CORE-UA 724
Expressive Culture: Photography
Fall 2018
Mondays and Wednesdays 4:50-6:10
MEYER 121

Professor Robert Slifkin
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Teaching Assistants
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Course description:

Since its invention in the mid-nineteenth century photography has occupied an ambiguous position in relation to art. While frequently seen as both a rival and a supplement to traditional media like painting, printmaking, and sculpture, photography has also enjoyed what one writer has called “a complex social life,” playing a significant role in such realms as scientific documentation, commercial illustration, journalism, and various vernacular practices like snapshots and social media. Drawing on examples from the origins of the medium to the present this class will consider photography’s dual identity as both an aesthetic and pragmatic enterprise in order to address fundamental questions surrounding modern art and its relation to life. In particular we will explore how the camera’s capacity to register, archive, and disseminate seemingly infinite facets of everyday life has fundamentally altered not only the concept of art in modern society but also crucial notions of selfhood, memory, and the experience of time and reality itself. Because of the photograph’s apparently direct and natural mode of representation, it has frequently functioned as a powerful precedent for what societies have considered true, normative, and ideal. As such photography provides a productive means to question the construction of notions of truth and reality and the various representational strategies used to manipulate social and individual thought and experience.

This course will offer students an opportunity to study what constitutes a work of art (for instance, why some photographs may be considered works of art while others are not and how these distinctions may inform other cultural practices from paintings and sculpture to more popular instances like movies and internet content.) Moreover it will address the equally important question of what roles art plays in society. Is art simply something that adds beauty to the world, or is it a privileged realm of culture where social ideals and norms can be critically examined and made visible and articulable? Or does it serve anthropological and existential functions, assuaging anxieties about mortality and preserving important memories across time and space? Finally, how does photography—and art more generally—promote communication and empathy between individuals, as well as between generations and different cultures?

Beyond these historical and conceptual issues, the course will encourage students to develop their skills as critical thinkers and clear and effective communicators, through writing and reading assignments as well as through dialogue in small sections.
Course Requirements:

Class and weekly discussion sections attendance. Students may be excused for documented medical or personal emergency and will receive reasonable accommodation for the observance of religious holidays. In these cases, they should contact their instructors in advance or, in cases of emergency, as soon as is practicable. Students are responsible for making up any material or assignments they miss.

Reading all assigned texts.

Completion of Assignments: All assignments are due in recitation. Students are expected to submit course work on time and to retain copies of their work until a final grade has been received for the course. Instructors are not obliged to accept late work and may assign a failing or reduced grade to such assignments.

Students who encounter sudden and incapacitating illness or an other comparably grave circumstance that prevents them from completing the final examination or assignment in a course may request a temporary mark of Incomplete from the course instructor. To receive an Incomplete, students must have completed all other requirements for the course, including satisfactory attendance, and there must be a strong likelihood they will pass the course when all work is completed.

In-class midterm exam: Monday, October 29

Final Exam: Monday, December 17th 7pm-7:50pm (location TBA)

Grade allotment:

Short Writing Assignments: 20%
Final Research Paper: 20%
Class participation 20%
Midterm: 20%
Final Exam 20%

Classroom Decorum

The classroom is a space for free and open inquiry and for the critical evaluation of ideas, and it should be free of personal prejudice. Students and instructors alike have an obligation to all members of the class to create an educational atmosphere of mutual trust and respect in which differences of opinion can be subjected to deliberate and reasonable examination without animus.

As a matter of courtesy to their fellow students and instructors, students should arrive at class promptly, prepared and ready to participate. Students are reminded particularly to shut off cellular telephones and, except in cases of emergency, to remain in the classroom for the duration of the lecture or section meeting. If it is necessary to leave or enter a room once class has begun, students should do so quietly and with as
little disruption as possible. Under University policy, disruptive classroom behavior may be subject to faculty review and disciplinary sanction.

**Plagiarism** is using the ideas, data, or language of another without specific or proper acknowledgment. If you present someone's words, thoughts, or data as your own, you are committing plagiarism. The location of the information is irrelevant: when it comes to plagiarism, information from the Internet is equivalent to information from a physical book or journal. To avoid plagiarism you must cite your source every time you:

- Use an author's exact written or spoken words. In this case, you must also identify the words by enclosing them with quotation marks or indenting the quote on both sides of the margin.
- Paraphrase someone's written or spoken words.
- Use facts provided by someone else that are not common knowledge.
- Make significant use of someone's ideas or theories.
- If you have doubts about any of the above points, or are wondering about related points, err on the side of caution: cite your source.
- It is also plagiarism to pay a person or Internet service for a paper, or hand in someone else's paper as your own.

**Cheating:** It is a violation of NYU's standard for academic integrity and considered cheating to submit the same or substantially similar work in multiple courses, either in the same semester or in a different semester, without the express approval of all instructors.

