MCMA 543/Media Arts Seminar: Small Town Documentary

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Introduction & Objectives

The transition of the small town has been chronicled in a variety of media and arenas of thought and analysis. Statistics have been used to measure the decline and occasional rebirth of communities. Stereotype of small town life have been created and other assumptions have been made. The goal of this course is to participate as a group in a visual examination of specific towns, to be chosen and photographed by individual students. In turn, the group will produce a collection of portfolios that will reflect the individual nature of each community, as seen by individuals.

The course is an intentional blend of geography, sociology, history, contemporary issues, education, art, individual curiosity and photographic skill building. There will be a mix of images in the final set that will represent a semester’s journey from August to December. The work will run from the everyday to the out of the ordinary, from the historical to the fleeting, from the traditional to the truly unexpected.

The public, community-oriented set of photographs will likely illustrate events, annual and unique, as well as other notable features of the community. Further opportunity may be private moments that include portraits and more intimate looks into individuals’ lives. Another component to the portfolios will be the photographer/student’s own impressions about the town. Those images will provide a visual response to the surroundings that will go through a transition during the semester.

The main objective is to complete a set of photographs that will inevitably convey the reason why the selected community is unique from all others. However, the course structure will also provide evidence of a definition that links towns together under the heading of “small town”.

Course Outline/Guide

There are practical limitations in selecting a community for a project. Here are a few starting points and initial concepts before one begins photographing.
1. There should be a town organization in place: a village board, town council, mayor/staff or other formal or informal governing body, which will be your contact(s) during the course of your project.

2. For the requirements of the course, you will create a portfolio to be turned in at the end of the semester.

3. You will provide a set of photographs to your town in the role of “town photographer”.

4. There will be similarities between the two sets of images, but your community may have needs beyond your portfolio and vice versa.

5. Another chief concern will be accessibility. The town should be close enough for you to return to often and without difficulty. The more you can and do visit your town, the better the sum total of your semester’s work. Alexander, Pulaski, Massac, Union, Johnson, Pope, Jackson, Williamson, Saline, Hardin, Gallatin, Randolph, Perry, Franklin, Hamilton, Washington, Jefferson and White counties all contain towns which are individual in nature and may provide a visual point of departure for a student.

6. These counties have communities that are, in general, all within about one hour’s drive. You may choose to drive ten minutes or much longer; that will be your decision, but for reasons that will be discussed a town that is closer will make for a more productive semester. Please note that all projects will be graded evenly and sympathy to distance will not be a factor.

7. Students will form an attachment to their selected community and care about what the photographs will represent. There are festivals and other annual events that will be of interest to their selected towns. Students can function as a photographer for these events with the understanding that if their town officials request specific photographs for their purposes alone, the community will bear the expense of the materials.

8. The communication skills of the individual student will be paramount in defining an understanding between all parties. There is a great deal of responsibility implied, as the student will be functioning as a representative of the SIU community and a member of their department(s).

Projected Outcomes

1. **Town facts packet**: Establish research into town; due 3rd meeting

2. Course Portfolio: 20-25 prints in a suitable container, due at end of semester
3. Journal: A critical instrument for telephone numbers, directions, appointments and visual documentation. Proofs/snapshots should be inserted. Bring to each class meeting to discuss content and for planning. Required for final submission.

4. Town portfolio: 20-25 prints, delivered to an agent of the town at semester’s end. Can be different from your own portfolio, to match the town’s preferences. Students will provide address information for follow-up questionnaire.

5. Group exhibition: Class will help organize a group exhibition on campus; end of semester; TA(s) to reserve space; class mounts exhibition

6. Statement: For group exhibition and related purposes; may also need captions for each image

7. Printed book form: (option) Potential for portfolio to be culminated into a web-published version; town may purchase copies through student

8. Web: Ongoing participation with the established Small Town Documentary Flickr site; students will upload their own photographs throughout the semester into the current collection. The website has proven to be a good source for community outreach during the semester and beyond. See: www.flickr.com/photos/smalltowndocumentary/

Technical

Technical issues will be discussed as they arise during critiques. However, this is an advanced, subject-based course and an assumed level of photographic skills will be a given. Color and/or black and white, digital or analog materials may be used, singly or in conjunction. Formats may be mixed to clarify or emphasize various subject areas within the context of the whole portfolio. Early experimentation is encouraged, as will be refinement of methods once specific delineations have been set. Students may discover the importance of an informal method in one instance while at other times a more studied approach will be preferable. Many of the photographs that you make might be seasonal or one-of-a-kind, so your initial choice will be crucial.

Journal

The journal is an important tool that will be employed by all students. Photographers need to document their experience and make notes along the way through the projects. Information of all kinds such as: dates/schedule, preliminary planning, local newspaper articles, names and numbers of contacts, maps/directions to locations, sketches of photographs, possible proofs or snapshots done as research or even given to you and any other related materials
dedicated to your selected community. Please note: Your course journal will be brought to class so that our discussions will be better informed and plans can be made for future work. The journal will be turned in with the portfolio and considered when awarding the course grade. Note: Please take care to not misplace the journal or any notes!

Grading

This course demands that you bring work for discussion to each scheduled critique session. After a few preliminary discussions of general guidelines and field days, the main body of the semester will depend on the work brought into discuss. Students will be graded on attendance, production, website participation, group exhibition and participation in critiques. The final submission of materials – portfolio, statement & journal - will have the greatest impact on your grade. Student portfolio progress will be tracked through the website and through notations contained in the journal.

NOTE: Students are encouraged to bring any questions regarding the course to the instructor during office hours, email queries or through set appointments. Please do not leave any telephone messages – only emails.
CP 470 Small Town Documentary Critique, workday and exhibition schedule
Fall 2016

Critique 1
September 1      Tuesday and Thursday groups show

Critique 2
September 6      Tuesday group
September 8      Thursday group

Critique 3
September 13     Tuesday group
September 15     Thursday group

Critique 4
September 20     Tuesday group
September 22     Thursday group

Critique 5
September 27     Tuesday group
September 29     Thursday group

Critique 6
October 4        Tuesday group
October 6        Thursday group

Critique 7
October 11       NO SCHOOL, Fall Break
October 13       Tuesday and Thursday groups show

Critique 8
October 18       Tuesday group
October 20       Thursday group

Critique 9
October 25       Tuesday group
October 27       Thursday group

Critique 10
November 1       Tuesday group
November 3       Thursday group

Critique 11
November 8       Election Day, students to photograph in their towns
November 10      Workday
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**Week 14**
- **November 28**: Monday: Statements due to Dan via email; students start hanging
- **November 29**: Tuesday: Students finish hanging, include captions if necessary; use class time to prep food for reception; reception 4:30-6
- **December 1**: Thursday, Workday

**Critique 14**
- **December 6**: Final critique: Tuesday group
- **December 8**: Final critique: Thursday group

**FINALS WEEK**
- **December 15**: Finals week session; portfolios due; 12:30-2:30