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21W.749 / CMS.935 Documentary Photography and Photojournalism:
Still Images of a World in Motion
Spring 2009

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General Requirements

Each of you will be required to plan execute a documentary photo project. You may select your own subject – subject to my approval, but I would urge that you not take on anything too grandiose. I would suggest that you begin looking for a subject close to home – but that is not part of your personal life, consider, for instance:

- Life on a dorm floor
- Life on a sheep farm;
- A day-week-month in a local laundromat;
- The work of a scientist, or lab;
- The life of an unseen worker.

On the other hand, you may push the envelope as far as you dare and are capable of pushing it – If you can gain access to a group of people, or an organization, whose lives or functioning we normally never see, go for it. But remember, to paraphrase Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas:

“Faraway is not a place.” Which is to say that sometimes the most interesting photographic subjects are those people, events and institutions with which we interact on a daily basis – and usually take for granted.

Most important, always remember that there is one thing that you owe your subjects, be they your roommates or a group of developmentally disabled adults -

Honesty: honesty in your vision; honesty in what you tell your subjects about your project and its purpose; honesty in your approach to your subject; and honesty in what you present to your viewers.

Your finished project will consist of 20 to 30 images, and 1500-2000 words of explanatory text. The text and photographs should, together, present the uninitiated with an understandable, engaging, ‘picture’ of your subject, but the writing and the photos should each stand on their own, and be integrated for presentation on the Web.

(You may **not** shoot your project over winter or spring break, because one of the requirements is that you pay at least three visits to your subject – something you can’t do if you shoot some place you can’t get back to. I need to be able to respond to your first and second shoots, and provide direction, so pick an accessible subject. Additionally, you may **not** begin working on your project at the beginning of the semester; if you are ready to begin shooting before you’ve done any of the assignments and class work, you don’t need the class.)

Past projects have included:

A runner’s view of the Boston Marathon – in which the student ran the marathon with a camera; a look at Georgetown, Tex; a day in a sheltered workshop for the developmentally disabled; life in a fraternity; the MIT sailing club; a day in the life of The Tech, MIT’s student newspaper; a day in the life of the Harvard Square Starbucks; a behind-the-scenes look at the Exploratorium, in San Francisco; the life of the Haymarket; a look at pigeon racing (and that project eventually lead to the writing of a book about pigeons); an examination of a Black beauty parlor; an artist producing a work for exhibition; preparations for an exhibition at the Boston Museum of Art; a week in the life of a surgical fellow who commutes weekly from western Canada to Boston; a look at Jacques, a fixture on the Boston transvestite/transgender scene; and on and on.