**Syllabus:**

**Week 1: What is a Photograph?**

*Wednesday, September 5 — Course Introduction*

**Week 2: The Origins and Ontology of Photography**

*Monday, September 10*


*Wednesday, September 12*

Andre Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 237-244


**Week 3: The Subject of Photography: Portraiture and Subjectivity**

**Monday, September 17**


**Wednesday, September 19**


**Assignment #1**

Write a two-page, double-spaced essay describing a photograph that either means a lot to you or has powerfully affected you (whether emotionally or intellectually). This could be a photograph of a family member or friend, something you saw on social media, in journalism, or in a museum. Try to describe the image with as much detail as possible, taking into consideration not only the subject of the image but its appearance (for instance, how the camera operator framed the subject, what perspective it was taken from, where the light source comes from and what it primarily illuminates, what is in focus and what can be seen in the margins of the image.) Consider as well how the format of the picture (its physical existence whether as a print or on a screen) informs your understanding of the image. Would the significance you find in the photograph be transmissible to others without external contextual information? Please include a reproduction of the photograph that you chose to write about.

**Week 4: Photography and the Archive**

**Monday, September 24 — Survey Photographs**


Wednesday, September 26 — The Archival Impulse of Photography


**Week 5: Aspirational Photography I (Photography as Artifice)**

**Monday, October 1 — Aspirational Photography I: The Rival of Painting**


**Wednesday, October 3 — Aspirational Photography II: Pictorialism**


**Assignment #2:**

Write 3-page, double-spaced essay analyzing how the various writers in the assigned readings for this week conceive of photography as an artistic practice. What is it about photography that makes its artistic? What are the challenges that compromise its apparent artistry? Your essay should contain a clear thesis that presents your argument and use an array of textual evidence from the readings. It should also contain one illustration taken from the lecture that will substantiate the claims made in the essay. Feel free to draw upon information from previous readings and the lectures as well.

**Week 6: Vernacular Practices**

**Monday, October 8 – No Class: Fall Recess**

**Wednesday, October 10**


**Week 7 – Photography and the News**

**Monday, October 15 — Photography as Historical Monument: War/Photography**


**Wednesday, October 17 – The Photojournalist Imagination**


**Week 8: The Vision Machine:**

**Monday, October 22 –Surrealism and the Optical Unconscious**


**Wednesday, October 24 — Time and the Image**

Assignment #3

Using any sort of camera take a photograph of the fountain at Washington Square. You should spend some time walking around the fountain considering what would be the most successful and compelling portrayal of the subject, taking into account the perspective, framing, lighting, and what other sort of visual information you want to include in the image. You might have to take numerous shots before selecting a final image. Then write a two-page, double-spaced essay describing the process: how you determined the perspective from which you took the shot, the range you chose, when you decided to actually take the photo, and how you selected from the various shots. Your essay should draw upon concepts addressed in the lectures and readings and cite other photographs and photographs as comparative examples.

Week 9: Photography and Magic

Monday, October 29 — Midterm Exam

Wednesday, October 31 — The Photograph as Medium: Spirit Photography


Week 10: The Photograph as Medium

Monday, November 5 — Montage and the New Vision


Wednesday, November 7 — Another Sort of Magic: Commercial Photography


Week 11: Photography as Social Document

Monday, November 12


Wednesday, November 14


Week 12: Modernist Photography

Monday, November 19 – Aspirational vs. Paradigmatic Modernism


Wednesday, November 21 — no class – Thanksgiving break

Week 13: Ironic Documents: Art Photography Takes to the Streets

Monday, November 26


Assignment #4

Write a three-page, double-spaced essay about a photograph you encountered at a museum in the New York City area (a list of possible museums and locations of their photograph collections will be distributed at the mid-term exam). Your essay should contain a clear thesis that is substantiated by visual analysis and research using at least five sources. It should also consider how the photograph’s exhibition in a museum or gallery informs its possible meaning (i.e. where it is hung on the wall, how it is lit, what other images are nearby). How does its existence in a museum alter your perception of the photograph as a work of art?

Week 14: Postmodernism and Post-Photography

Monday, December 3


Wednesday December 5


Week 14: Digital Photography

Monday, December 10 — The Digital Revolution


Wednesday, December 12 — Photography and Social Media


Assignment #5 (Final research paper)

Write a ten-page, double-spaced paper that analyzes a single photograph or a small series of photographs that demonstrate both aesthetic and non-aesthetic characteristics. That is to say you can select a photograph that was intentionally created as a work of art and consider how it produces effects and meanings that go beyond such aesthetic intentions or conversely select an ostensible non-artistic photograph (i.e. vernacular, journalistic, scientific, or commercial) and make a case for its artistic intelligence and visual complexity. Essays should contain a clear thesis and substantiate its claims with both textual evidence and visual analysis. They should also exhibit a significant degree of research, citing relevant literature on the subject including books and articles not contained on the syllabus. A handout outlining research techniques and academic writing conventions will be circulated on October 31.