

A JOURNAL.....

written with Communications 499
in mind.

by:

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For:

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This is not so much a journal by the dictionary definition as a reflection, an assessment of the Communications 499 course as it was run in the fall of 1976.

The course was an interesting idea, and it intrigued me from the start. Here we were, doing photography for the archives of the Burnaby Public Library, getting all our supplies free, and above all, being told we had artistic control. "You can shoot anything you like." "Anything?!?" "Anything." It gave one a sense of power- here we were, mere university students, deciding what future generations would see about Burnaby in the year 1976.

There were problems that loomed in front of us immediately, of course. The clerical employees strike meant that it was hard for us to get equipment out and even harder for us to get the proper supplies. Countless rolls of film were ruined in the developing, by most of the others as well as me. It was a while before I caught on to the Acufine developer and Plus-X film combination as being the ideal one. I cannot foresee ever again using another developer unless special circumstances preclude it.

The main problem was my own desire to constantly better my work and at the same time avoid comparing it to that of the others. I always had the growing suspicion that I was failing in both of these areas. It also quickly became apparent that we did not have Artistic Control of the material for the archives.

We shot everything that we could think of, submitted the contacts to them, and they picked exactly what they wanted off of them. This would not necessarily have been a bad system if they had known what was important material to have in an archives and if they were experienced at reading contact sheets. I have my doubts that they possessed either of these qualities. In any event, it was evident that there was not going to be adequate room for the expansion of our abilities as photographers merely from the photos for the archives. Therefore, the additional five photo essays were also assigned.

Essay #1- School Kiddies At Burnaby Lake.

This was a rather chaotic and disappointing essay for me. I didn't have the proper amount of time to devote to it, and didn't have the sense to realize that my topic just wasn't that interesting. Since kids aren't the easiest subjects in the world to take pictures of, I suppose that my results could have been much worse than they were. The major problems with the essay were that it had no identifying photo, no focal point, no real flow from one picture to another. In both the introductory course and the Habitat course, the order and clarity of purpose of the photos didn't seem as important as cranking out X number of them by a set date. These requirements now became evident to me. I vowed to resolve them in the next photo essays. As well, I received many of the other standard Lynn V. comments that I have come to know so well- "Not enough variety of angles." "Could you crop this a bit here?" "Is that tissue I see?" I decided that these also would be comments missing from those about my next essay.

Essay #2- The SFU Strike Protest Rally.

This essay fell into my lap by accident- Stu was going to cover it as part of an essay on the strike in general. I tagged along. Stu decided that it was too foggy to shoot, and he left. I shamelessly decided to use his idea, and ran back to the darkroom to get my equipment. It turned out to be a rather interesting subject- lots happening, relevant, good facial expressions and body language, on the part of the students and the speakers. The fog, if anything, added an aura of mystery and disbelief. The architectural makeup of SFU made it very easy to get lots of good views and interesting angles. There were a few minor complaints when the essay was presented, but nothing that I had not anticipated. There was nothing that I thought I could rectify while still keeping within the bounds of the concept that I had in mind for the piece. For example, the complaint was made that I didn't have a picture of a sign or other identifying object to positively place the event. While true, there were no signs. It would have been necessary for me to go down to the picket lines or somewhere similar in order to get such a shot. I then wouldn't have had an essay on just the rally and the thrust would have been blunted. All in all, I think that my second essay was the best in portraying just what I set out to.

Essay #3- The Scrap Cars.

This was an essay with an interesting beginning. I drove past this same scrap metal place on my way home from school every day, and was always entranced by the huge mass of scrap cars that they had piled on a field next to their main yard. I stopped to take one picture for myself, I was so intrigued by all the angles and lines and distorted metal spaces that I blasted off a whole roll in about fifteen minutes. It occurred to me

as I drove home that I could have just taken my next photo essay. It was a subject that had always interested me, ever since I had seen that scene in Goldfinger where the car was crushed up into a small cube. It was fun to shoot and to print as well. Reaction to the essay was varied. It seemed to basically come down to whether or not you got off on scrap cars. I printed the whole thing on Ilfobrom Velvet Stipple paper before realizing that I really would have preferred to have seen it on Agfa Portriga, so I redid it. It was worth it. The prints had a lot more snap (with comparable grades) and the whole mood was more in line with the old timey feeling I was aiming for.

Essay #4- The Abandoned House.

