkshake stain. Perhaps I'd proved (to myself or my parents? I'm not sure which was the necessity) that I was a daughter before a photographer."

Read Campbell’s accompanying text which contextualises this project, much like the photo essays of the 1940s: www.brionycampbell.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/The_Dad_Project_Briony_Campbell.pdf [accessed 24/02/14]

Exercise

- How does Bryony Campbell’s *The Dad Project* compare with *Country Doctor*?
- What do you think she means by ‘an ending without an ending’?

Make some notes in your learning log.
Campbell’s comment about an ending without an ending seems to be a personal projection on what she believes is a deferred goodbye. In narrative terms, though, the project does have an ending, a sad ending, which brings the project to a close and has also contributed to its acclaim. The Dad Project has offered comfort to many viewers and the process itself had a positive impact on Campbell’s relationship with her father, enabling them to co-author the final project. The ending is also intrinsic to the final outcome in the impact it delivers to the viewer.

Using pictures to tell a story

We all know the famous adage that a picture tells a thousand words. With this as your premise, think about how you can use pictures in the best way to forge your own stories.

First, a word on terminology. Magnum photographer David Hurn, in conversation with Bill Jay in the book On Being a Photographer, differentiates between the picture essay and the picture story:

“I cannot think of a good term which defines a series or sequence of pictures where the whole, the group, is stronger, visually and emotionally, than any of the individual images. I agree [with Jay] that a set of pictures is never narrative in the usual meaning of the word. For this reason, I think the word essay is slightly better than story.

When I talk about the picture or photographic essay I mean a group of images in which each picture is supporting and strengthening all the others; not that the sequencing of the pictures can be read like a string of words.

Take Robert Frank’s The Americans, for example. It is a superb photographic essay – but it is not narrative in the visual sense. The sequencing of the pictures might have a visual logic but that is very different from a narrative/idea logic…”

(Hurn & Jay, 1997, p.41)
Linear picture narratives like those discussed above guide us from a beginning point to an end point which is in line with classical ways of forming narrative. The sequencing of the images is important in ordering the unfolding narrative; we’re guided by the photographer’s intentions. However, there’s an important difference between the picture essay (or story) and a piece of classical prose. A writer will give you the information they want to tell you in a precise order that you, as reader, aren’t in control of (unless you read the back pages first). With picture essays the viewer is to some extent in control of the order in which they view the pictures. Even if the narrative is presented in a book, people tend to flick through and stop at images that particularly catch their attention. Each individual viewer will see different parts of a picture in different ways; some won’t even notice a part that is the primary focus for another. In this sense the photographic narrative is a lot looser than a literary one. Photographers have used this to their advantage whilst creating a cohesive set of images that build upon and strengthen each other. Robert Frank’s *The Americans* is a very good example of this.

When you’re creating your narrative (or essay, or story) bear these points in mind and consider how your viewer will ‘read’ your story, namely:

- Do the pictures have a consistent theme?
- What elements back up your central theme?
- What disrupts it?
- Are there good reasons for this disruption?
- Do the images have a visual consistency that holds them together as a recognisable set?

Postmodernism has challenged the classical ‘rules’ of narrative across genres. Think about this next.

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1 This could be argued from a literary perspective as well. Some readers will ignore or skip certain phrases that seem irrelevant to them and hone in on those that resonate. See ‘Postmodern narrative’.
Postmodern narrative

In postmodern literature, experimental authors have challenged the beginning, middle and end narrative and the notion of authorship control that had its roots in traditional and classical literature. ‘The Death of the Author’ is an influential poststructuralist position stated by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay of the same name. In fact writers such as Alfred Tennyson and the modernist writers Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot had already put this into practice, as have contemporary authors such as Italo Calvino and Zadie Smith. Postmodern techniques include the incorporation of fragments of other texts, the use of ambiguous or open-ended plots and unresolved endings, and reduced use of descriptive language. These experimental approaches allow authors to let go of authorship control and major plot lines in preference of stream of consciousness, developing characters and playing with expectations and language. Ultimately they allow the reader to put themselves into the story, with their personal histories and memories playing an important role in how the narrative is read.

In other words, Barthes’ (and Michel Foucault’s) rallying cry of the death of the author wasn’t about the mass murder of creative people with something to say, but rather a call to the reader to become less passive in their consumption of literature and art. Some writers, poets and artists began to create work that asked more of the viewer/reader – and was often condemned as inaccessible as a result – but Barthes believed that a more active approach to reading opened up endless possibilities of interpretation and created a more enriching experience.

Now it is often jested that our generation is living in the age of ‘the death of the death of the author’. That’s because the term eventually became widely overused and was wrongly interpreted as suggesting that technique didn’t matter.
Picture essays such as W. Eugene Smith’s for magazines such as LIFE and TIME were often printed with heavy text accompaniments, placed there to enhance the story and give extra factual information about the pictures. As you’ve seen, Bryony Campbell did this from a very personal perspective in her essay on *The Dad Project*.

In his 1967 essay ‘Rhetoric of the Image’, Roland Barthes gave us two terms that help define different ways of using words with pictures:

- **Anchor** – In news stories the text that accompanies pictures is usually there to control meaning – to stop the image from being interpreted in a manner that isn’t in keeping with the political views of the newspaper, for example. In advertising this type of anchoring text is used to fix the meaning of the image into one clear and distinct message (i.e. why you should buy this product).

- **Relay** – In the second definition the text has equal status with the image. Image and text bounce off each other to create a fuller picture that allows for ambiguity and various interpretations. This is more in line with a postmodern view of narrative.

Both ‘The Death of the Author’ and ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ are widely available to read online.

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**Exercise**

Cut out some pictures from a newspaper and write your own captions.

- How do the words you put next to the image contextualise/re-contextualise it?
- How many meanings can you give to the same picture?

Try the same exercise for both anchoring and relaying. Blog about it.
Research point

Examples of relay in contemporary photographic practice include Sophie Calle’s *Take Care of Yourself* and Sophy Rickett’s *Objects in the Field* (see interview in the Appendix to this course guide) where clashes of understanding or interpretation work together to create a perhaps incomplete but nonetheless enriching dialogue between artist and viewer.

Look these pieces up online. Investigate the rationale behind the pieces and see if you can find any critical responses to them. Write down your own responses in your learning log.

• How do these two pieces of work reflect postmodern approaches to narrative?
• Another way to incorporate text into an image-based project is to include interviews or audio.

The New York Times has a simple but effective project online called *One in 8 Million* about the inhabitants of New York. It includes images of people from different walks of life and professions with audio clips overlaid to give a voice to the subject. It is a clever way of celebrating the richness and diversity of a city with such cultural and social diversity.

Some photographers use interviews and diaries to incorporate text with their images.

Have a look at these examples:

Kaylyn Deveney – *The Day-to-Day Life of Alfred Hastings*
www.kaylyndeveney.com/bertintrotext.htm [accessed 24/02/14]

Karen Knorr – *Gentlemen*
www.karenknorr.com/photographs/archives/gentlemen/ [accessed 24/02/14]
Duane Michals is an influential American photographer who places text on top of, or close by, the photographs. The text is often hand written, giving a personal and intimate quality to the work. Look up Michal’s work online. In particular, look carefully at the image entitled *This Photograph is My Proof* (1974).

Below the photograph it reads:

> This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon, when things were still good between us, and she embraced me, and we were so happy. It did happen, she did love me. Look see for yourself!
Michals pairs image and text so that they build upon one another to create a fuller reading for the viewer. He also refers to the medium of photography in his texts to challenge notions of what a photograph is; this self-reference is another technique characteristic of postmodernism. Is this image actually proof of a happy liaison or is that just what we choose to see? What do you think?

Using image and text well together can enhance a project and articulate interesting and sometimes clashing ideas. If this is something you would like to consider for your own narrative, think carefully about your method and how it would best suit your story. Use the above examples as inspiration. Your text could be in the form of captions, an accompanying essay, interviews (audio or written), excerpts of diaries or your own ideas.

Selecting a subject

David Hurn (1997, pp.43–44) talks about the difference between a photographer and someone who is interested in photography. He says that the person who becomes a photographer is not interested in photography as an end result but uses photography to pursue an intense interest in something else:

“…photography is only a tool, a vehicle, for expressing or transmitting a passion in something else.”

This is an important point, otherwise your photography will be about using the best lenses, filters, etc., and creating ‘impressive photographs’ without actually having anything to say. He goes on…

“It comes down to the choice of subject. The photographer must have intense curiosity, not just a passing interest, in the theme of the pictures. This curiosity leads to intense examination, reading, talking, research and many, many failed attempts over a long period of time.”
In other words, the best work is personally driven and, for this reason, the course assignment guidelines are not prescriptive. Rather, they’ll serve as catalysts for you to build on your own interests: open-ended enough to give you freedom of interpretation but hopefully with enough inspiration to give you a springboard into your own imagination. As you develop your contextualisation and research and look at photography that inspires you, you’ll gradually discover how to choose the right subject for you.
Exercise

The aim of this exercise (and Assignment Two) is to encourage you to develop metaphorical and visceral interpretations rather than obvious and literal ones, to give a sense of something rather than a record of it.

Choose a poem that resonates with you then interpret it through photographs. Don't attempt to describe the poem but instead give a sense of the feeling of the poem and the essence it exudes.

Start by reading the poem a few times (perhaps aloud) and making a note of the feelings and ideas it promotes, how you respond to it, what it means to you and the mental images it raises in your mind. Next, think about how you're going to interpret this visually and note down your ideas in your learning log.

You may choose to develop this idea into creating a short series of images reflecting your personal response to the poem (or another poem). Write some reflective notes about how you would move the above exercise on.

The number of pictures you choose to produce for the exercises and assignments in this course, including this one, is up to you. Try to keep in mind the following tips for knowing when you have done enough/not done enough:

- Are the images repeating themselves? Are there three versions of the same picture for example? Can you take two out?
- Does each image give a different point of view or emphasise a point you want to make?
- Do the images sit well together visually?
- Have you given the viewer enough information? Would another picture help?
This may seem like a contradiction in terms and on a literal level it is. However the idea of poetry and prose being simply about description is an outdated idea. In order for literature to move on, writers had to move past descriptive texts in favour of ‘showing, not telling’ in their work. Photography suffers from the same problem. Being a visual medium and, as you’ve seen, often regarded as a ‘true’ record of reality, it can be hard for users of the medium to see its more poetical attributes. Using photography this way can help shift it from operating within a literal scope to a more evocative and affecting one, moving it into the realm of the arts.

