

MANDATORY ASSIGNMENT 06: PHOTO ESSAY

INTRODUCTION

In this assignment my plan has been to simply try and capture emotions. Emotions related to rather unique and different relations. I have done research on other photo essays to get inspiration and to come up with ideas of my own - both for thematic inspiration as well as compositions and ways to portray a person.

I have tried keeping the photos simple and interesting to look at in terms of elements, compositions and variety in between the shots. By trying to consider each image as an individual I think all my images stand strong alone, and also together as a unity.

Interpretation of Task

The way I interpreted this assignment was that I had to portray a person (show who the person is, and give a sense of their personality or character) through a series of photographs. In addition to a cover photo, I needed six more photos that would somehow communicate a story related to this person.

Concept

A girl receiving, reading, philosophizing, and writing letters with prisoners in the United States. Because of the dark topic, I have focused on non-coloured images with quite a lot of contrast, and details.

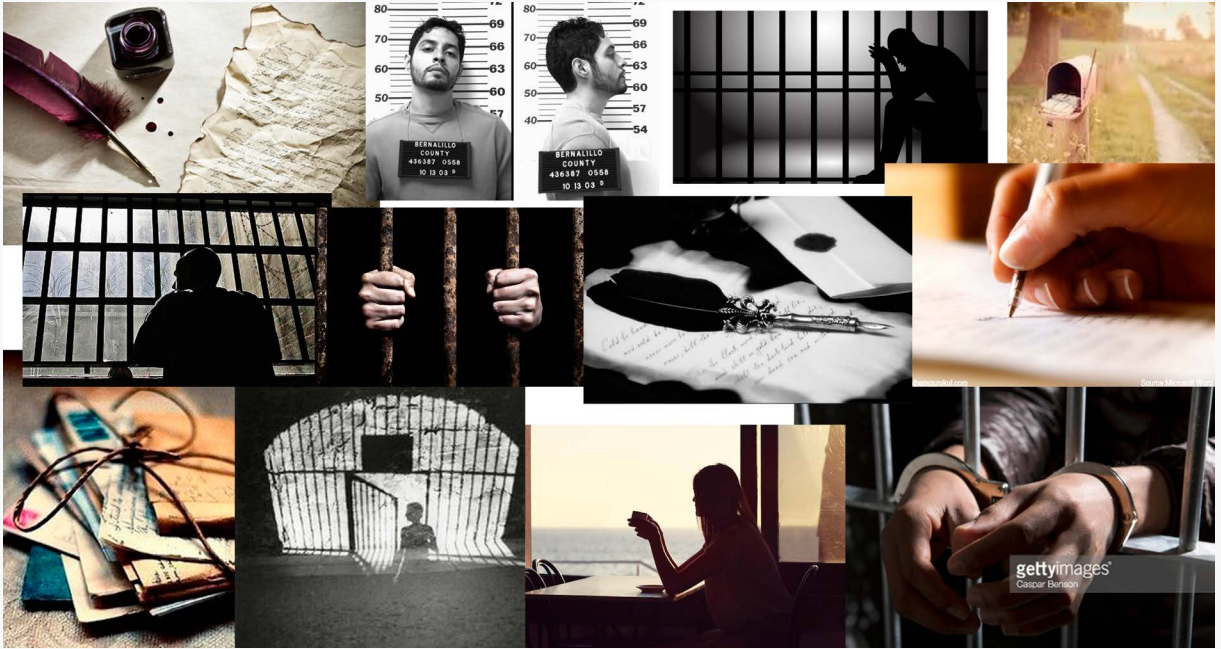
Message/Achieved Action

I didn't want this photo essay to use colours or give any sense of a "happy" mood, since the stories of the people behind the letters aren't always exactly cheerful.

Story - Very simply put, the concept of the photo essay is to portray a girl who writes letters with prisoners in the US. Since a lot of people might have prejudice in regards to this topic, I wanted to make it quite dark and emotional. Although living a completely normal day to day life, this girl is also in contact with people who have been, and are going through a reality quite different from hers.

