

Course sample

Please note that due to copyright reasons, some images may be greyed out in this course sample.

Open College of the Arts

0800 731 2116

enquiries@oca-uk.com



Photography 2: Social Documentary

**Written by
Michael Freeman**





Open College of the Arts
Michael Young Arts Centre
Redbrook Business Park
Wilthorpe Road
Barnsley S75 1JN

Telephone: 0800 731 2116
E-mail: enquiries@oca-uk.com
www.oca-uk.com

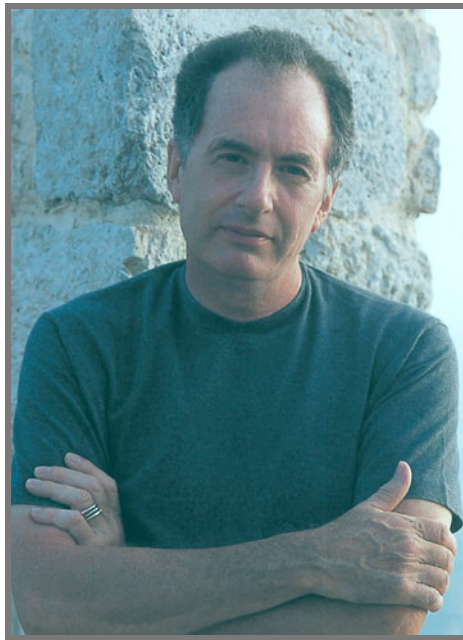
Copyright OCA 1991; revised 1999, 2003, 2005, 2006
Document Control Number: Ph2sd_121108.doc

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise - without prior permission of the publisher
(Open College of the Arts)

OCA is a company limited by guarantee and registered in England under number 2125674.

Registered Office, Open College of the Arts, Michael Young Arts Centre, Unit 1B, Redbrook Business Park, Wilthorpe Road, Barnsley, S75 1JN, United Kingdom

About the author



Michael Freeman is one of the world's most highly respected professional photographers. He is widely published, with more than 80 books to his credit including the classic 35mm handbook (over 1.5 million copies sold). His publications include *Spirit of Asia*; *Angkor: Cities and Temples* (both Thames and Hudson); *Japan Modern* and *The Modern Japanese Garden* (both Mitchell Beazley).

Michael has also produced a unique series of guide books for the digital photographer and this is published by ILEX, who are digital media specialists.

He has worked on commissions for many well-known publishing clients, including *Time-Life*, *Reader's Digest*, *Condé Nast Traveller* and *GEO*. He is also the principle photographer for the *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Contents

Introduction

- Beyond the basics
- What is social documentary photography?
- The scope of social documentary
- Extra resources
- The equipment you will need
- Following the course
- Assignments
- Your portfolio
- Your logbook
- On completing the course
- Project and tutorial plan

1: The reporter's eye

- Putting the subject first
- Dealing with people
- First subjects
 - Project 1: a friend in a public place
- Basic composition
- A single subject
 - Project 2: framing - a single figure
- Several points
 - Project 3: framing - 2 people
 - Project 4: vertical vs horizontal
 - Project 5: eye-lines
 - Project 6: direction of movement
 - Project 7: a day at the zoo
 - Project 8: thinking about the way you work
- A closer view
 - Project 9: suggesting more with less

Crowds

Project 10: high viewpoint

Project 11: crowds

Natural portraits

Project 12: a natural portrait

Project 13: hands

Project 14: people at work

Project 15 (optional): tools of the trade

Project 16: urban life

Project 17 (optional): holiday

Project 18 (optional): life at a beach resort

Your logbook

Assignment 1: a day in the life of ...

2: The telling moment

The importance of timing

Project 19: analysing moments

Project 20: anticipating a moving figure

Working quickly

Project 21: camera handling

Project 22: action - peak moment

Following the action

Project 23: action with a motor-drive (optional, dependent on your equipment)

Focus

Project 24: using an auto-focus lens (optional, dependent on your equipment)

Project 25: follow focus

Project 26: selective focus

Project 27: selecting the right shutter speed

Project 28: improving your slowest shutter speed

Photographing people

Project 29: children at play

Project 30: emotion

Improving the shot

Project 31: a situation that improves

Project 32: street photography

Assignment 2: relationships between people

3: Working in low light

Extending your range

Fast film

Daylight indoors

Tungsten light

Project 33: tungsten light - colour and exposure

Fluorescent lights

Other kinds of artificial light

Tripod and standard film

Flash

Using blur for effect

Project 34: handheld slow exposure

Project 35: a city at night

Planning the rest of your course...