Peter Mansell, Drug Packaging, from the series Paralysis
To inspire you in your narrative photography, read about how some Level 3 OCA students have developed their work in this area.

**Three case studies**

The following examples are from Level 3 OCA students who have chosen to explore themes that are not necessarily visible. All use metaphor to portray their ideas rather than a more straightforward method of representation.

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**Peter Mansell**

Pete suffered a spinal cord injury as a result of a traffic accident when he was 20 and has lived most of his life as a paraplegic. His projects deal with how his injury has affected his life.

As Pete looked for the visual traces of his injury and its impact on his life, the camera became an investigative tool for a greater cause than just taking ‘nice pictures’. Here, he talks about his work.

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*Peter Mansell, Examining, from the series Check Up*
How did you begin to think about photography as the best means to portray what your injury means to you?

Photography has offered me a way of articulating my reality in a way no other medium can. I could write about my experience, or paint about it, but in doing so the reader or viewer would have to rely wholly on my imagination and abilities of expression to relate to my experience. The fact that it’s a photo means there is a direct relationship with reality at its centre and thus offers me the chance to make a particular statement about my experience. But I did not know this when I set out...

How did you begin to find the visual expression for such a personal experience? How did the pictures begin to emerge?

At the time I started my first OCA course I saw photos in terms of visual spectacle and photography in terms of technical proficiency. As my exploration continued and my technical competence grew, that area became more habitual and I found my research and practice began a subtle but profound shift in interest.

I became attracted to speaking visually about things that were important to me rather than creating beautiful or spectacular pictures in order to meet a course requirement. This resulted in my creating images that were often much more mundane in terms of subject matter.

Looking back I can see this first becoming apparent in Digital Photographic Practice Assignment Five, where the assignment brief was to: Choose a subject or theme for which I have personal enthusiasm and that will over a period of time build up to and culminate in a collection of around 12 images. The sorts of images I created were about my impairment and showed things others don't see, either because they are hidden or because they wouldn't notice them. For example, not many people see this space below as it's the place I sit in my wheelchair in the front room, but by documenting this, the meaning of the photo changes.

The effect of creating such images was cathartic. I had not realised just how much emotional pressure I had repressed for so many years.

As I progressed I found that I was being drawn to use photography more and more as a form of expression as the process of creation often saw me though pain and anguish while the end product acted as a visual statement about my existence and that experience. In a way it sort of objectified my situation or experience and by so doing released me emotionally.
How did you edit the work? What was important to you about what the work conveyed?

I tend to begin by having a general objective and a loose framework (made up of a timescale and rough areas of exploration) and this allows room for experimentation and serendipity. For example, when beginning Social Documentary I was hospitalised and so used the time to shoot one assignment while in bed.

The actual workflow editing begins with a whole number of shots taken where the general approach has been thought about and decided upon. For example in Landscape Assignment Three: A Linking Theme, I wanted to evoke a feeling of claustrophobia and compression and so used a square format in that series.

What advice would you give a Level 1 student who is beginning to think about how to use photography as a means of personal expression?

I think of the OCA courses as frameworks that offer a structure by which ones own exploration can take place. So I refer to those frameworks but would suggest students don’t plan a really tight schedule of what to read and shoot. Rather they should think about what they value and what they might like to say or explore and then pursue that interest within the framework of the OCA course. (The full interview is in the Appendix to this course guide.)
Dewald Botha – Ring Road

As a South African living in China, Dewald often felt like an outsider. He found the busy-ness and intensity of life in China smothering so began to use his camera to explore this personal issue. Ring Road is the outcome of this visual exploration and the resultant images portray a searching for beauty or relief in a place of difficulty.

Ring Road (2012–13)

Two ring roads encircle the expanding and fast paced city of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, China, locally prized as ‘The Venice of the East’. One road skirting the outer perimeters of the ancient, mostly destroyed, city walls and canals. The second, an express-way, in a much wider loop to serve neighbouring cities and sprawling development zones.

I walked the entire inner ring road in several sections, multiple times, taking over one year’s separate walks, each time covering a section of the rectangular loop, searching for pockets of calm and quiet, exploring with engagement and intimacy, the slight differences in architecture, surroundings, neighbourhoods, and
small manicured parks, all bordering the central old town. The total walk-able distance is approximately 27 kilometres.

The project, which started out as an exploration of a physical object which can be seen as one single structure (the ring road itself), slowly turned into a more complex personal journey of self-reflection about displacement and survival. Ring Road developed into a metaphor for distance placed and personal limits reached within the confines of language and local culture.

Ring Road questions and explores exactly that which allows us our freedom, or what we believe the definition of freedom is, but which we turn into our own invisible limitations and boundaries. Do we create these limitations out of a need of knowing where limitations lie in today’s unlimited and undefined world? Are we experiencing a sense of being lost or displacement, and attempting to rectify or stabilise our sense of self through redefining the parameters, which we have in some way become disconnected from?

Dewald Botha http://dewald.weebly.com/ring-road.html [accessed 24/02/14]
Jodie Taylor – *Memories of Childhood*

Jodie Taylor’s work deals with nostalgia, which at first may seem like an unphotographable subject. She got around this problem by revisiting her childhood area and photographing it in a way that marries her memories and family history with her present interaction with those formative places. The outcome is a visually consistent and poignant view of her childhood. The subject drove her photography, not the other way around. The final presentation consisted of 6x4 photographs presented in the sort of flimsy plastic family album she’d have had at home.

Read more about Jodie’s work here:
www.weareoca.com/photography/photography-and-nostalgia/
[accessed 24/02/14]
Exercise

All three of these projects are examples of personally driven work but they become universal when we can relate to the feelings they present by visiting our own personal histories.

• Which of these projects resonates most with you, and why?
• How do you feel about the loss of authorial control that comes when the viewer projects their own experiences and emotions onto the images you’ve created?

Like the poetry exercise you completed earlier, your next assignment will help you think about what you’re interested in as a person rather than as a photographer. This will help you to take a step back from any preconceived ideas about what it means to be a photographer and consider what you’re passionate about first and foremost.
Assignment two

Choose between the following two assignments:

1. Photographing the unseen

Start by doing some reflecting in your learning log. What kinds of subjects might be seen as un-photographable? How might you go about portraying them using photography? List a few examples of things you’re experiencing now or have recently been thinking about. This doesn’t have to be too in-depth or revealing, but it can be if you want. Equally, it might be something as apparently trivial as how you’re going to fit everything into your busy day. At first you may come up with literal examples, but the more you think about them the more those ideas will develop into specific and more original ones.

Make a list of at least seven ideas. Try and keep to things you have a personal interest in or curiosity about. Keep a notebook with you at all times and make notes when ideas strike you as interesting. (This is good practice for all stages of the degree and beyond. Ideas books are something to be revisited time and again for ideas and hints for the photographer you’re becoming.)

Now implement one of your ideas. Aim for a tightly edited and visually consistent series of 7–10 images.

2. Using props

This option is about photographing an object to suggest a narrative.

Choose between a white shirt and a handkerchief for your object. Once you’ve decided, make a series of 7–10 photographs which tell a story about or including your object. You can make your photographic style anything you like. You may wish to include the prop in all of your series or just some of the images, depending on the narrative.

Bear in mind that the story is being alluded to through the use of the prop and its location – and characters should you choose to include them.

Draw a storyboard before you start to help you consider the progression of the plot and how you’ll set up the shots.

Now implement one of your ideas. Aim for a tightly edited and visually consistent series of 7–10 images.

Whichever assignment option you choose, send your series to your tutor by the method agreed together with an introduction of around 300 words. You should also send to your tutor the relevant pages of your learning log or blog url.
Reflection

Before you send your work to your tutor, check it against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course and make sure that it meets all the criteria. Make your evaluation available to your tutor.

Your tutor may take a while to get back to you. Carry on with the course while you’re waiting but please don’t attempt the next assignment until you’ve received your tutor’s feedback on this one.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you plan to submit your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you’ve done and why in your learning log.
Part three
Putting yourself in the picture

OCA student Stephanie D’Hubert
This part of the course is about putting yourself in the picture in one way or another. Self-portraiture in its widest sense provides an outlook on the world formed in subjectivity. Artists have worked within the confines of traditional self-portraiture and also continued to push its boundaries into metaphorical territory, yet the underlying intention remains the same. Namely, the genre of self-portraiture allows artists to have ready-made subject matter; it allows them to analyse and explore who they are as artists and people and it gives them a voice and strategy with which to express themselves. We hope that Part Three will raise your sights with regard to self-portraiture and its possibilities. You’ll see that no matter who we are, we all have a story to tell or a point of view on the world that could form the basis of an interesting project.

The idea of making work about yourself may fill you with dread. Many photographers don’t like to be on the other side of the lens, while others may consider their lives too boring to make good subject matter. Part Three contests these preconceptions. Hopefully, looking at some inspirational and innovative ways of approaching yourself as subject matter will fill you with enthusiasm for the next assignment.

Fictional autobiography, on the other hand, is about drawing on your own life as a starting point for a project. Here, ‘putting yourself in the picture’ may be taken literally but also metaphorically. In other words, you don’t necessarily have to be physically in the picture in order to be in the picture, as you’ll see.

Note: Please skip ahead now to read the assignment brief as you’re required to write a diary. You may wish to start that process now so you can be ready for the assignment when it comes.
Let's start by looking at some photographers working with the most accepted notion of self-portraiture – using yourself to say something about yourself.

The artists here are looking at themselves and exploring their personal identities through their work: the portraits include them in a literal as well as in a conceptual sense. This doesn’t mean that the work isn’t also about mankind in a wider sense, but the starting point comes from a direct connection with who they are and the photographic tools they employ to pursue their identity.

Project 1

Autobiographical self-portraiture

OCA student Keith Greenough, Iron Man
Francesca Woodman (1958–81) explored issues of gender representation and the use of the female body in her work. Self-portraits dominate her substantial portfolio, often portraying dark psychological states and disturbing scenes. She uses her body, locations and props to evoke a sense of surrealism, mystery and vulnerability. In *Space 2*, for example, her body almost disappears into the blur of movement. This visual strategy recurs in her work and, since her death, has been interpreted as Woodman using photography both to present herself to the camera as an exhibitionist and to help herself disappear.

