

**SEM/ARTX214: Framing Difference  
Documentary Practices in Fine Art Photography  
Fall Quarter 2023, Kalamazoo College  
Richard Koenig, Professor**

Meeting Time: Tuesday & Thursday 12:30 to 3:30 PM

Meeting Place: Room 306 Upjohn Library Commons

Class Homepage (NOT optimized for phones): <http://people.kzoo.edu/~rkoenig/educator/photo/seminar.html>

Office Location: Light Fine Arts Building Room 203, Phone: 337.7003

Office Hours: Wednesday 1:30 to 3:30 PM (or other times by appointment—IRL or via MS Teams)

Cell Phone (emergency only, please): 269.270.8110

Photo Classroom (LFA 103) Phone: 337.7399

E-Mail: [rkoenig@kzoo.edu](mailto:rkoenig@kzoo.edu)

### **Course Description and Goals**

This course combines research and studio components. The research topic, broadly painted, will be fine art documentary practices, grounded with the entry-level hands-on studio component of digital photography.

Related to these two components, there are two expected outcomes: to give participants creative control of photographic tools (technical, formal, conceptual) prior to their possible departure for study-away, but also to explore the issues and ethics of documentary photographic practice. While the research topic is broad, including theory and tradition, this course would place particular emphasis on the ethics of photographing outside of one's own group or culture (more below).

Through research (readings, short writing assignments, discussion) and the production of a small body of work, each student should complete this course with a basic technical foundation in digital photography generally, as well as an introductory understanding of documentary photographic practice—including gaining an awareness of the responsibility involved when “taking” someone's picture.

### **Introduction**

For 184 years now, photography has been utilized to document people, places, and things. Photography was immediately recognized as being a trace of the real—a fine rendering of nature. Only later does it become a “picture” or artwork—meaning something that is expressive. Of course, the true strength of photography is that it is, and always has been, both at once—objective (trace) and subjective (art). It is the tension between the two that is so fascinating to many (including myself). In this course we will focus on how photographers use their medium in a way that leans toward the objective (documentary).

Photography can be an aggressive act and the history of photography is checkered with what we might classify as good to very poor uses of this invasive medium. For instance, I would put Lewis Hine at the positive end of things: first trained in sociology, Hine's work helped create the motivation and resolve for others to enact laws to keep children out of coal mines and sweat shops here in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simply put, photography helped change the world for the better.

On the other hand, there are the unfortunate uses of photography—take the example of phrenologists during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: here, photography was used as a tool to measure, label, and discriminate. Most other uses could fit somewhere in between the two. Where would one place the well-known work of Edward Curtis, photographer of Native Americans, for example? And while you're looking at Curtis, it would be natural to compare the production of Adam Clark Vroman and Frances Benjamin Johnston.

So, through study and practice, we aim to look at how photography has and may be used when crossing cultural boundaries. Students here at Kalamazoo College often travel across the globe, but these issues and concerns apply, as well, when one crosses lines of gender, race, or socioeconomics right here on our campus, in our town, state, or nation. Care, thoughtfulness, and collaboration must always be employed.

## **Evaluation**

Merely completing the requirements for an assignment will not necessarily ensure a good evaluation. I look at technical, formal, and conceptual aspects of your work but also the level of exploration and risk taking. Below is a breakdown of how your final grade will be determined:

15%	Assignment One—DOF/Motion Exercise (ungraded) and Sense of Place
15%	Assignment Two—Typology
10%	First Half Participation
10%	Biographical Study
20%	Assignment Three—Site as Subject with text panel (or Event/Personal Narrative)
20%	Assignment Four—Open Project with Structured Reflection
10%	Second Half Participation

## **Credit/No Credit Policy**

Students in good academic standing may elect to take at most one letter graded course per term as CR/NC for a total of up to four courses while enrolled at Kalamazoo College. Courses taken CR/NC must be outside the major, minor, or concentration (including cognates). Students may elect this option for at most one course in any one department. Before signing this form, please be sure to investigate all possible implications:

- This form is due to the Registrar's Office on or before Friday of eighth week of the quarter during which Credit\No Credit is a course registration option.
- Once declared a Credit\No Credit course, the course cannot be converted back to a letter-graded course.
- Declaration of a course as Credit\No Credit makes the student ineligible for the Dean's List consideration for that quarter.
- Many graduate schools and professional institutions may not accept Credit\No Credit graded coursework in subjects related to an intended program of study.
- Students may retake a CR/NC option for a letter grade.
- The course will not satisfy prerequisites for those course sequences that require a "C- or better."
- The course will not satisfy the last course in the language requirement (103 or 201) or any of the Shared Passages Seminar requirements.

