

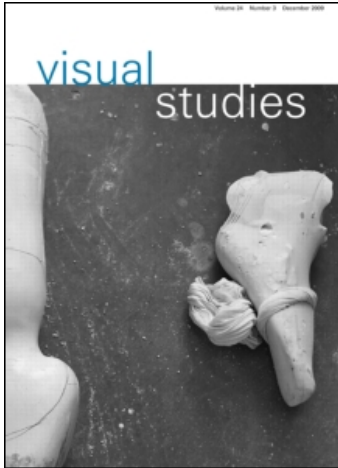
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Howard Becker's summer workshop in visual sociology: A personal view

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association publications, a number of IVSA members have published their own books and journal articles, and the ASA from time to time has featured publications on aspects of visual sociology. There has been, in other words, a fairly steady stream of words on visual sociology, all of which is accumulating into a respectful set of bibliographic references that legitimates the field as an academic arena. IVSA members have also been successful in creating exhibitions of photographs, making films and video tapes for local and national distribution, and have had some of their own work selected for permanent collections in university libraries. It would be ill-advised of me to select out the names of just a few of the visual sociologists who have made these important contributions, but I hope no one will be offended if I just list a few of the titles of the books produced by visual sociologists since 1974: The Human Image, Introducing Visual Sociology, Exploring Society Photographically, Images of Information, Education and Social Change: A Photographic Study of Peru, Good Company, Life in Wellsboro 1880-1920: A Socio-historical Portrait.

Perhaps most important for the future of the organization, there has been a steady growth in resources both in terms of money and persons willing to undertake the management of the association. In the early days of its formation the IVSA depended totally on the charity of universities to supply its most basic needs, such as stamps and envelopes. Had it not been for the willingness of administrators at a number of universities to underwrite the costs of the association, we could not have made it through those formative years. But while the treasury currently has enough money for stamps, the IVSA is hardly a rich and powerful organization. We still depend on the kindness of

strangers for underwriting some of our expenses, and until we become able to pay all of our bills ourselves, we will be vulnerable to sudden shifts of fortune at the hands of others. Luckily, the association has been able to recruit officers who have been able to locate resources for the association that have allowed it to do things that it could never have been able to do on its own. The IVSA is now at the point where a new set of energetic officers have appeared to replace most of the founding figures, a very healthy sign for the organization which, like most voluntary associations, needs a periodic turnover of "management" if it is to deal creatively in advancing its objectives with a minimum of resources in a period of technological and social change.

Howard Becker's
Summer Workshop in
Visual Sociology:
A Personal View
by Jon Rieger

This summer the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, will once again offer the one-week workshop entitled, "Exploring Society Photographically," taught by Howard Becker. I attended it last summer (15-19 July 1985), during the week following the IVSA Annual Meeting. When Tim Curry found out I was going to stay for the Becker workshop, he asked me to write a report on it for IVSA members. So each evening during the week I recorded on tape a summary of the day's activities, and made additional notes on various pertinent aspects.

The workshop is organized mainly around the use of still photography, but opportunities exist for exploration of other techniques, e.g., video. Becker

conducts it as an informal seminar and prefers to have a small group of between five and twelve students. There were seven students last summer—a nice-sized group with varied visual interests and skills. Most of us were sociologists but the group also included a photographer, Kate Brower, and a critic, Steve Melville. Howard takes a flexible approach and he observed at the outset that the course "is a little different every year" in organization and content, depending, in part, on the number and "mix" of students and their interests. I would say that it is pitched mainly at those who want to teach courses in visual, especially photographic, sociology and/or those who want to do research using visual techniques, but it can be enjoyed by almost anyone interested in visual phenomena and communication. My perception is that the most benefit accrues if you show up equipped with a 35mm camera that you feel reasonable competent/comfortable using, the right supplies or the money to buy them locally, and a readiness for a very busy, but exciting, five days.

We met initially on Monday morning for an hour and talked about the use of photography in sociology and specific approaches to the utilization of photographs as an investigative tool. For those of us who had brought cameras, Howard outlined the week's assignment, which was to:

investigate, with the use of our cameras, some activity, or a place where people are doing things together--behaving together--interacting, etc. It can be a restaurant, for example, or other type of place; even a streetcorner. It can be something that is organized or something that is spontaneous.

Except for its focus on interaction, then, the assignment was essentially wide open. After the morning meeting we sortied.

Those who needed supplies went to pick them up. The afternoon was filled with exploration of the city and photographing. Becker wanted us to return and develop a role of film by supper, make a contact sheet after supper, and meet around 8:00 p.m. to critique our day's experience and our results. The evening seminar went on until about 10:30. Wayne Wheeler and Kate Brower had teamed up to study an Italian festival underway in downtown Rochester. Eric Margolis picked the "Chapel Hill Residence Hall," an SRO lodging house. Vito Signorile selected something called the "Sweet Stuff Pastry Shoppe & Cafe," and I had settled on "Hammond's Health & Fitness Center," a black-owned "iron" gym in the inner city. Tom Matthews was working on a video exploration of a Christian day care center, while Steve Melville was absorbed in a review of selected materials in the Workshop library. The discussion of our results was vigorous, with Becker continually challenging us with the question, "What is in the photos that you didn't already know?"

On Tuesday we revisited sites and took many more photos, returning in time to make a large number of prints for the evening critique. I spent more than four hours in the gym, spread though the day, and made lots of discoveries: Many subtle and not-so-subtle differences existed between this gym and suburban white middle-class gyms with which I was familiar. The evening meeting again lasted until 10:30. As a critic, Becker was alternately stimulating ("If you don't free yourself from always looking at the conventional focus of attention, you'll never see what's really going on.") and devastating ("You know, the camera is a marvelous mechanical device: It reproduces exactly what's inside your head!").