Look up Francesca Woodman’s images online. What evidence can you find for Bright’s analysis?

“It is difficult not to read Woodman’s many self-portraits – she produced over five hundred during her short lifetime – as alluding to a troubled state of mind. She committed suicide at the age of twenty-two.”

(Bright, 2010, p.25)
Elina Brotherus is a contemporary photographer who has become renowned for her vulnerable and honest depictions of herself and her experiences. She has a varied and diverse approach to her photography practice but often includes herself in her work, both as an exploration of herself and as a study of her circumstances. She has also used herself in her work in a more detached manner in *Model Studies*, where she is interested in the role of the artist’s gaze in self-portraiture. If you’re not already familiar with her work, Brotherus is an excellent example of someone using photography as an investigative tool.

‘The series *Annunciation* was included in *Home Truth: Photography, Motherhood and Identity*, curated by Susan Bright at The Photographers’ Gallery, London 2013-14. *Annunciation* details the artist’s IVF treatment over a five-year period. The title, a direct reference to the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, contrasts with the artist’s own experience of attempting to become pregnant using IVF.’
“I’m showing this series of photographs to give a visibility to those whose treatments lead nowhere. The hopeless story with an unhappy end is the story of the majority. My way of discussing the matter is to give out the pictures, not to give an interview. I’m not sure if I will be able to actually speak about this. I’m still too sad. This is the saddest thing that has happened to me since my mother’s death. Yet, I’m tired of lying and inventing excuses to this or that medication, not drinking, having to cancel trips etc. People these days aren’t ashamed of talking about sex, psychological problems, alcohol and drugs, but for some reason involuntary childlessness is very much a taboo topic…..

Elina Brotherus
www.galleriesinparis.com/exhibitions/brotherus-gb-agency/ [accessed 24/02/14]
Family portraits have become a firm fixture within photographic art in recent years thanks to work by Sally Mann, Elinor Carucci, Richard Billingham and Tierney Gearon, amongst others, who are shifting expectations from ‘nice, cute pictures’ to a more thought-provoking and honest response to the genre.

Gillian Wearing has approached the family archive in an original and innovative way in *Album* (2003). By constructing masks of her immediate family members based on their photographs, Wearing recreated the original image but with herself behind the mask. The gaping holes around the eyes are the only give-away that it’s actually Gillian Wearing behind the mask. By re-enacting these images and literally putting herself into the pictures of her brother, sister, mother, etc., Wearing is questioning her role in her family history and also questioning the role her family has played in who she has become. The same question is asked of the viewer. What role have our family histories played in who we are?
As you can see from these three examples, photographers who use self-portraiture as a means of self-exploration tend to be unafraid of expressing who they are through the medium. The camera allows them to focus on themselves and their situations in a detached and almost observational manner. The findings are nonetheless subjectively driven, personal viewpoints of the world they inhabit at a given time. They provide an analysis of themselves, which becomes interesting for all of us as we relate to, or project ourselves into, the readings of these images.

Exercise

Reflect on the pieces of work discussed in this project in your learning log and do some further research of your own.

Here are a few questions you might ask yourself:

• How do these images make you feel?
• Do you think there’s an element of narcissism or self-indulgence in focusing on your own identity in this way?
• What’s the significance of Brotherus’s nakedness?
• Can such images ‘work’ for an outsider without accompanying text?
• Do you think any of these artists are also addressing wider issues beyond the purely personal?

Make some notes in your learning log.
This project is about using yourself to say something about something else. This may sound confusing at first – but artists and photographers often use themselves in their work to explore areas that don’t have very much to do with who they actually are as individuals. Many adopt disguises or use themselves to stand in for an idea they wish to investigate. (Painters, for example van Gogh, have done this as a way of getting affordable subject matter throughout art history.) Or they may use self-portraiture as a means of gaining access to a world they otherwise don’t know much about.

This is easier to grasp through some examples, which you should look up online.

In her various Projects, Nikki S. Lee (an American of Korean origin) finds subcultures, transforms herself physically, and includes herself in the picture so that she blends in with the group and becomes one of them, or infiltrates a particular subculture and appears as though she is genuine. For example, she has ‘become’ a Chinese tourist, a Puerto Rican woman, a hip hop fan, a runner, a bride... the list goes on.

The point of this work is that photography is not necessarily a true depiction of who we are. In fact we can shape and mould our identities to fit a certain image, which may then be recorded by a camera. By playing different roles, Lee questions the reliability of the photograph as a record and challenges the very nature of self-representation. Is it ever really possible to capture ones essence in a photograph?

Hannah Starkey, Self portrait, February 2013. Reproduced by permission of the artist.
For the series *Front*, Trish Morrissey found groups of family and friends – strangers to her – on beachfronts in Britain and Melbourne, swapped clothing with one of the women and adopted their position within the family unit or the group. When you look at each image individually, the guise is faultless: the closeness of the skin, the expressions and the positions she enacts seem perfectly realistic and fitting for the scenarios she has become part of. Across the series as a whole, though, you begin to see a recurring character, albeit in different personas, in each image.

**Exercise**

- Is there any sense in which Lee’s work could be considered voyeuristic or even exploitative? Is she commenting on her own identity, the group identity of the people she photographs, or both?
- Would you agree to Morrissey’s request if you were enjoying a day on the beach with your family? If not, why not?
- Morrissey uses self-portraiture in more of her work, namely *Seven* and *The Failed Realist*. Look at these projects online and make some notes in your learning log.

Tracey Moffat, herself a Scorpio, is fascinated by what characterises Scorpios as different from people with other star signs. Scorpios are supposed to be dark in nature and thrive on danger; they are unpredictable and often successful. Moffatt set up a makeshift studio in her home and performed for the camera, dressing up and masquerading as a number of famous female Scorpios, from Hillary Clinton and Vivien Leigh to Anna Wintour and Indira Gandhi. Whereas in acting the pretence is normally disguised, here Moffatt plays upon her amateur role and her lookalike status becomes the point of the show. The contact sheet format shows the process of becoming someone else and the un-cropped full frames give away the studio set-up.
Through this methodology, Moffatt enters the idea of the person she holds in her mind – though not wholly convincingly in practice. In this sense the work isn’t about Moffatt, or even the famous woman she pretends to be; rather, she is using herself to enter into the assumed psychological space of celebrity. It’s a trusted form of method acting, but her method doesn’t convince us and it makes reference to the fact that it’s a performance. Moffatt makes us aware of photography’s role in the creation of celebrity. She is also exploiting the camera’s attention to detail, but instead of trying to hide the imperfections, she uses them to draw attention to the limitations of photography’s role in the masquerade.

As evidenced by the work you’ve looked at in this project, self-portraiture doesn’t always equate to self-exploration. Artists have used self-portraiture to challenge the use of photography, using themselves to make a point about fluctuating identities and how that is represented. They question the extent to which we believe what the image presents us with and challenge the way we make judgements about people based on an image. The use of the self in this sense is a means to an end.
Exercise

Recreate a childhood memory in a photograph. Think carefully about the memory you choose and how you’ll recreate it. You’re free to approach this task in any way you wish.

- Does the memory involve you directly or is it something you witnessed?
- Will you include your adult self in the image (for example, to ‘stand in’ for your childhood self) or will you ask a model to represent you? Or will you be absent from the image altogether? (You’ll look at the work of some artists who have chosen to depict some aspect of their life without including themselves in the image in the next project.)
- Will you try and recreate the memory literally or will you represent it in a more metaphorical way, as you did in Part Two?
- Will you accompany your image with some text?
- In your learning log, reflect on the final outcome. How does the photograph resemble your memory? Is it different from what you expected? What does it communicate to the viewer? How?

It might be interesting to show your photograph to friends or family members – perhaps someone who was there at the time and someone who wasn’t – and see what the image conveys to them.
You’ve looked at artists who use themselves to say something about themselves and at artists who use themselves to comment on something else. Thirdly, and finally, you’ll look at some artists who’ve used other means of depiction than photographing themselves in order to tell the viewer something of who they are.

Not all self-portraiture includes the photographer. Some photographers use other people to stand in for themselves (Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself*), use people in a metaphorical sense (Maria Kapajeva, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*) or choose not to have anyone in the picture at all (Nigel Shafran, *Washing-up*). All these approaches fall within the genre of self-portraiture, but none include the photographer in a literal sense.

Maria Kapajeva has adopted a self-absented approach to portraiture in a series about young women with whom she identifies (2012–ongoing). These portraits become a form of self-portraiture because of the lines of affinity that the artist draws with her subjects. The portraits are a collective response to a traditional model of femininity. The work portrays a category of women forging their own identities in a contemporary society and with whom the artist sees herself belonging.

Maria Kapajeva, *Nhung*, from the series *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*. Reproduced by permission of the artist.
“But I will tell you also what I do not fear. I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave. And I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake, and perhaps as long as eternity too. (from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce, 1916)

I grew up in a culture [Estonia] where women were declared equal to men. This, however, applied to their jobs not to domestic duties, which remained exclusively the obligation of women. They hardly ever got to the top management positions but instead aimed to get happily married and dedicate themselves firstly to the families and then to their jobs. When photography came into my life, I began to realize that the myriad of possibilities and perspectives that it afforded were much more interesting than any dream of ‘marrying a prince’. With my move to the UK, I was lucky to meet women who shared my thoughts, were passionate about their careers, and wanted a freedom of choice in what they would aim in their lives. Most of these women have moved to a new country, as I have, not to get married, but to realize their own potential in whatever they do: write, draw, paint, photograph or invent. Working in collaboration with them, I try to find the ways to photograph each of them as a unique and strong personality in her own working environment. For me these women are my peers and represent a new generation of impassioned young intellectuals who are not afraid to undertake risks and break the rules. With this ongoing project I am interested to open debates on imagery of women in contemporary society in the context of the historical, cultural bias and the global changes we are each going through.”