Assignment 3: a critical review

Assignment 4: in the style of an influential photographer

4: Documentary styles

The appropriate lens

Wide-angle

The subjective camera

Project 36: wide-angle technique

Project 37: telephoto technique

Black-and-white film

Grain

Printing

Project 38: black-and-white

Project 39: making connections

The photo essay

Project 40: laying out a photo essay

Cropping

Project 41: a cropped print

Assignment 5: photo essay

Your portfolio

At the end of your course

**Appendix A: if you plan to submit your work for
formal assessment**

**Appendix B: information concerning the proper use of
materials and equipment**

Further reading

Introduction

'The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each to himself.'

Edward Jean Steichen

Beyond the basics

This course, which is designed to take you about 9 or 10 months to complete, is one of two that make up the second level of the Open College of the Arts' photography programme. Unless you have agreed direct enrolment on to a Level 2 course it is important that you have already completed the Level 1 course - *The Art of Photography* - before continuing with this one. The first course covers the basics and the application of design principles to photography; now we are ready to build on what you have already learned. This course, together with its Level 2 companion, *Landscape Photography*, is at a more advanced level than *The Art of Photography*, not so much in technical matters but in its assumption that you have reached a certain level of proficiency and awareness.

The fundamental aim of this course remains the same as for the first one: to encourage you to think about the image and to recognise a potential picture in a real-life situation. While it is important to master the technical side of cameras and film, what you see and think is much more important than the technology of photography.

What is social documentary photography?

The topic in this case is the way in which societies function. Or rather, the many and varied ways in which all kinds of societies function. It includes everything from the manner in which people live and interact as individuals, to social organisation.

Documentary photography has a long and established history and goes back much further than the Depression years of the 1930s, when the term was coined. It evolved gradually. From the beginning, in the early 19th century, photography was used to record scenes, events and people. At first it was enough to make a reasonable likeness, but eventually some photographers learned how to make pictures that revealed more aspects of their subjects. Instead of standing back, photographing the scene, and leaving it to the viewer of the print to work out what was of interest, they began to use the camera to make comments. One of the first was Jacob Riis who, at the end of the 19th century in New York, used a camera to record the desperate poverty in the slums - to show others living conditions that they would not otherwise see.

The photography of downtrodden areas of society is one of the most powerful and commanding uses of the camera. Work such as that of Dorothea Lange during the American Depression of the 1930s, and W. Eugene Smith's photographs from the early 1970s documenting the long-term effects of mercury poisoning in Minamata had a strong impact, not least because the subject matter was unsettling. This is the most arresting type of social documentary photography, yet surrounding it is a much broader field of imagery covering all aspects of the social landscape, including what seems tranquil, non-political or downright ordinary. But, as Cartier-Bresson hints in the quote at the beginning of 2: *The telling moment*, nothing is ordinary or without significance; the camera seeks out a sense of life through the details of our existence.

So, we are not suggesting that in this course you follow the uncompromising tradition of photographic crusaders; it is enough that you learn to work within the sphere of everyday life. However, many of the classic examples are from this tradition. For further reading look at the Bibliography at the end of this course. You can learn from professional examples, and most professionals in this field have at one time been or are photo-journalists.

One of the important lessons to learn from professional photo-journalism is to know your subject: this is at least as important as knowing how to photograph it. In the Level 1 course, you will have devoted a considerable amount of time to the 2-dimensional aspects of the image - its design, the effect of light, colour relationships and so on. These are now skills which you already have, to some extent, and you should use them fully. In this course, however, you will have to think much more about what it is you are photographing, the significance of the real events that you are recording with your camera. Study your subject first, then think about it while you are shooting. Approach it as a writer as well as a photographer; like writers, photographers not only record, but define, interpret and even transform what they are seeing.

The scope of social documentary

The essence of documentary photography is to record and show an authentic view. The key word here is authentic. In its broadest sense it can include any subject at all, even lifeless ones, but here we will photography deal with the photography of people. Social documentary photography is concerned with people's lives and activities, and this can even be extended to human artefacts, such as houses or craft objects provided that these can be shown in a way that has a bearing on their use. Walker Evans' photograph, *Negro Barber Shop Interior, Atlanta, March 1936* (*Photography: A Concise History* page 172) has much to tell us about the economic and social conditions of the location and Paul Strand's picture, *The Bicycle, Luzzarra, Italy, 1953* (page 155 of the same book), not only records specific location but also provides an insight into a different time and place.