Photos - I have tried choosing photos with detail, where I have gone closer than what one may normally do, and also photos of my subject where she is not smiling. Since photos that don't necessary capture happiness may be more appealing, and more descriptive, I wanted to keep it more natural. This is probably extra important for this topic, since hearing stories from the inside can really move you.

Title - *Between the Lines*. I decided to have a title quite open for interpretation; one people can read what they want in. Whether they think of what is written between the lines in a letter, between the lines of the cell door of an inmate, or the lines in a person's face - it lets more in the essay be up to the individual viewers.

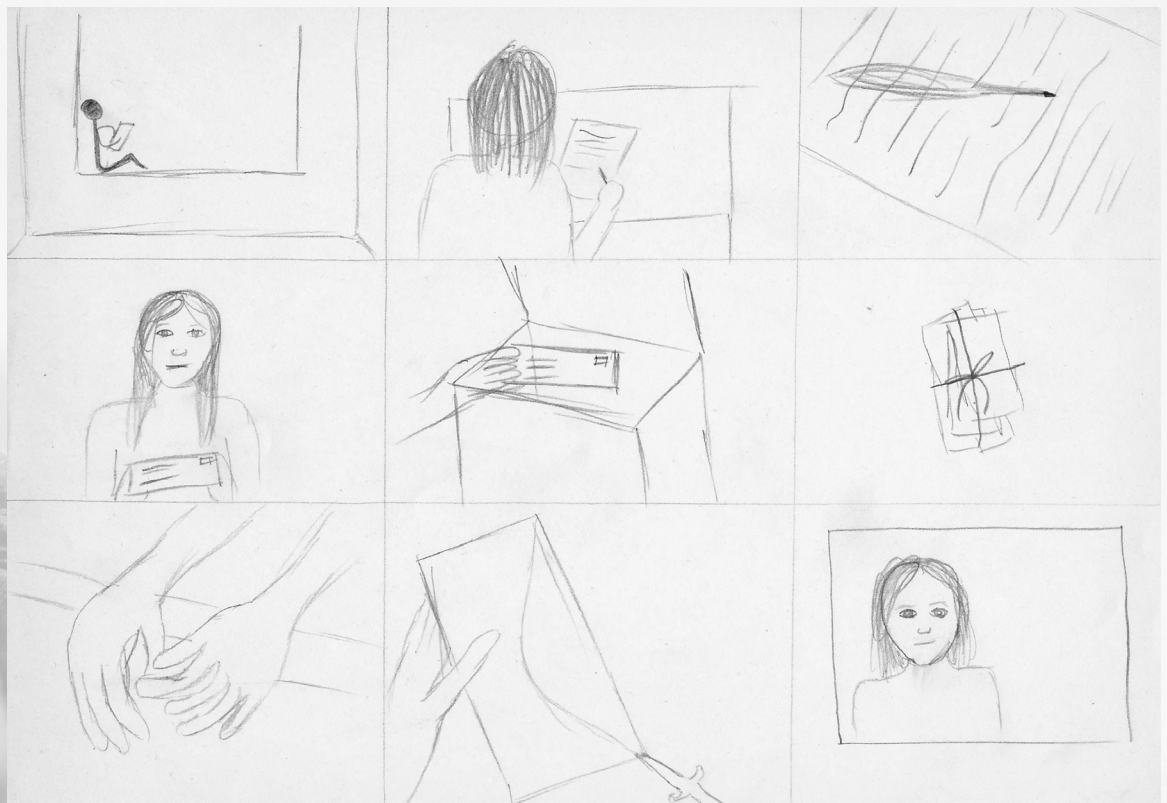


Coming Up With Ideas

Equipment - For this assignment I used a Nikon D7000, and an external flash when necessary. As for lenses, I used a Nikon AS-S Nikkor 18-105 mm 1:3.5-5.6G, and a Nikon AF-S Nikkor 50 mm 1:1.4G.

Photos - I wrote down different scenes that could tell the story, both to make sure I would get unique photos, and also so they would be able to tell the story. For the cover photo I quickly knew I wanted to use the letter opener. And for other photos I had things such as portrait, mail box, writing letter, reading letter, hands, sitting in a window...

Sketches - Before I went to do the shoot, I also did some very quick sketches.