Maria Kapajeva
www.mariakapajeva.com/a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-woman/ [accessed 24/02/14]
In *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), Sophie Calle uses a multitude of disciplines to deconstruct and interrogate an email she received from her partner ending their relationship; the eventual installation included film, photography and text. The final words of the letter were ‘Take care of yourself’. Calle asked 107 women to interpret the letter according to their professions: these included a female analyst, a linguist, a rifle shooter, her mother, a storyteller, a ballet dancer, etc. By over-producing the meaning of the letter, so unceremoniously delivered, Calle demeans its power and exhausts it. The letter becomes almost like a joke. In an indirect way this work is about how the artist has dealt with a break-up, and in that sense it’s autobiographical, but in the process it has taken on a life of its own and transcends the genre of self-portraiture into a more universal language.

I received an email telling me it was over.
I didn’t know how to respond.
It was almost as if it hadn’t been meant for me.
It ended with the words, “Take care of yourself.”
And so I did.
I asked 107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers),
chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter.
To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.
Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.
Answer for me.
It was a way of taking the time to break up.
A way of taking care of myself.

Sophie Calle
www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/56 [accessed 24/02/14]
Nigel Shafran began his career as a fashion photographer but has moved his practice into the realm of fine art. His work has been exhibited at the V&A, Tate, Rencontres d’Arles and other venues.

Shafran's work is mainly derived from his personal life and includes information about his eating habits and his wife's whereabouts. In the series *Washing-up*, through beautifully lit and composed images of sink areas after washing-up time, and accompanying text, Shafran gives us an intimate insight into his daily routines and family life. Objects and information, tastes and preferences shine through what on the surface appears to be banal and homogenous subject matter. The more you look at the images, the more distinctions you can make and the more insights you get. His use of everyday domestic environments gives the viewer a point of resonance and a sense of shared experience in the commonplace activity of 'doing the washing up'.

**Exercise**

Go to the artist’s website and look at the other images in Shafran's series.

You may have noticed that *Washing-up* is the only piece of work in Part Three created by a man. It is also the only one with no human figures in it, although family members are referred to in the captions.

- Did it surprise you that this was taken by a man? Why?
- In your opinion does gender contribute to the creation of an image?
- What does this series achieve by not including people?
- Do you regard them as interesting ‘still life’ compositions?

Make some notes in your learning log.
Anna Fox’s infamous *Cockroach Diary* consists of photographs of a diary that she kept at the time her house was infested with cockroaches, as well as pictures of the cockroaches themselves. The combination of text and imagery reveals the friction and frustration of trying to deal with an unpleasant situation. *Cockroach Diary* became symbolic of the fractured environment, social structures and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships in her life at the time and was Fox’s first use of autobiographical photography that was to become an important motif throughout her career.

Each of these photographers has used photography to speak directly about their lives, yet they haven’t seen the need to include themselves in the pictures. In doing so, they force the image to become symbolic in meaning rather than a depictive representation of a certain person or situation.
Assignment three

Drawing upon the examples in Part Three and your own research, you can approach your self-portraits however you see fit. You may choose to explore your identity or masquerade as someone else, or use empty locations or objects to speak of your experiences. However you choose to approach it, use yourself – directly or indirectly – as subject matter.

Keep a diary for a set period of time (at least two weeks). Each day write two or three pages about yourself – what you've been doing/thinking. This can be as specific or poetic as you wish. You may wish to pick a theme for the duration. This is an open brief designed to give you freedom to create something personal which suits you best. Use the artists you’ve looked at in Part Three or your own research for inspiration.

Select the most interesting parts of the diary (which could also be the most banal or mundane) and interpret them into a photographic project.

A good way to approach selection could be to ask a friend/fellow student/stranger to read it and send back a highlighted version. You could then base your project on those parts. This would take the pressure off you to find a ‘good story’.

You may choose to select a few days or phrases that spark an idea for you, or you may wish to exaggerate how you were feeling one day into a parody of yourself or the circumstance. You may wish to create a ‘document’ of that time in a re-creation of events – or direct a model to act out some of the content of the diary, making your own ‘film-stills’.

You could present your chosen diary entries as a visual diary or use it as a springboard for further exploration. You may choose to insert the pictures like snapshots into your diary and hand it all in together. You don’t have restrict yourself to the diary itself; you may decide to use it to take you into new territory.

Send your finished piece to your tutor by the method agreed together with an introduction of around 300 words briefly setting out your rationale and how you approached this project. You should also send to your tutor the relevant pages of your learning log or blog url.
Reflection

Remember to evaluate your work against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course guide and make this available to your tutor.

Your tutor may take a while to get back to you. Carry on with the course while you’re waiting but please don’t attempt the next assignment until you’ve received your tutor’s feedback on this one.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you plan to submit your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you’ve done and why in your learning log.
Part Four

Reading photographs
"Photography is a foreign language everyone thinks they speak."

Philip-Lorca DiCorcia (Galassi, 1995)

Photography is in many ways like a language: it’s used instead of or as an accompaniment to words as a means of expression and communication. Just as a language comes with its alphabet, photography comes with its own specific codes and grammar. The technical apparatus leaves traces on a negative and these traces resemble what was set up in front of the camera to varying degrees of accuracy. The tools of this apparatus (aperture, shutter speed, etc.) determine how the photograph will look – much like the letters of a language.

In most photography – amateur, vernacular, weddings, art, advertising – the goal is to communicate or express something. Depending on the photographer, there’s usually an aim behind taking a picture. It may be to remember a moment in time; it may be to record information; it may be to convince the public to buy something, etc. The message might be obvious or ambiguous, but in each case the picture is acting as a language.

Language connects people, it also divides them. And language only works if it is understood, so the idea of a private or esoteric language is a contradiction in terms. It’s true that some languages are harder to grasp and that specific fields of expertise (including photography) have their own jargon, which is understood by a minority with a particular interest in that subject; but it is still understood, as that is the purpose of language. There are also ways in which the language of photography departs from written and oral languages; you’ll look at these later.

Your assignment for this part of the course will be to write an essay of 1,000 words about a single picture. You may wish to start considering some pictures now that you would enjoy writing about. You could make a selection of three or four and ask your tutor what they think of your selection.

Before you read any further, can you think of any photographs that are not used as a means of expression or communication? Blog about them.
Project 1 The language of photography

How we ‘read’ a picture is determined by many personal and background factors. One person may look at a picture of a dog and be repulsed; another may feel affection. So there’s no such thing as a universal photographic language which can be directly understood in the same way as spoken or written language can (although misunderstandings occur even between speakers of the same language due to different usage of the same word, double meanings, etc.). When we refer to photography as a language, we’re speaking more about an interpretation rather than a direct translation of information. This distinction is important when we’re thinking about how to read pictures.

Translation

noun

• 1 the process of translating words or text from one language into another.
• 2 the conversion of something from one form or medium into another.

(Oxford Dictionary)

Traditionalists see language as a fixed medium used to convey specific meaning. A message is given through a code of grammatically correct syntaxes to allow an exchange of information to occur. In this view of language there’s not much room for ambiguity; in fact ambiguity is seen as a weakness as the main point of language is to be clear. Correct use of words and grammar is important. That’s why early modernist writers like T.S. Eliot caused such controversy when they experimented with the language. We’re more used to such experimentation now – for example, many of us are familiar with the linguistic patterns of youth culture – but the traditional view of language is arguably still dominant.

Interpretation

noun

• the action of explaining the meaning of something
• a stylistic representation of a creative work or dramatic role

(Oxford Dictionary)
Interpretation is different from translation because, rather than depending on a correct word for word account of a text, it allows for a certain degree of subjectivity and also allows an expansion of meaning. Often an interpretation of a sentence will include a certain emphasis, personal viewpoint or context that gives more information than the ‘correct’ word would allow for.

The many versions of the Bible illustrate the difference between translation and interpretation. Some versions include contextual and historical analysis and take into consideration what a certain phrase would have meant to its original listeners as opposed to what it means to us now. (It was normally read aloud to groups.) Other versions translate the text word for word from ancient Hebrew and Greek and don’t shed any light on context.

You can see the dilemma. Do we facilitate contemporary understanding by including ‘what this would have meant’ or do we leave the text untouched for fear of tainting an ancient manuscript? This is the conundrum translators face and in many ways it’s the same for photographers and photography thinkers. Do we take the elements we see in a photograph at face value (translate them) or do we get beneath the surface (interpret them), opening up the opportunity for getting it ‘wrong’?

In A Very Short Introduction to Poststructuralism (pp.1–2), Catherine Belsey recalls Alice’s conversation with Humpty Dumpty in Alice Through the Looking Glass as a good example of conflicting ideas of language:

“Humpty Dumpty engages Alice in one argument after another, just as if dialogue were a competition. Having demonstrated to his own satisfaction, if not Alice’s, that unbirthday presents are to be preferred because people can have them more often, he adds triumphantly, ‘There’s glory for you!’

Torn between the desire to placate him and good common sense, Alice rejoins, ‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”.’ So Humpty Dumpty explains:

‘I meant “there’s a nice knock down argument for you”’.

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock down argument,”’ Alice objected.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’
‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be Master – that’s all.’”

We use language to communicate – there’s no such thing as a private language and ‘glory’ is not literally a ‘knock down argument’. However language is slippery. We might use a word to convey something that word doesn’t traditionally mean. This might really mean that. For Humpty Dumpty ‘glory’ equates to a ‘knock down argument’ and surely many of us would agree that it does indeed feel glorious to win an argument in one fell swoop!

We do it all the time in dialogue. We speak in innuendo or euphemisms and normally most follow the logic and remain in the conversation. Sometimes this duplicity is used to share a joke with a majority of people where the joke is hinged around the incomprehension of an unsuspecting character. Shakespeare himself adopted these methods of language in order to dupe the audience or make fun of an ‘idiot’ he wished to create. The idea of language being malleable is nothing new.
Departures

There are clearly some differences between photography as a language and written and spoken languages. A major area of departure is the fact that a word is an arbitrary symbol used to connote a shared understanding. For example, there's no reason why the letters C A T should mean a furry, four-legged feline other than the fact that we know that's what they mean. The same goes for most words and explains why words in different languages can be so very different from each other even if they share the same root. In English a dog says woof woof, in Japanese they say wan wan, in Hebrew they say yav yav, etc.