One inescapable fact about this kind of photography is that it implies far more than the literal depiction of the subject. What is left out of the photograph, or what can't be shown, becomes active within the viewer's perception of the image. In this sense the viewer of an image and the reader of a text are closely connected and both activities can be seen as actively creative rather than merely passive. They make an imaginative contribution to the experience the artist has begun for them.

Project 9: suggesting more with less

Do this project either on its own or combined with another. The aim is to practise economy of means, by looking for details in a situation that communicates information or a mood.

Where the human form is included, a detail is often sufficient, for instance, a pair of hands in the following image.



Look at the image below (also on page 220 of *History*). Manuel Alvarez Bravo tells us a great deal about his subject, sharing experience of both social conditions and physical feelings in an apparently simple image.



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, El Umbral (The Threshold)

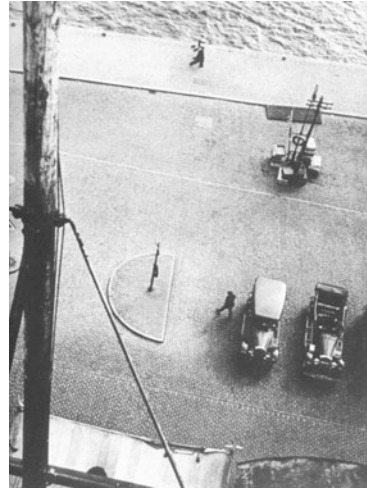
Such details have often been used as icons to express a response to subjects involving extremes of human experience. In 1980, in a story in *Stern* on hunger in Africa, a photograph by Mike Wells showing, in close-up, the withered hand of a starving child resting on the hand of a white aid-worker seems to symbolise both unimaginable suffering and the enormity of the task facing aid agencies.

Crowds

In the same vein of looking for different scales and types of view, consider how some situations might appear from above. You can see 2 examples of nearly vertical photographs of people below (also found on pages 95 and 127 of *History*).



Heinrich Kuehn, Der Maslschirm

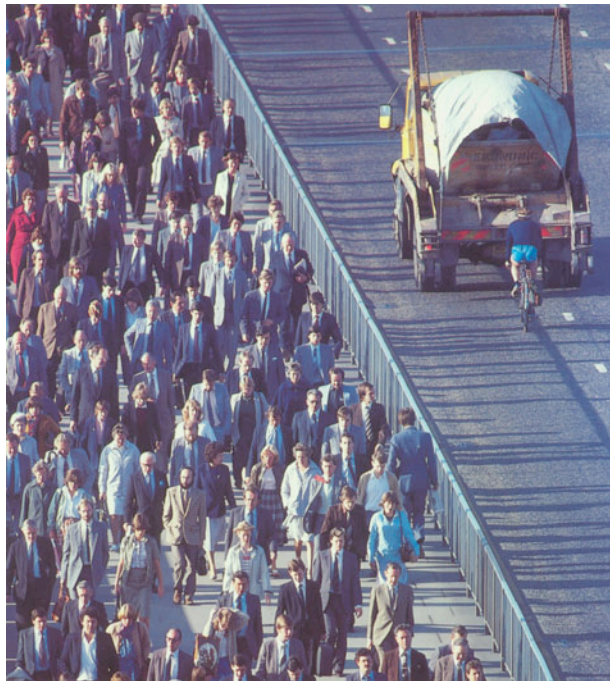


László Moholy-Nagy, Stockholm

Clearly, this is a technique to be used sparingly, but it can be very effective on occasion. Practically, of course, much depends on the surroundings; in both the examples just mentioned there were balconies overlooking the scenes.

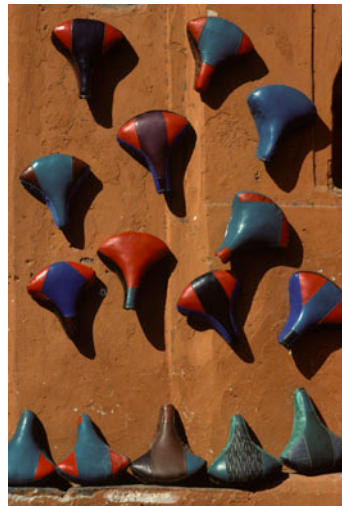
Project 10: high viewpoint

Higher levels of a shopping centre and pedestrian overpasses are 2 obvious places for this kind of picture. Try this for yourself. You will probably find that for most situations it shows little more than the tops of people's heads, but that occasionally it yields an interesting result. The photograph above, and on page 127 of *History*, uses the pattern of the cobbles to provide a complex background against which the movement of the dark figures stands out well. The following is an example of a high viewpoint.