## **Participation**

Good participation means one actively and candidly contributes to the conversation, while also being supportive of one's peers. It means one is following what is going on and is a constructive presence to the goings-on of the class. It means, quite simply, that one contributes to a positive class atmosphere. Along those lines, an important note about critiques: we criticize the work, not the person making the work. You should note that I've earmarked a not insignificant portion (10% for each half of the term) of your final grade for how you participate in this class.

## **Diversity and Inclusion**

With our time spent together in this course, we will make a conscious effort to ensure that all participants feel welcomed and encouraged to participate. Hurtful comments based on ethnicity, religion, physical appearance, sexual orientation, national origin, and/or socioeconomic status will not be tolerated. Creating personal artwork can cause one to be vulnerable—we, in this course, will endeavor always to treat each other with respect and regard one another's artistic production seriously.

## **Required Texts and Lab Fee**

There is no required textbook for this class—I will provide handouts or links to websites as needed. The lab fee for this course is \$10.00 to offset costs of inks for some printing that we will be doing.

## **Land Acknowledgement**

We gather on the land of the Council of the Three Fires—the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi. Indigenous nations of the Great Lakes region are also known as the Anishinaabe (Ah-nish-nah-bay), or original people, and their language is Anishinaabemowin (Ah-nish-nah-bay-mow-in). We acknowledge the enduring relationship that exists between the People of the Three Fires and this land.

## **Accommodations**

If you are a student with a disability who seeks accommodation or other assistance in this course, please let me know. Kalamazoo College is committed to making every effort to providing reasonable accommodations. If you want to discuss your overall needs for accommodation at the College, please direct your questions to the office of Associate Dean of Students. [<https://www.kzoo.edu/student-life/students-with-disabilities/>]

## **Learning Support**

Learning Support collaborates with students to find effective learning techniques for time management, notetaking, test-taking skills, organization, and more. One-time appointments or regular check-ins are available with a learning coach or peer consultant.

We welcome all students who are interested in practicing new study strategies. If you're facing challenges like ADHD, Autism, or other learning differences, you can expect an ongoing commitment to empathetic

support, encouragement, and accountability for student-defined goals and paths. Learn more and schedule your appointments at the following link. [<https://learningsupport.kzoo.edu/>]

### **Course Learning Outcomes vis-à-vis Institutional Learning Outcomes**

In order to cultivate cross-institutional consistency and coherence, departments and units are encouraged to identify how their learning outcomes might align with and support the broader institutional learning outcomes. These four ILOs were approved by a vote of the faculty in 2019 after thorough campus-wide discussion and deliberation. ILOs enable graduates to...

- Communicate effectively
- Address complex problems
- Collaborate successfully
- Demonstrate intercultural competency

Most, if not all, of the courses in the department of Art & Art History fulfill the ILOs. Beyond communicating through visual artwork, we, in this class, will exercise this ability through discussion, critiques, and possibly some small written pieces or oral presentations. Current artwork more often than not addresses complex social issues such as climate change or institutional racism, to name but a couple. Collaboration may be exercised through a group project where participants modulate their contributions for the best result of the whole. And we are constantly examining the *impact* (rather than the *intent*) of our work using an intercultural lens.

### **Artificial Intelligence: what is Acceptable and Unacceptable**

The use of generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT) is permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Brainstorming and refining your ideas
- Fine tuning your research questions
- Finding information on your topic

The use of generative AI tools is not permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Impersonating you in classroom contexts, such as by using the tool to compose discussion board prompts assigned to you or content that you put into an MS Teams chat.
- Completing group work that your group has assigned to you, unless it is mutually agreed upon that you may utilize the tool.
- Creation of a draft of an image or writing assignment.
- Creation of final images or entire sentences, paragraphs or papers to complete class assignments.

You are responsible for the information you submit based on an AI query (for instance, that it does not violate intellectual property laws, or contain misinformation or unethical content). Your use of AI tools must be properly documented and cited in order to stay within college policies on [academic dishonesty](#). Any assignment that is found to have used generative AI tools in unauthorized ways will result in failure for that assignment. When in doubt about permitted usage, please ask for clarification.

*The section above has been adapted from guidance provided by Temple University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching.*

## **Lecture, Computers, and Lab Time**

As a result of the pandemic, I now provide all materials ahead of class time via Moodle. Please look this over prior to our class meeting time so that we can make the most of our time together.

Our normal meeting place will be Upjohn Library Commons room 306. We will also use the Mac computers on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor as well as those in the Center for New Media on the 1<sup>st</sup>. These will be for demonstrations, but you will have access to our computer lab in the Light Fine Arts Building (room 122, just off the lobby).