In photography, however, the symbol is always relevant to the subject. It is its referent. This doesn't mean that a photograph is always a precise depiction of the subject, but the way photography works means that it always has a certain proximity to its subject. It refers to the subject.

So words are arbitrary, photographs are referents. This means photographs may look like the real thing but they're not it. It's not the actual thing we're interpreting but a photograph. This changes how we see reality or what we consider to be reality. It also has an impact on how much you rely on photography as a window on the world.

For example, if you regard the photograph of a dog (below) as a snapshot of reality rather than a photograph, you'll probably make lots of assumptions about the moment it was taken. You'll almost be convinced that you were faced with the little dog yourself. You'll momentarily forget that your height hasn't been dramatically reduced to street level and that you were nowhere in sight. That's because the photograph gives the impression that you were there and that this dog really looked you in the eye. In other words, when you view the photograph as a real moment you put yourself in the picture. In order to deconstruct pictures, it's important to create a distance and almost take a scientific viewpoint in order to see the varying elements and messages clearly (up to a point, anyway).

Now try and see the same photograph as a piece of paper (or pixels) with a black and white picture on it, taken at a certain date by a certain photographer. You'll know (or can find out) that Elliott Erwitt (b. 1928) was a famous Magnum photographer, so straightaway the context of the photograph shifts from being a simple chance encounter to a professionally composed statement about life with dogs in it. Indeed, Erwitt has made several books about dogs but says, in his introduction to Dog Dogs, that his images are “not pictures of dogs but pictures with dogs in them” (Erwitt, 1995).
Erwitt was born in Paris in 1928 but relocated to the US in 1938 with his family. His trademark was depicting surreal or absurd moments in a candid style, owing much to Henri Cartier-Bresson’s decisive moment. All this information re-situates the picture – and we haven’t even got to unpicking the elements within the frame.

When we do get inside the frame, we see a wittily cropped picture which, at first glance, gives the illusion that we’re looking at two people and a small dog. Then we see the joke. The humour could be the thing that makes a less discerning viewer think they’ve ‘got it’ and move on, failing to really look at the rest of the picture, but for those who continue to look there may be more to uncover.
Did you spot that the picture is framed in stages of three? The bottom third is the foreground, the middle is the subject matter and the top shows the subject and the background. This element of three is repeated in the number of subjects and the horizontal thirds are balanced by the vertical thirds of the small dog and other subjects’ legs. This use of three and the horizontal and vertical lines make the image appear visually complete. You get the impression that what’s within the frame is the whole picture, but of course there were bodies and heads and the rest of the larger dog just outside the viewfinder.

This leads us to the photographer’s decision to crop at a particular point. This was a witty decision but, more importantly, we’re reminded that it was a decision. What we see of the situation very much depends on the photographer’s point of view. By placing the small dog as the main focus, Erwitt emphasises its small stature. The size of this dog probably means that it’s often overlooked, especially in relation to its larger friend, so Erwitt’s decision to make it the main focus may tell us something about him as a person. Does he like to help the ‘underdog’? Does he prefer dogs over humans? Is he making a statement about giving everyone a voice? Or is he just making a joke? We can’t answer all these questions from one picture, but if you read it as part of the whole series Dogs, it’s clear that he has a special fondness for canines and sees their role in society as an important one.

There’s another important difference between different types of language. In spoken or written language, the information is given in a certain order, allowing the author to build anticipation or shock the reader. A photograph, on the other hand, gives all this information at the same time and how this information is processed by the viewer is outside the photographer’s control. For example, one viewer of the Erwitt picture might be very interested in locating the park as Central Park while another might focus on the breed of the dogs. All Erwitt can do is present the information; the way it’s read is taken on by the viewer.

1 Although even in literature one reader might miss a sentence because it doesn’t resonate with them and pick up on a smaller point because it does.
So what does this all mean for reading pictures? If photography is a language for communication, how do we understand what pictures mean? What does it mean for us to interpret pictures?

As you saw in Part Two, pictures used in newspapers and magazines with anchoring captions are there to illustrate a story. This use of pictures is broadly in line with a traditional view of language and a translation approach to understanding pictures, ‘This means what I say it means.’ ‘Broadly in line’ because there are other things going on here too – cropping, captions, placement on the page, other accompanying text – which will have some influence on how the picture is read.

For an approach to reading pictures more in line with interpretation, consider the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).
Deconstruction

Derrida coined the term deconstruction and challenged traditional ideas regarding predetermined and fixed language. He believed language to be malleable, with many possible meanings (or polysemous); moreover he believed that language has a power of its own that can’t be held down by the demands of the user. This is an important theme of poststructuralism and gives both author (or artist) and reader (or viewer) equal status in the production of meaning.

It has been said that it takes as much effort to read a book as it does to write it. This principle can also be applied to reading pictures. An interpretative approach to understanding pictures takes into consideration the fluctuating and conflicting codes inherent within them. As you saw earlier, an element within a picture might mean one thing to one person and something entirely different to another. So when reading pictures we have to hold lightly to the idea that ‘this means precisely this’. In fact the act of embracing the many potential understandings enriches the experience and allows the level of meanings to go on and on.

As a brief and necessarily reductionist summary of Derrida’s term deconstruction, what he was trying to encourage was the questioning of knowledge. Essentially, in order to fully comprehend how something has been made, you have to take it apart before you can put it back together.

Derrida didn’t want people to blindly accept what was generally held as ‘truth’ and encouraged a sceptical approach to understanding. He wanted to move away from a black and white acceptance (or rejection) of knowledge and encourage freedom to question and challenge, allowing people to move into the grey areas of understanding. In his essay ‘The Principle of Reason’, Derrida asked:

“Who is more faithful to reason’s call, who hears it with a keener ear… the one who offers questions in return and tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any question about the reason of reason?”

(Jacques Derrida)

Before we go any further, apply some simple deconstruction for yourself in the next exercise.
If Derrida was the father of deconstruction, Roland Barthes (1915–80) was the father of semiotics in the world of photography. Semiotics is the study of signs and language and through this Barthes provided us with terms and tools that can be helpful (but not the sole possible approach) in interpreting photographs.

**Signs, signifier, signified**

Barthes made distinctions between the different parts of a photograph which help us to see how meaning is created. For Barthes the photograph is a sign that is made up of a signifier and a signified.

\[
\text{SIGN} = \text{SIGNIFIER} + \text{SIGNIFIED}
\]

In semiotic terms:

SIGN = the overall effect of a photograph

SIGNIFIER = the actual picture, its formal and conceptual elements

SIGNIFIED = what we think of when we see the picture. This could be very straightforward, for example a picture of a dog signifying ‘dogness’. Or it could be metaphorical or conceptual, for example a crown signifying royalty or the union flag signifying Britishness.

When both the picture of the dog (for example) and the idea of what a dog is come together, the SIGN is made. We need both.

**Exercise**

Rip out an advertising image from a newspaper supplement and circle and write on as many parts of the image as you can. Comment on what it is, what it says about the product and why you think it’s there. You could use this as the basis for your assignment if you feel it’s taking you somewhere interesting. Or you could adopt this method for your assignment preparation.

Come back to this exercise when you’ve reached the end of Part Four and see if you can add anything to your analysis.
**Denotation and connotation**

We can interpret a photograph on two different levels:

- **Denotation** is an objective approach in line with ‘translation’ – looking at the elements present in the image. What’s there?
- **Connotation** is more in line with ‘interpretation’ and is to some extent subjective. What do the elements mean (or connote)?

In short, denotation states the facts and connotation allows for an interpretation of the facts.

For example, looking at the Erwitt picture again you might say that what’s denoted is a small dog, a pair of boots and the front legs of a larger dog. What is connoted might be that a lady and her two dogs are going for a walk in the park on a winter’s day. But you might go even further, depending on your own point of view or preconceptions, and say that it’s a wealthy lady taking her dogs for a walk (because of the small dog’s outfit or because you believe that wealthy New Yorkers are the type of people who have small dogs like that).

**Punctum and studium**

**Studium** is the term Barthes uses to refer to the general status quo of an image. The studium is the photograph’s cultural, political or social meaning.

The punctum is an element within the picture that disrupts the rest of the narrative. In other words it punctures the meaning and takes it off on a different tangent (for example, in the Erwitt picture, the larger dog’s legs). It may even provide a contradiction or at least an alternative reading. It may also be the point in the photograph that gives the viewer a personal connection with it above other elements.
**Intertextuality**

Barthes talks about the rich tapestry of meaning. He suggests that, just as fabric is woven in different directions with different colours and threads, so is meaning – and the more complex the threads, the more enriching the experience. What he means by this is summed up by his term ‘intertextuality’. Each person comes with their own background, education and experiences and all of these things contribute to how they interpret life and events. We all come to read a text from a very different place and therefore we each create a different meaning from it. This is the enriching experience that Barthes refers to; the more we have to share with each other, the richer the tapestry becomes.

You can’t help but bring your own background into play when interpreting photographs and this brings a unique and at the same time universal voice to the creation of meaning. When interpreting photographs it’s also good to draw on other readings, pictures, paintings and experiences you’ve had in order to bring the photograph to life even more.

Barthes gives a detailed example of deconstruction – an advert for Panzani – in his essay ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ (available online) which you might find helpful.
Research point


Read and reflect upon the chapter on Diane Arbus in Singular Images: Essays on Remarkable Photographs by Sophie Howarth (2005, London: Tate Publishing). This is out of print but you may be able to find it in your local university library: some of the chapters are available as pdfs online. You’ll find the Arbus chapter on the student website.

If you haven’t yet read any of Judith Williamson’s ‘Advertising’ articles (see Introduction), now would be a good time to do so. See: www.oca-student.com/content/her
Assignment four

“A picture is worth a thousand words”

Write an essay of 1,000 words on an image of your choice.

The image can be anything you like, from a famous art photograph to a family snapshot, but please make sure that your chosen image has scope for you to make a rigorous and critical analysis.

- If you choose a well-known photograph, take time to research its context – the intentions of the photographer, why it was taken, whether it’s part of a series, etc. Add all this information into your essay to enable you to draw a conclusion from your own interpretation of the facts.

- If you choose to use a found photograph, a picture from your own collection, or perhaps one from an old family archive, use it as an opportunity to find out something new. Avoid telling us about that particular holiday or memory – look directly to the photograph for the information. It may be interesting to compare and contrast your memory with the information you’re now seeing anew from ‘reading’ the picture so intensely.