Project 11: crowds

Large numbers of things frequently make strong images, as in the images below.



This applies equally to large numbers of people as in the earlier picture of commuters and in the beach scenes below.





These images have 2 features in common - they were both taken from a high viewpoint obliquely, and with a telephoto lens. The viewpoint made it possible to see the numbers clearly, while the long focal length of lens compressed the perspective and made it possible to crop tightly in on the pattern of the crowd. Although similar in many ways, there is one marked difference. The commuters are all performing the same action - walking - and are moving in the same direction. This commonality of purpose makes the picture very easy to read (and this is also shown in the next picture).



Without being able to distinguish the details in any individual, we know what each is doing. In the beach scene there is no common action or movement and so the message is confused and we need to look for detail in individuals to understand the image. It is also much more difficult to read the picture as a whole. In the cover picture the composition comprises 2 distinct blocks while in the beach scene there are no larger shapes and the whole reads as a complex texture with no definite point of focus.

It may be useful, at this point, to compare the work of 2 painters. Both Lowry and Bosch include large numbers of figures in their images but with Lowry the figures are simplified and are often part of a larger movement whereas Bosch's figures are detailed and are involved in small tableaux of action across the picture surface. Therefore, we read the paintings differently, one as a single situation and the other as a series of separate events - in fact it is usually only the title which gives the clue to the common link between the actions in Bosch's pictures.



Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights



Lowry, Huddersfield

For this project try to recognise and record the 2 kinds of situations. With smaller numbers of people, a similar concentration is made possible by the use of a telephoto lens. Look at the images below for further examples.



Natural portraits

In social documentary photography, there is a division between portrait images in which the subjects are unconcerned about or unaware of the camera and images in which the people look at the photographer. In one, the photographer appears to be an observer, in the other, he or she is a part of the situation. Both types of image have their place in the social documentary field, although individual photographers tend to prefer one or the other.

Clearly, when subjects who are looking at the camera are aware of the photographer, most images of this kind qualify as a portrait. I make a distinction here between formal portraiture, which tends to be associated with the studio, and natural portraiture, which is more a part of social documentary photography. There is no hard and fast dividing line, but the portrait here is one that you should approach without special lighting and without an artificially contrived background.

Most people's first idea of a portrait is the rather formal picture that is the speciality of high-street photographers - carefully lit in a studio, the person properly dressed and in just the right pose. Professionally, this is certainly the standard approach, but more often than not it is used because it is predictable and, for the photographer who has already learned the techniques of formal portraiture, convenient. In reality, however, casual shots of people who have clearly not prepared themselves for an occasion are just as much portraits, and are often better liked for being natural and typical.

Natural portraits of this kind depend less on the technical aspects of camera work and lighting equipment, and more on the ability to spot the right

moment and a readiness to take the picture immediately, without losing a second. The best expressions and attitudes are extremely fleeting, and the biggest single reason for failing to catch a person at his or her best is hesitation. Stopping to check the focus or some other camera setting just when you should be squeezing the shutter release may save the technical condition of the photograph, but it will also lose you the shot.



To make natural-looking portraits easy, the conditions themselves should be suitable and uncomplicated. The lighting, certainly, should be simple, reliable and efficient; in this, soft daylight, without the harsh shadows of a bright sun, has a considerable advantage. Indoor lighting is much weaker, and even with high-speed film (ISO 200 and above) there are limitations (slow shutter speed and shallow depth of field) that may delay you from reacting spontaneously. Portable flash, for all that it gives an unflattering light for portraits, has the virtues of being reliable and simple to use.

The occasion, also, is important. A gathering of some kind, such as a family picnic, gives some of the best opportunities because it is fun and involving for everyone. Picture-taking can be unobtrusive simply because people are relaxed and have their attention on other things. Even when there are just 2 or 3 people having a conversation, there is less chance of self-consciousness than if one person is facing the camera alone.

Finally, be prepared to take plenty of photographs. If the success of the picture depends heavily on the subject's expression, it is almost inevitable that for each picture that works there will be several more that do not. In this kind of photography, as in candid shots, getting only some good pictures from 20 or 30 shots is by no means a sign of failure. The important thing is speed and simplicity.