There you'll find fifteen iMacs with the latest Adobe software. If access to building and our particular room line up with normal practice, you will have access between 7:00 AM throughout the day till 11:00 PM—except for any organized class times. For example: Nayda's class, *Design Fundamentals*, meets in this same room Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 12:30 to 3:30 PM.

## **Equipment and Supplies**

A digital single lens reflex (or mirrorless) camera is ideal for this course. Kathryn Lightcap of the Center for New Media (first floor of library) has been in touch with you for the loan of a fine camera.

You may need to purchase a portable hard drive to save your work from this quarter, if you don't already own one. Tripods may be checked out from Curricular Support, also found on the first floor of the library.

## **Assignments—In General**

Assignments must be turned-in on time. Each assignment will require that you shoot a minimum of a hundred or so digital files, create a rough edit of twenty to thirty images, and finally produce, on average, eight final digital images. (Assignments range from six to twelve images each.)

Regarding final digital image quality: these should contain a full-range of tones and straightforward color as a default. Avoid cropping as much as possible—keep close to full frame so I can see how you compose things in the viewfinder. And in terms of concept, my assignments are open, but directed. It's really good to kick your ideas around with others in the class.

## **Assignments—In Particular**

### Assignment One—Depth of Field/Motion Exercise and Sense of Place

Depth of Field/Motion Exercise—this assignment is to show that you have a grasp of the basic controls of your camera (shutter and aperture) and the effects they provide when used in combination. Give me four images that prove your aptitude in this regard—one example of each of the following effects: shallow depth-of-field, great depth-of-field, blurred action, frozen action.

Sense of Place—this could be your abode (dorm room, apartment, group house) or a larger area of some kind—campus, neighborhood, or city. It could be another town, such as where you grew up (if nearby), but you should avoid too large an area, such as the state or region, given our time constraints. When I say the word “place” I would like it to be a physical place, rather than treating this as a metaphor or state of mind—but I like that idea (save for “open”). Give me six images for this part of assignment one.

## Assignment Two—Typology

Typology—this assignment asks you to take a typological approach to your documentation. Make a series of photographs where your subject may be people, places, or things. Your working strategy here should be clinical or scientific, not expressive or dramatic. The point is to *photograph a single type of subject in a very similar manner*. Then, when viewing the photographs (usually together, as in a grid), a comparison can be made between the individual subjects of that group. Turn in eight or nine digital images, along with a digital maquette. Please see the work of Bernhard and Hilla Becher as well as their famous students Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth.

## Brief Biographical Study

This will be a brief, one-page research paper on a photographer (imagine it as support for an exhibit of the person's work). The photographer must come from my list of accomplished folks (see our website). Turn in 500-word document (in MS Word, preferably, so I may edit).

## Assignment Three—Site as Subject (with research and text panel) or Event/Personal Narrative

Site—find a place of significant cultural and/or historical import to document. Think of public monuments, statues, or historical sites downtown to get you going. For instance, Abraham Lincoln spoke in Kalamazoo 165 years ago (August 1856). Where did he speak? Another example—an F3 tornado roared down West Main Street, not far away, in 1980. Shoot a “site” as your focus, but also cover any ancillary aspects of it—try to contextualize your subject. Turn in eight digital images.

Text Panel—in addition to shooting your “site” you also must provide some research on it. In the end, with the combination of image and text, we hope mine the past, like an archaeologist, to bring meaning forward to the present. Create 300-word text panel on your subject and turn in (MS Word) with your digital images.

Alternative assignment ideas—in lieu of the above, you could document either an *event* of some kind or pursue a *personal narrative*. To help you here, we'll look at the work of Larry Fink for the former and Nan Goldin for the latter. Turn in eight to ten digital images. In lieu of text panel for above, you should work up a 300-word artist statement for either of these alternative assignments and turn in (MS Word document).

## Assignment Four—Open Project with Structured Reflection

Open Project—you're completely free to do as you like for this assignment, but please run your idea by me before you begin. If you enjoyed shooting an event or site you could do that again (but I am expecting more this second time around). As mentioned in number one above, you might want to explore a metaphysical space, or something a bit more amorphous or subtle. Look for “edges” or borders between things or groups of things, for example (the beach acts as this—lies between sea and land). If you enjoyed combining image with research, you could continue in that vein.

Turn in ten to twelve digital images for this last assignment along with a maquette to show me how the project would be exhibited in a gallery.

Structured Reflection—I will ask you to turn in a structured reflection with this assignment. The writing will apply to both this final assignment as well as a recap of your experience in this course overall.