It’s not enough to write an entirely descriptive or historical account of your chosen image. You must use the facts as a means to draw your own conclusions about what the picture means to you. You may wish to apply what you’ve learned in Part Four regarding translation, interpretation, connotation, signs, punctum, etc., but be sure you get the definitions correct.

Follow thought associations and other images that relate to the discussion, directly or indirectly. Look at the broader context of the image and its background and specific narrative as well as your personal interpretation of it and what thoughts it triggers for you. Follow these associations in a thoughtful and formal way. Allow yourself to enjoy the process!

There are many good examples of writing about single images (e.g. Sophie Howarth’s Singular Images), which you may find helpful to read before attempting your own. Take note of the level of critical analysis and aim for a similar approach in your own writing. You may write about personal connections but ensure you express yourself in a formally analytical and reflective manner.
For more information on how to write critical essays see:
http://community.ucreative.ac.uk/index.cfm?articleid=12239 [accessed 24/02/12]

You’ll also find a guide to writing visual arts critical reviews on the OCA student website. This is primarily intended for Level 2 and Level 3 students, but you should be able to pick up some useful tips. And don’t forget that your tutor is there to advise you.

Send your essay to your tutor, together with the relevant pages of your learning log or blog url.

Reflection

Don’t forget to check your work against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course guide. Include your evaluation in your assignment submission.

Your tutor may take a while to get back to you. Carry on with the course while you’re waiting but please don’t attempt the next assignment until you’ve received your tutor’s feedback on this one.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you plan to submit your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you’ve done and why in your learning log.
Part five

Constructed realities and the fabricated image

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (Self-Portrait of Marilyn Monroe)*, 1982
Photographers have been making up pictures since the early days of the medium. In recent times the constructed image has become synonymous with contemporary photographic storytelling. Whether the stories are drawn from real life, literature or art, the images you’ll see in this final part of the course are completely man-made as the photographer takes on the role of director. Locations, props and characters are created to play a specific part in the story; very little is there by accident. The colour scheme, framing and composition are all purposeful decisions which combine together to create a convincing scene and contribute to an exciting and sometimes vast narrative.

As you’ve seen, photography was traditionally known as the ‘realistic’ medium, but tableau photography brings it firmly into the land of the imagination and fantasy. By combining the realistic nature of the photograph with the work of the photographer/director, tableau photographs occupy a position between what is fact and what is fiction.

OCA student Jeremy Pelzer, A Midsummer Night’s Dream
Just as films are constructed to create a sense of another time and place for the purposes of the plot, so photographs can be constructed in order to tell stories or at least hint at narratives. Many photographers use what is known in film as mise-en-scène; this literally means ‘to put in the scene’ and refers to the process of setting a scene or a stage for a story to be enacted upon.

Props, costumes, locations, actors, and even colour and tiny details, can all be part of the story. It’s important to remember that every aspect within the frame is there for a reason; things therefore adopt a heightened meaning because we know they’re there intentionally and serve a purpose.

Exercise

Watch this famous scene from Goodfellas directed by Martin Scorsese in 1990:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJEEVtqXdK8 [accessed 24/02/14]

Don’t read on until you’ve answered the following questions.

- What does this scene tell you about the main character?
- How does it do this? List the ‘clues’.

Make some notes in your learning log.

In a single shot that lasts for over three minutes, the point is driven home that the male protagonist is a very important person. The car, the secret entry, the tips, the bottle bought for him, are all placed to tell us that this is someone everyone wants to be on the right side of. The music and the redness of the room speak of a mysterious and romantic allure as well as a hint of danger.

Photography, like film and unlike painting and other art forms, relies on what’s in front of the camera for its content, so the props, clothes, location and setting have to be right for the time period and the story. Setting up a shot can be an arduous job. Many photographers working in this genre (known as tableaux) produce a single image at a time.
One example is Jeff Wall. See: www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/jeff-wall/room-guide/jeff-wall-room-6

“Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel Invisible Man centres on a black man who, during a street riot, falls into a forgotten room in the cellar of a large apartment building in New York and decides to stay there, living hidden away. The novel begins with a description of the protagonist’s subterranean home, emphasising the ceiling covered with 1,369 illegally connected light bulbs. There is a parallel between the place of light in the novel and Wall’s own photographic practice. Ellison’s character declares: ‘Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well.’ Wall’s use of a light source behind his pictures is a way of bringing his own ‘invisible’ subjects to the fore, so giving form to the overlooked in society.”

[accessed 24/02/14]

The commitment to the production of this image is evident. Each light bulb was painstakingly hung and the chaos of the scene has been manufactured to portray something of the character’s psychological state.
Drawing on documentary and art

Just as Jeff Wall drew on a literary influence on which to base his image (his other influences include novels by Franz Kafka and a painting by Hokusai), other artists have drawn from the wealth of the wider art world.

Hannah Starkey used Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s 1832 poem *The Lady of Shalott* as a reference point for a body of work exhibited at Maureen Paley Gallery in 2010.

In brief (you may want to read the full poem), the Lady of Shalott is subject to a curse which means she can only watch the real world reflected through a mirror. Tempted by a knight’s shining sword, she looks out of the window and dies. The point is that it wasn’t worth living when she could only see the shadows of reality through a reflection in the mirror.

This idea is very present within photography: a photograph becomes a kind of mirror on reality. Although photographers are no longer reliant on mirrors to create self-portraits as painters were, many still choose to include reflections and mirrors in their work to make reference to the fact that we’re seeing reality via a reflection of what was real rather than the real thing itself. The inclusion of reflections and mirrors also gives the viewer an insight into what goes on behind the scenes and creates a false sense of intimacy. So as
much as Starkey’s image is literally a self-portrait, it is also a comment on photography itself and its ability to create a different reality.

Tom Hunter is an artist who draws both upon painting and documentary in his photographic approach. Although he wouldn’t be considered a photojournalist, his work revolves around real people and their stories – but he portrays them through fiction. The real people he gives a voice to are those in his local community of Hackney. In Living in Hell and Other Stories, Hunter took news stories that captured his attention from the Hackney Gazette and created tableaux depicting the types of people the paper was sensationalising. His visual aesthetic is strongly derived from Johannes Vermeer and he makes use of windows and natural light in the same way that Vermeer did in his paintings.
Hunter’s work straddles the factual and the fictional and this gives the stories an emotional depth as well as an aesthetic strength. This combination of real life and art has enabled Hunter to tell the stories of people who are often sidelined or misrepresented in society.

Taryn Simon is an American artist who uses a variety of approaches in her photographic work. Her main research area, which ties her different projects together, is the idea that complete understanding is impossible. She uses text and photography to bring ambiguity and deliberate disorientation to the viewer.

In *The Innocents*, Simon photographed people who had spent time in prison for crimes they didn’t commit. She took each individual to a location significant to the crime or trial. Larry Mayes, for example, was arrested while hiding under a mattress in a hotel room in Gary, Indiana. What this work does is question the reliability of photography in determining truth. In scenarios such as these the instances of mistaken identity and dubious proof can be catastrophic to the individual involved.
Philip-Lorca DiCorcia’s series *Hustlers* consists of around 80 images of male prostitutes in LA. The photographer and his assistant would find locations and set them up for a photograph and then go in the car to find a prostitute on the street. DiCorcia paid the prostitute not for sex but to be in a photograph. The images were exhibited with the location, name of the prostitute and the amount of money DiCorcia paid. This project was DiCorcia’s first experiment with street photography but he went about it in a very different way from photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Joel Meyerowitz. DiCorcia incorporated what he found on the street into his own ideas; the constructed elements of the picture coincide with the serendipity of the subject and how they ‘perform’ for the camera.

What stands out in Wall and DiCorcia’s work, in particular, is the semblance of a candid moment. They seem like everyday or even banal moments, but behind the scenes a lot of direction, lighting and consideration is going on. Indeed, when DiCorcia dropped off his portfolio at MoMA in 1983, the directors couldn’t decide if it was constructed photography or not!

Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993 (transparency in lightbox 229.0 x 377.0). Reproduced by permission of the artist.
Much of the success of these works comes from their ability to replicate a real moment in time when in fact they were fabricated with the utmost care. The use of large format cameras and the perfection of the formal aspects of the pictures (colour, composition, lighting, expressions, etc.) enable the photographers to achieve a successful outcome, both visually and conceptually. Drawing upon real life is an excellent way to approach constructing your own images because it allows you to retain a sense of authenticity whilst provide an illuminating and thoughtful critique of everyday experiences.

A less subtle form of mise-en-scène is often used in advertising and fashion photography which frequently involves a more cinematic or dramatic use of lighting.

**Research point**

Look up the work of Gregory Crewdson online.

Watch this YouTube video about Gregory Crewdson and his work and consider the questions below.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7CvoTtus34&feature=youtu.be [accessed 24/02/14]

- Do you think there is more to this work than aesthetic beauty?
- Do you think Crewdson succeeds in making his work ‘psychological’? What does this mean?
- What is your main goal when making pictures? Do you think there’s anything wrong with making beauty your main goal? Why or why not?

Crewdson’s work is deliberately cinematic in style and as a result is often very popular in commercial settings. The dark nights, the heavy lights and the perfectly styled locations and actors aren’t meant to fool us into believing those moments are real, but rather they seduce us into entering the world of fiction. This visual strategy of elaborate direction, as in film, makes us lose our sense of reality and become absorbed with the alternative reality we’re faced with. Some commentators regard this is an effective method of image-making, but for others it lacks the subtlety and nuance of Wall and DiCorcia’s work. What do you think?
Cindy Sherman has built her career on constructing different realities. In much of her work, Sherman places herself in the picture, adopting different guises. She first came to prominence with *Untitled Film Stills* 1977–80. She uses herself in her images to comment on social phenomena, especially how society views women: from film stills and their homogenisation of women, to *Centerfolds* (a series based on images from pornography magazines and their objectification of women), to *Society Portraits*, garish constructed self-portraits about women of a certain wealth and age in America. She has also recreated famous pieces of art history in a distasteful and even grotesque manner. In a tongue-in-cheek way her work cleverly challenges identities constructed by society and the very nature of representation itself.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still 3*, 1977–80
Photographic archives have allowed artists to create fictional histories based on photographs already in existence.