Other Photos - Below are only a few of the photos that didn't eventually make it on the photo essay, but having many to choose between helped a lot in creating an interesting essay with different angles, elements and compositions.



Photoshop/Camera RAW

To edit my photos I used Camera RAW and Photoshop CS6. In Camera RAW I converted the photos to black and white, and adjusted the brightness and contrasts. Then opening the photos in Photoshop, I did some very simple retouching and cropping on certain images, and also used Levels and Curves to further pump up the contrasts a little.

DESIGN CHOICES

Photos



Photo 1 - Cover Photo

f7.1 - 1/200 - ISO 100 - Focal Length 50

Studio Lighting (External Flash + LED)

Idea: Since the letter opener is what she uses every time she opens one of her letters, I thought this would suit well as an object closely linked to the person.

Composition: Rule of Thirds



Photo 2 - Philosophizing

f4.8 - 1/125 - ISO 200 - Focal Length 45

Natural Lighting

Idea: Inspired by the way prisoners are often portrayed standing, looking out from their cell, I wanted to do a similar detail photo of my subject.

Composition: Rule of Thirds



Photo 3 - Mail Call

f4.5 - 1/125 - ISO 200 - Focal Length 25

Natural Lighting

Idea: I simply wanted to have a photo of my subject actually reading a letter. We did this outside to contrast the prisoners being inside, and because of good light conditions.

Composition: Rule of Thirds



Photo 4 - Not Just Ink On Paper

f4.5 - 1/100 - ISO 100 - Focal Length 18

Artificial Lighting (External Flash)

Idea: Creating a nice atmospheric photo while she puts some words down for a penpal. Shows of some of the objects related to her writing.

Composition: Rule of Thirds



Photo 5 - From the Iron Curtains

f5 - 1/125 - ISO 200 - Focal Length 50

Natural Lighting (Light through window)

Idea: The light coming through the window at this time was absolutely beautiful and perfectly captured the mood I wanted for this photo showing of some of her letters.

Composition: Works with lines going in different directions



Photo 6 - Dear John

f5 - 1/125 - ISO 200 - Focal Length 50

Natural Lighting (Light through window)

Idea: A shot showing of one of her letters, almost ready to be sent. This is yet another atmospheric image that I think emphasizes the topic very well.

Composition: Rule of Thirds



Photo 7 - Mugshot

f4.5 - 1/200 - ISO 100 - Focal Length 24

Artificial Lighting (External Flash)

Idea: Even though my model hasn't been incarcerated, I thought this would be a fun way of pointing out that her penpals are in prison. This is thus inspired by mugshots.

Composition: Formal Balance

Style/Genre

For this photo essay I wanted a pretty dark mood. Looking at photos from prison, that's usually the mood they express, as it's not exactly a happy place. Even though the girl portrayed in my photo essay isn't in prison herself, and by no means is in a relationship with any of her penpals, these emotions are often reflected through the letters. At the same time, I wished to create a contrast by also placing her outside on a few of the photos, as this is a freedom she has, whilst her penpals don't.

Colours

There are a few reasons why I wanted my photo essay to be black and white. The first reason is that, since we had to have our cover photo without colours, I wished to keep the rest the same to tie the photos together. Visual coherence is important to give the impression of the images as a whole, rather than individual images thrown together.

A second reason is that I by removing the colours make it easier to focus on the actual elements in the image, and the composition etc. Finally, I also think black and white images focus more on the mood that I wanted for this essay: a bit depressed and emotional.

Elements and Composition

I have tried keeping the amount of elements in each photo to a minimum, to avoid them being too busy, and rather keep the focus on what is important in the frame. The elements range from a letter opener, to my subject, to letters, pens, envelopes... Generally things that play part in the actual story.

The composition of each image obviously depends on what is portrayed. But for the most part I have considered the rule of thirds - a nine frame grid "used as a guide for placing the key elements in the shot" (*Ultimate Photo Tips*). For the final photo, the "mugshot" photo, I used formal, or symmetrical balance, meaning that "each side of the vertical center of the photograph has equal weight or exactly the same elements and principles" (*Andrew Nourse*).