This was by far my most complicated essay, and the one that I worked the hardest on. It was highly conceptual in origin. I thought about what I would really like to photograph, and then I tried to do it. I consulted with a number of other people (who had no photographic experience) and asked them their opinions on my ideas. Then, I took three people to an abandoned house in Burnaby. We had a number of props as well- theatrical masks, hats, capes, a gun, and an axe. I wanted to improvise situations using mainly the house as the central theme, but with the people as subtle subjects peeking around corners, through windows and so on. The house itself was very interesting, but I wanted more, in order to sort of 'tease' the viewer. Well, things fell through. The people I was trying to use didn't really have their heart in it, and kept fooling around, removing their masks and exchanging hats and so on. More importantly, they kept insisting on being the central figures in the shots rather than the vague additions that I had visualized. The actual photography was hard to do. The interior shots were all done with existing

exterior lighting, and a tripod was necessary for most of the shots. I had to use extensive bracketing. I ended up going back the next day and doing a roll of pickup shots with no people in them at all. This was my first time using the fisheye, and it was a very expressive lens. Many wierd and wonderful things were possible with it. The main danger was in leaning on it too heavily, because it is basically a trick, and therefore can easily be over-used. It was also the first essay where I did not use the regular 50mm lens at all. The results? People seemed to generally like it, as I thought they would, and I suppose that in many ways it is a good essay. But it is in my opinion a failure, because it didn't in most respects turn out to be what I had envisioned. Most people seemed to interpret it as being a concrete, story-type thing. It wasn't. C'est la vie.

Essay # 5- Forest Lawn Cemetary.

I wasn't aware that our one totally full-blown creative masterpiece of an essay was supposed to be the last one. The impression I got was that any of them could be the one. So the order of my submissions was essentially wrong, and to some extent this essay had to be overshadowed by the previous one. All of my energy for almost two weeks went into the 4th one, whereas while I was doing this one I had a lot of other things on the go as well- finishing up the archival printing, doing the releases for them, finishing writing this journal, and so on. Nevertheless, I tried to think of something that I hadn't done before for the last essay. Not in subject matter- there were obviously many 'things' that I hadn't covered- but something new in concept or mood. I then decided that since I had been completely selfish on the last one and done exactly what I wanted to do, for this one I decided to photograph something

that I didn't particularly want to do, and therefore in all probability a subject that many people would view as unlikeable. I settled on one of the more obvious choices- a cemetery. It was more interesting to do than I initially thought it would be. I found out a lot of things about the funeral scam that I didn't know about before. I had bad luck with the shooting and had to go back several times until I got material that I was happy with. On one day there wasn't any people or funerals happening, the weather was bad another day, and I screwed up the developing of the film on another occasion. Consequently, I became a familiar sight to the gravediggers. I hope they didn't think that I was some sort of wierdo, hanging around all day with my camera, saying "When's the next funeral?" In any event, I ended up capturing what I thought was the proper combination of reverence and ridiculousness that one experiences there.

Meanwhile, back at the archives: While all this foolishness was going on with the photo essays, we were all out diligently shooting apartments, houses, streets, hospitals, vacant lots and hospitals. Among other things. (Too numerous to mention) It really surprises me sometimes that we did get this thing finished. The library continued to vacillate and procrastinate. I suppose the main reason why it was finished was due to us, pushing to meet that 13-week deadline. Most of the credit must go to Lynn, who got this thing going originally and kept it moving along more or less on schedule. (Personally speaking, I really don't think that I needed another two weeks to finish- I was proceeding right on schedule- I think- cough cough)

I personally got a lot out of this course. I refined my printing abilities, and I think that I have a much better 'eye'. I know that I will keep up photography in the years to come, and I hope to have a little darkroom of my own in the basement sometime when my finances permit it. I was looking through all the photos that I ever printed before I sat down to write this conclusion, and I can see a marked improvement even just in the work that I did this semester over last. The best thing about this course was that we were able to gain experience in two different types of photography- totally creative and fulfilling work, and the commercial variety where little if any control is enjoyed by the photographer over the final 'product'. In my opinion., the 'hands-on' courses offered by the Communications Department are some of the most valid ones in the calendar. After taking the photo courses that I have, I can, for instance, look at a magazine ad and see why it is a good ad and why it was set up the way it was and why it's going to sell the product. And that's what media is all about.

Thanks for everything, Lynn.