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin have worked together for over 12 years, challenging accepted views of how photography is used. In 2011, they were commissioned by Belfast Exposed to make work in response to the archive held by the gallery. The archive consists of domestic and journalistic photography of the troubles in Northern Ireland over a period of 20 years and remains an important document of that difficult political time. What resulted from the artists were two bodies of work, *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground (Contacts)* and *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground (Dots)*.

In *People in Trouble… (Dots)* Broomberg and Chanarin noticed that the images selected for the official archive (set up in response to rising concern about how the military were behaving in NI) contained dots of various colours that distinguished them from the mass of other pictures. Intrigued by what these dots were hiding, the pair uncovered them. Resulting from a combination of system and chance, *Dots* reveals a version of events that was hidden from view. De-contextualising these tiny snippets gives the circular images a very different reality from their original intention. They’re no longer a document of events but instead create their own dialogue and fiction.

These words are printed in the accompanying book and although in some senses they are literal descriptions of the content of the pictures, they also become poetic, thereby challenging the certainty of meaning attached to those words.

By using the ‘straight’ photography of the archive to tell new stories, Broomberg and Chanarin question the role of documentary photography as a trustworthy record of events and offer a different use for photography in such times.
Nicky Bird’s series *Question for Seller* is an interesting take on providing new meanings for old photographs. This wasn’t an archive already in existence; rather, Bird bought unwanted family photographs from eBay to create her own archive of unwanted portraits.

“*Question for Seller* originated from my interest in family photographs that appear on eBay. I purchased photographs that no-one else bid for, with the connotation that they were unwanted, and therefore with no significant value. The seller was approached with the question – How did you come across the photos and what, if anything, do you know about them? Their replies, however brief, are as important as the photographs they are selling – sometimes alluding to a part of a discarded family history, or the everyday, where personal photographs have long since lost their original meaning.”

http://nickybird.com/projects/question-for-seller/ [accessed 11/02/14]

**Exercise**

*Question for Seller* re-situates images in a different context and in so doing allows for a new dialogue to take place. Reflect on the following in your learning log:

- Does their presence on a gallery wall give these images an elevated status?
- Where does their meaning derive from?
- When they are sold (again on eBay, via auction direct from the gallery) is their value increased by the fact that they’re now ‘art’?
Look online at the Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye series *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. You might be forgiven for assuming the images to be remnants from an old family album documenting the life of the beautiful actress Fae Richards. The images appear to chart Richards’ life from her birth in the 1920s through her glamorous career in the 40s up to her involvement in the civil rights movement of the 50s.

Fae Richards is an entirely fictional character, however. Leonard and Dunye drew upon historical records and, noting a distinct lack of information about African-American women, they invented one.

The purpose of this fictional archive is to question the truthfulness of the archive and how history is recorded. Who gets included in our written histories and why? More importantly, who is left out? And who is in control of this information?

Do you have any archives that you could have access to? Might you be able to use it for the beginnings of a project? Blog about some ideas that you could come back to some day.

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**Exercise**

Record a real conversation with a friend. (It’s up to you whether you ask permission or not!)

Before listening to the recording, write your account of both sides of the conversation.

Then listen to the recording and make note of the discrepancies. Perhaps there are unfinished sentences, stammers, pauses, miscommunications etc.

Reflect upon the believability of re-enacted narratives and how this can be applied to constructed photography. What do you learn from the conversation recording process and how can you transfer what you learned into making pictures?
Assignment five

Making it up

Construct a stand-alone image of your choice. Alternatively, you may choose to make a series, elaborating on the same theme.

As the culminating assignment for the course you may wish to draw upon skills learned from Parts One to Four – using various forms of narrative, using yourself as subject matter, telling stories and reading images. The only stipulation is that you produce work that has been controlled and directed by you for a specific purpose. Remember to create a story with a specific context like the artists you’ve looked at in Part Five. This means you need to have an artistic intention, so a good place to start would be to write down some ideas. This could then form the basis for a 300-word introduction to the piece. You may find it helpful to draw storyboards to help you visualise your ideas.

The aim of this assignment is to use props, costume, models, location, lighting, etc. to contribute to the overall meaning of the image. (Use flash/lights if required but available light is fine as long as it is considered.)

If the narrative is to be set in a different era then the elements of the image must reflect this. Also consider the symbolic meanings of objects and try not to be too literal in your approach. For example, don’t automatically use red roses in a love scene but try to be subtle in your ideas to obtain a more true-to-life scenario.

For this final assignment, you should also include an illustrated evaluation of the process you went through to produce your final image(s). Include snapshots of setting up the work and write about how you felt your direction went, how you found the location, props, etc. How did this process affect the final outcome? Write around 1,000 words in total (including your 300-word introduction).

Send your final image(s) to your tutor, along with your commentary and relevant pages of your learning log (or blog url).
Reflection

Before you send your work to your tutor, check it against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course and make sure that it meets all the criteria. Make your evaluation available to your tutor.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you plan to submit your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you’ve done and why in your learning log.
Conclusion

This course has taken you on a journey through just some of the main approaches to contemporary photographic practice. The aims were to increase your creative vision for your own practice as well as widen your knowledge of current and historical practices within what is often known as photographic art. Keeping research and creativity at the centre of your development is key to producing work in keeping with that expected of you at HE level. As you develop your skills in these areas, you'll become adept at recognising genres and styles as well as theory and ideas in photography, and this in turn will influence the quality of your own practice.

The journey can be frustrating and things don’t always come together at once, so be prepared for the long haul. However do enjoy yourself as you continue to learn and make it your way of life as an artist – you’ll find that this process is never-ending.

Whether you prefer to use images from real life, use found photography or set up complicated tableaux, your personal vision should remain at the heart of what you produce. If there’s a common feature in the photography we’ve looked at in this course, it's commitment and pursuit of the photographers’ individual passions. Many of them have succeeded out of sheer dedication and drive which is something you should take hope from.

Remember that photography is a language and photographs are there to send a message. As with learning any language, the more photographs you look at and the more you take, the greater your ability to articulate your ideas will become. Know what messages you wish to convey so that your photography successfully communicates your ideas. Sometimes, though, photography takes on a life of its own and it can be enlightening to follow the process. This doesn’t mean letting go of your critical standards, but rather allowing the process to drive the work and not being too fixed upon your final outcome.

Finally, what aspects of this course resonated with you the most? There are some reflective questions below to help you think about this so that you can apply the skills you’ve built up in this course to take you forward into the next. The point is that you're on a voyage of discovery, getting to know yourself as a photographer.
• Out of all the topics covered in this course, which felt most comfortable to you? Why?
• Did you discover anything completely new to you? What was it?
• Which area enabled you to come closest to finding your personal voice?
• Which area seemed furthest away from who you want to be as a photographer? Why?
• What were the main things you learnt? Were there any epiphany moments?
• Will you return to any of the assignments from this course at a later date? Did you feel as if you were on the cusp of anything?

Good luck with the rest of your studies with OCA.
Appendix

John Umney, Level 3 OCA student – full interview

Many artists use photography as a tool to explore family relationships. In ‘I keep Looking for Him, I think I always Will’ OCA photography student John Umney began to look at his problematic relationship with his deceased father as the subject for a new body of work. Umney wanted to use photography to interrogate his own often-difficult memories of time spent with his Father, (particularly as a child). He began to photograph a piece of land called Purgatory close by to his family home, hoping to use the landscape itself as a metaphor to explore the ambiguous nature of memory. However, in the course of the project, Umney began to question the ability of photography alone to convey these powerful feelings and began to insert his own voice into the project.

How did your project come about?

I suppose it came about through a need to confront that relationship, one which had rested as part of family-lore since his death twenty years or so ago. I had written about it but had failed to fully describe my feelings and so it had lain between us, and photography, through this project, allowed me to articulate those feelings in a way that words had previously failed me (perhaps I need to go on a Creative Writing course!).

The trigger was almost certainly the impending need to develop a Body of Work and another generation (my grandchildren) entering the narrative. I felt his presence, even after all these years burdening my progress and it was a struggle at first to engage with a narrative so personal.
What hurdles did you have to overcome in the development of this project?

Finding a way to bring him into the conversation when we never found common ground when he was alive, was perhaps the primary hurdle. But also how to present the work. As the work progressed, my feelings regarding what the project was about continued to develop, and it was trusting these subtle changes that informed the decision to make the work small and intimate.

I also had to find a way to trust the work I was making and hope it would find a way to communicate to others. All the imagery, landscape, artifact and text all have personal resonances which I have never felt the need or desire to explain, but I had hoped the work would be open enough to resonate with others.
What did you learn from the project?

So many things! Foremost might be the benefit of seeking critique and receiving feedback from fellow students and practicing artists, in other words the development of a network – it requires constant effort, but so worth the investment. Oh, and the practicalities of editing and narrative flow.

I have presented the work in a number of ways now and I am excited by how much I am learning about the work the more I do so. Initially it was a deeply personal project about father/son relationship, it has since also become about how memory can be considered and represented.

In the course of finding ways to present the work I have had to explore various avenues, competitions, residencies, artist talks as well as exhibitions. Each of these methods encourages the work to be presented in a different way and that in itself presents opportunities for the narrative to alter subtly. In other words the project continues to develop.
How has this project helped you further develop as an artist?

Opened up new lines of research (perhaps too many!), but perhaps specifically into the ideas around the relationship between the supposed indexical nature of the photograph and the mutability of memory. What I found in the making of the work was how poor memory is, perhaps more specifically how parlous ‘autobiographical memory’ is. This questioning of both memory and photography’s claim for ‘truth’ is one that I feel drawn to as a direct result investigating my own past.

Perhaps one the greatest boosts was to have the work presented, in whatever form.

Doing so has provided the confidence to continue to develop the work and its themes.

Watch John Umney talk about his project at the 2016 OCA Pastoral Paradigms symposium here:

www.oca-student.com/resource-type/course-specific-resources-video-resources/new-pastoral-paradigms-symposium-john-umney
In 2012 Sophy Rickett was awarded one of four Artist Associateships at the Institute of Astronomy, University of Cambridge (IoA).