Photo number five, "From the Iron Curtains," plays around with diagonal lines. As *PictureCorrect* explains, "Diagonal lines can convey a sense of action or make an image more dynamic. (...) Their power resides in their ability to grab the attention of the viewer. The viewer's eyes tend to travel back and forth along diagonals." I therefore believe that this is a quite dramatic image because there is a lot going on.

UPDATES

In my feedback I was recommended to either edit, or change three of my photos (to the left below). For the cover photo I was encouraged to try and flip it to see if this could increase the viewer's attention - since we in this part of the world read from left to right and thus look at artwork the same way, the breathing space we first see creates an interesting effect. I did this, and found out I actually liked it a lot better than I first thought I would, and decided to go with this.



Since so much of the composition of this photo was taken up by the wall, I decided to change this one. In one way I do like the wall taking up so much space as it makes her seem more trapped, but I changed it to a photo where she looks in the camera to create a more personal look.



This photo came across as a little impersonal as well, so I changed it to one where we could see the model's face while communicating with her penpals. This is another way to make this photo essay be more personal. I like how clean this photo is, as there aren't many disturbing elements neither around the model, nor on the table.



SELF EVALUATION

Reflection Around Finished Product

I believe I managed to choose both a model and a part of her personality that is interesting and makes for a good photo essay. Having penpals in prison isn't something a lot of people are aware of being possible, and many of those who do know are sceptical. So all in all the story is quite unique and one I think can make people curious, and possibly trigger emotions.

The photos I have chosen have balanced compositions, and are tied together because of strong contrasts, the lack of colour, and the elements used. I'm happy with the way each and every photo turned out as single images, and also in unity as an essay.

All photos have obviously been taken with the manual settings of my camera, and I have thus experimented with different shutter speeds, aperture, ISO, and focal lengths. In doing so I have achieved the look and feel I have wanted for each photo, and made sure my main element is always what is in focus. All in all I would say I'm very happy with what I have come up with.

Development and Process

I normally don't do any sketches before I go out and shoot, but since I was taking photos of someone, and had to use also their time for this assignment, I figured it would be smart to have a rather clear idea of what kind of photos I'd want. Then, as we were shooting the different scenes, I moved around and tried out angles and compositions to see which would suit the individual scenes and frames best.

Although I tried getting the exposure, compositions and framing as close to how I actually wanted them while taking photos, some photoshopping also helped me in achieving the mood I was aiming for. I needed the photos to be a little contrasty because I think they really set the atmospheric mood that I wanted. Since I have been using Photoshop regularly for several years now, this wasn't very hard for me to get done, as I know where to find and adjust most things.

The project only run over two weeks, and I ended up spending the first week on research and planning the shoot, but since I got the photos taken in a day, and another day was spent on editing, I never saw time as an issue. However, what I do realise now when looking back at it, is just how much it actually helped having some sketches beforehand. Had I not had those I'm sure the whole shoot would have taken a lot more time because I would have had to think a lot more about which scenes to actually set, rather than experimenting with angles and compositions.

As a lesson learnt from this assignment, I believe I will start putting more time into planning my shoots for the future, particularly when dealing with a model or a story. Of course, sometimes the best images come when you are standing in front of the actual scene, but having at least a few ideas never is a bad thing.



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Kontrakt vedrørende portrett fotografering, foto-essay

Studenter ved Noroff Webstudent/Instituttet skal gjennomføre en obligatorisk oppgave som har, portrettering av en person gjennom en fotoserie, som tema.

Bildene skal kunne publiseres, og i den forbindelse trenger studenten at personen som portretteres samtykker til dette. Studenten har gjennomgått og blitt informert om Norsk Presseforbund sin, vær varsom plakat: http://presse.no/Pressens_Faglige_Utvalg_PFU/Var_Varsom-plakaten/

Jeg, Julie samtykker herved at student, Monika skal kunne publisere bildene som er tatt i forbindelse med obligatorisk oppgave 07 Fotoserie-essay.

Kontrakten er gjennomgått og akseptert.

Monika R. Hovsen
For studenten(e)

Julie Wilhelmine Hovsen Schide
For portrett person (kunde)