We spent the early part of Wednesday morning doing additional shooting or printing. Late in the morning we gathered to watch, and then discuss, a video documentary

on Rochester's homeless people produced by Suzanne Frew of the Rochester Institute. The rest of the day before the evening meeting was spent in the field and in the lab. In the evening we and the students in Nate Lyons' advanced workshop gathered for a visual presentation/lecture by him entitled "The Snapshot."

On Thursday the students spent a good deal of the day in the lab, mostly printing. We met with Howard in the afternoon for about an hour on the general topic of editing--the process of selecting and ordering the materials--to create a final report/presentation of our projects. Some of us watched a video documentary Eric Margolis had produced last year on the strike in the Colorado coal mines. In the evening we met again, as a class, in the Workshop library to look at a number of published visual essays and to continue the discussion of the editing process.

Friday morning was spent preparing our final project reports, which were presented in the final seminar on Friday afternoon. In critiquing our work, Becker asked each of us how it could be extended and developed, assuming we had the time and inclination. He made, as usual, many trenchant comments and observations. "Every photograph is potentially an answer to a question, if we know what that question is." He pointed out some critical implications of the strategy of "grouping" photos:

A single photograph, by itself, can have many different meanings. When another photo is put alongside, the meaning of the first one is channeled and constrained. The more photos, the greater the constraint in the interpretations to be made of any one in the set.

It's probably obvious why I hastily copied down such observations: Afterall, how could you sit there

and let stuff like that just glide by?

All week long one of the struggles Howard was having with me was over my perfectionist frustration at the technical sloppiness and esthetic inelegance of many of my photos (you are shooting, developing, and printing furiously each day and the out put is strictly "working prints"). Like others I know who have come up in photography by way of courses offered through college art departments, I have always been sensitive to esthetic criteria in taking and evaluating my photographs. Howard's response was unequivocal: "Look, the scientific--i.e., sociological--esthetic is its own perspective, and its own overlappage with the 'art esthetic' is incidental: The art esthetic is irrelevant or meaningless for the sociological enterprise."

Becker also strongly supported linkage of photographs and words--in the use of captions and text to amplify, clarify, and comment upon the message in the images. I found this view especially gratifying since another consequence of my conditioning in college photography courses was the notion that somehow a photo must be able to stand alone, without assistance of words. Becker's position is that "photos by themselves are not as useful to sociology as when they are accompanied by captions and comments."

The final discussion/critique lasted until almost 4:00 Friday afternoon: Some of us went out on the town in the evening and left for home Saturday morning.

For those of you who might be interested in a seminar of this sort, I strongly recommend it. It is a hands-on practical field experience as well as continually challenging intellectually. Becker has a broad sociological compass and the seminar interaction is always invigorating. The atmosphere is informal. While the students were busy, and always tired by late evening, they were also having a

ball!

Here's some advice for those considering going this summer: If you can handle college dormitory-style accommodations, try to stay in the Eastman School dormitory, just across the street from the Visual Studies Workshop. It is inexpensive and a boarding arrangement is available--the food is excellent in quality and quantity. The Workshop lab is your basic everyday black-and-white photo lab, which you may be sharing with other workshops going on at the same time. It is not necessary that you be particularly knowledgeable or expert in film processing or printing: Lab attendants and fellow students are there to help and you can learn as you go along. The tanks, trays, reels, and chemicals are all provided: What you will need in addition to your camera is film and photographic paper. (I would recommend at least 6-8 rolls of 36-exposure Tri-X film and at least 50 8x10 sheets of variable contrast RC paper--you'll be making lots of full-negative prints on half or full sheets.) For your convenience I'd also urge you to bring an adequate number of printfiles to hold your negatives, a towel, a lupe, a grease pencil for marking contacts selected for enlargement, and a satchel of some kind to carry it all in. For those who care about the quality of the results I recommend you bring a thermometer and the development data sheets for your film and paper, or a B&W lab guide (last summer the lab attendants continually put out incorrect information on fluid temperatures and development printing times). All of this material can be bought locally but prices are not particularly low.

The announcement for the 1986 Summer Institute schedule will be out sometime in April. Howard Becker's workshop is scheduled for 14-18 July (tuition: \$200). For additional information write the Visual Studies Workshop, 31 Prince Street, Rochester, New York 14607. The phone number is: 716/442-8676.

Student Critiques and Teaching Visual Sociology

by Steven J. Gold

In a visual sociology class students need to establish competence in looking at and talking about images. I have found that getting students to discuss and critique bodies of visual information about society--photo and art shows, photo books, and films--helps them master such skills.

Because members of industrial societies are so accustomed to living in a world of photography, we tend to glance at images quickly, often avoiding deeper inspection. Further, precisely because visual images possess great communicative potential, those who create and consume images often prefer to "let the pictures speak for themselves." As a result, students may have little experience in describing their impressions and reactions to visual materials in an articulate fashion. Becker (1974) suggests an exercise for developing skills for looking at and talking about images:

Take a genuinely good picture....Using a watch with a second hand, look at the photograph intently for two minutes. Don't stare and thus stop looking; look actively. It will be hard to do, and you'll find it useful to take up the time by naming everything in the picture yourself....Once you have done this for two minutes, build it up to five, following the naming of things with a period of fantasy, telling yourself a story about the people and things in the picture. The story needn't be true; it's just a device for externalizing and making clear to yourself the emotion and the mood the picture has evoked...(Becker, 1974:7)