During the residency she produced a new body of work, *Objects in the Field*, so-called to appropriate the lexicon of terms used by astronomers and astrophysicists that refers to stars as ‘objects’ and the sky as ‘the field’. The project consists of several series of photographs, a monitor-based video and a text, each of which reflects in some way upon her encounter with Dr Roderick Willstrop, a retired astronomer based at IoA.

During the 1980s, Dr Roderick Willstrop designed and built the Three Mirror Telescope, a camera telescope, in the grounds of the Institute of Astronomy. Operational for just twelve years, the telescope produced 125 black and white film negatives before it was modified to capture digital images in 1991.
Here Rickett describes how her practice as an artist combines, but also to an extent clashes, with Willstrop’s practice as a scientist.

**Before we begin, can you briefly explain to us the technique used by Dr Willstrop to obtain these large format negatives with the Three Mirror Telescope?**

Dr Willstrop designed the Three Mirror Telescope (3MT) during the 1980s. It was operational for about 12 years before it was taken out of active service in 1997, just after the Comet Halle Bop image (featured in *Observation 123*, below) was made. For the first two years of its life, before being modified to capture images digitally, it was an analogue camera that worked using three mirrored lenses that reflect the light from the stars internally, focussing them onto a specially customised section of b/w negative film to create a photographic image of the night sky.

Dr Willstrop’s work with the 3MT seemed to come to a standstill sometime after 1997 when he became Chair of the Libraries Committee. When I met him, about 12 years after he retired, he was preparing to have the negatives archived.
Then could you tell us what you did and how you feel your treatment of the image builds upon his?

Hardly any of the negatives had ever been printed, and if they had, it would only have been as a very small section; none of them had ever been printed full frame. So the set of 125 negatives were a starting point for me – both technically, as I started making my own prints of them, but they also informed the way that I began to think about the project.

The project tells the story of my encounter with Dr Willstrop and the 3MT. It looks at my attempts to find ways of aligning our very different practices, as well as my work as an artist with his as a scientist. But in the most part I fail. So the work came to be about a kind of symbiosis on the one hand, but on the other there is a real tension, a sense of us resisting one another. The material in the middle stays the same, but it's kind of contested, fought over.

What makes you say “in the most part I fail”?

Well when I first met Dr Willstrop, I was interested in exploring areas we had in common, mainly relating to process; for example we both worked through the night and usually on our own. We also share an interest in the night sky, and perhaps some sense of landscape, although I don’t think that he would ever describe his work in those terms, and it was that tension that I began to find more and more interesting. Other parallels began to emerge over time, to do with photographic processes, but also to do with using lenses to extend the limits of our vision, which in turn took me back to memories of having my eyes tested in a hospital corridor when I was young, and all the language around that. So in the end it seemed to go full circle for me, and made complete sense, but in relation to Dr Willstrop and me, I’m not so sure, so the failure would be to do with a kind of misalignment between the ways we think about our work. Insisting that the project had bridged our two practices, or brought them together in any real way, would feel like a platitude.
Dr Willstrop sees the photographs as scientific research and you see them as art objects, highlighting the multifaceted realm of photography and its purposes. In the midst of this contention did you feel completely free to use the negatives for your personal artistic purposes?

Our connection unfolded quite gradually – we’d met many times before I found out about the negatives. To begin with I was interested in the camera telescope itself, which still stands in the grounds of the Institute. He also has several smaller models of it that he still keeps in his office. Developing the work and gaining his trust happened in tandem – an ongoing process – part of a dialogue that kind of solidified and that made more and more sense over time, maybe over the course of 6 months or so.

To answer the question more directly, I haven’t, and I still don’t, feel completely free to do just anything I want with his negatives – even once I had begun with the printing and also writing the story I would check with him that he was happy with what I was doing, that I wasn’t mis-representing him or his work in any way. He was quite adamant that what I was doing was of no scientific value, because the stars would have changed position relative to each other since the negatives were made, and a part of me was a bit disappointed about that – I would love to have given him something back in some way, something that was meaningful or useful for him in his work, but I think he feels that it’s a bit late for that now.

But I still communicated, consulted, checked with him at every stage. I wanted his voice, his presence to be acknowledged, an intrinsic presence in the whole project. In the show at Kettle’s Yard, I titled every work, and Dr Willstrop provided captions – so again, there is a sense of these two voices speaking over each other, addressing the same theme, but slightly in opposition.

Are there aspects of Dr Willstrop’s scientific research that inspire and influence you as well as overlaps with your research as a lens-based artist?

I admire the completeness of Dr Willstrop’s commitment to his work, the steady application of industry that he has maintained for over sixty years. His work, and his connection to the stars, has provided this continuity that has endured for his whole life, going back to when he was five and his father gave him a telescope so they could look at the night sky together. There’s something in the way that this fascination has provided a bedrock to his whole life that I really admire, in some sense linked, not so much to what he’s done, but to how he’s done it.
N.B. Rickett also produced a text, where a factual description of her encounter with Dr Willstrop and the 3MT is inflected with more subjective impressions and memories from her childhood connected to optics, seeing, and the fleeting nature of the encounter.

The story (also featured in the accompanying pamphlet) beautifully connects the new work with memories from your past, linking not only optics and photography, but fragmented moments, feelings and experiences. The scene shifts in the last section of the story away from the Institute to you being on a train, witnessing an event that at first glance might seem completely unrelated….

Yes – as my time at the IoA started drawing to a close, I tried to find out more about the 3MT – how the science had evolved from where Dr Willstrop had left off, and whether anyone had continued to work in that field, or with any of the processes or techniques he developed. At the time I was unable to find reference to any specific legacies of the work that was done on the 3MT, though I found out later that one of his research students has been working on a similar design with a group of scientists in Arizona. I couldn't find anything more substantial than that, but then I was only looking in the most obvious places, mainly the internet, search engine searches, that kind of thing.
I realised how little I knew, how little I understood about his work, and how so much of what I’d done was based on assumption, supposition, instinct – the opposite of everything that Dr Willstrop as a scientist stood for, and that’s what the anecdote in that paragraph you mention seeks to address. It recalls something I saw years ago, when I was sitting on a train as it pulled out of a small seaside station in Devon. A young boy was standing on the sea wall smiling and waving at the train, but the waving stopped abruptly when he was drenched in water by his companion who threw a boulder into the water that made a big splash. In an allusion to the incompleteness of my interpretation, the partiality of my account, I write that I see ‘just the beginning of what is to pass between them, a fragment of story as it begins to unfold’ before the trains speed up, ‘and then I have gone’.

Can you say a little about how this whole process connected with you on a personal level?

When I first arrived at the IoA, I’d been thinking a lot about ageing, and more generally about the advancement of obsolescence. I’d been trying, unsuccessfully, to find out about de-accessioning – that is the process of an object losing its status, maybe by being removed from a museum. I hadn’t been able to find anything theoretical, and everyone I spoke to about the bureaucracy of it was quite dismissive; there didn’t seem to be anything written down.

It was as if there were instances of it everywhere; for example at the Institute of Astronomy they had just recently digitised huge sections of the library, and a few years earlier all the analogue darkrooms had closed, but I had arrived just a little bit late to witness or record those interesting shifts.

I was feeling a bit lost so when I met Dr Willstrop, it was as if a light went on. I liked the way he spoke, the way his fingers handled the lenses when he explained how they worked, the way he combined this very high level technical language with much more intimate reminiscences that took him back to the 1930s when he was a child.

I also liked that we had the photographic process in common – we talked about film stock, about the merits of FP4 in relation to HP5 or something. And I remembered back to when I was young, thought about things I’d not thought about for years, and I realised how much of it was linked, all these different threads, different periods of time, all woven together, tangled in to the very same story.
In the video work *Afterword (Grinding a Lens for King’s College Chapel)*, Dr Willstrop can be heard reading your story, another device that brings him into the work, both literally and metaphorically.

The story is central to the work, and I wanted to find ways of conveying that. Having him read the story, and then feature it as the soundtrack to the DVD, seemed like a good way of doing that practically, but also it suggests a kind of blurred authorship. At times it is not clear whose story is being told, with a suggestion perhaps that they could be two separate narratives combined. Different voices, different points in time, collapsed in together.

By pairing images with both Dr Willstrop’s factual information and your own poetic diary, you provide a dialogue, which is open and then is surprisingly closed. It demonstrates an intriguing clash, often contradictory, between how you read the image and how Dr Willstrop sees it. This refers again to the different functions of the photograph and its openness to interpretation. What do you hope this element of confusion will bring for the viewer?

So maybe there was this connection between us, or maybe that connection was all my invention – but whichever it was, he went to great lengths to try to make me understand the science. Some of the time I’d find it really hard going, and would feel quite lost and confused. I wanted to evoke a sense of that in the finished work; a sense that in some way we don’t completely fit together, that we are not occupying the same ground, and that there is a kind of resistance between us and the work that we do. I’m interested in the sense that the material in the middle – the subject – doesn’t ever change materially – but that the interpretation of it is highly contested.

What is it about collaboration that you enjoy? How would you advise artists to enter into collaborations?

My first collaboration was with the composer Ed Hughes, which resulted in the film installation *Auditorium* (2007), and the most recent one, *Album 31*, which is a commission by GRAIN at the Library of Birmingham with Bettina von Zwehl, is currently in progress. I really enjoy the dialogue that comes out of the collaborative process, the feeling of being challenged, of finding the right kind of balance. It’s also more fun; I like the camaraderie and the shared ownership – the sense of being in it together.

I approach collaboration like any other project really; I try to keep an open mind, and not to project forwards too much, or continually try to anticipate the outcome. I think it’s good to concentrate on the process, to let the process lead the way and to stay open to different possibilities, to the unexpected…
How does Dr Willstrop see the images, now they are large scale on the gallery wall? In other words what does he think of your interpretation?

There was a great moment a few weeks ago during an ‘in conversation’ event between the two of us and the director of Kettle’s Yard, Andrew Nairne. Andrew turned to Roderick and asked him what he thought of what I’d done … it was the first time that question had been put to him so directly. ‘I’m very grateful to Sophy…’ he began – and a sense of relief started to flow over me, before he continued ‘… for making the digital scans. They have made some of the over exposed areas of the negatives just so much clearer…’ So what he makes of the aesthetics is still unclear – although at the private view, he seemed quite happy!