

## Image & Text

Beginners / GCSE / OCN Level 2 / City & Guilds 6923 Level 2

***The use of words in photographs has changed from numbers and initials scratched onto the rebate, to hand written messages adding to the narrative appearing directly on the print. How has this affected our understanding of the relationship between words and pictures? Do we separate the two, or regard the text as something integral to the final work?***

My first calling to be a professional photographer occurred in a New York bookshop in the Wall Street area in 1986. I happened upon a copy of Ansel Adams' autobiography, and opened it at a photograph he had taken of Half Dome, in Yosemite National Park, a black and white image of the face of a mountain, with a storm cloud above. In the accompanying text, he described how he felt at the time he visualized the picture, and the act of taking one of his more famous images. He also printed opposite the photograph, a letter written to his brother outlining the feelings he had at the time, and how the experience moved him. The combination of his words and pictures led me into thinking that this was something I could hope to achieve; the powerful combination of words and images could interpret my experiences and form a medium to share my vision.

Together in the book, the letter and the photograph had a significant meaning in my life, and their relationship to each other had a unique significance in that the meanings of both the photograph, and the letter were altered in a special way by appearing on the same double page spread. My luck was the moment of inspiration one feels when one discovers a path, one that I have followed for 16 years so far. The relationship between the words and the photograph was a trigger for me, perhaps uniquely, and their meaning was so derived because of my state of mind at the time. Reading the same book now (I bought it) and looking at the same pages, the feeling of inspiration felt by Adams as he describes his moment of creation, and the discovery of his calling, returns me to my moment of discovery in the bookshop, and the start of what has become a quest to examine the relationship between words and pictures.

Traditionally words and pictures appear in newspapers and books side by side in the form of captions - text that explains and enhances the pictures. They also appear in photographic exhibitions beside the work displayed as a form of explanation.

In all situations, text and images are complimentary, and are meant to be viewed together as separate elements.

Recently, in the work by artists mentioned in the additional sections<sup>1</sup>, words have been appearing within or next to the frame the image usually occupies. When you look at a photographic print, the image is contained within the frame of the negative. Adding text on top of the image, or in the white paper to the sides or top extends the image and enhances its meaning.

A photograph is an object defined by the space it occupies, and by adding to that space, one adds to the meaning. In past times, photographers like Eugene Atget would scratch a code number or the name of the location where the photograph was taken on to the photographic negative. This is a form of work which distresses the raw material - the negative, and affects every print made afterwards.

Traditionally, the negative is a sacred object, fragile and handled with great care. The addition of scratched words breaks this convention, and opens up new avenues for creative expression.

At the same time, the print has been treated with the same reverence as the negative. Using the photographic print as a starting point to add paint or words with other media has challenged this convention as well.

Let us explore how the two mediums can contrive to enhance each other in their combination, and challenge us with artworks that have many meanings on many different levels.

Words are a trigger for messages that are contained in our language. If we say the word 'horse' we immediately visualise a mental picture of a horse. Thus the word has one meaning. Imagine a photograph of a cat, with the word horse written across it. Now we have two components, the word, and the image, that combine to form a third meaning. Obviously such a work is nonsense, but the combinations of words and pictures can provide us with all types of meanings, from nonsense to the confessional.

Earlier, I explained how I became interested in the use of words and pictures to extend narrative. My example was that of an Ansel Adams

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<sup>1</sup> Hamish Fulton, Karen Knorr, Barbara Kruger, Duane Michals,  
Learning resource at: <http://www.dshed.digitised/reveal>

picture, coupled with a letter to his brother, and how this combination had motivated me.

I have not actually used words in my piece, called 'reveal' but relied on the narrative being constructed by the subject of the photographs and myself in the picture taking process, and the intersection of that suggested narrative with the narrative invented by the viewer of the work.

My idea was to challenge the viewers to confront someone presenting themselves through the medium of photography, aware of the photographic process and the eventual placing of the work in a public place. The challenge to the viewer was to understand the images and facts as they are presented, invent a narrative - a life of the person in the pictures, and perhaps, to question their own narrative construction - thereby questioning their own prejudices during the process of their narrative construction.

By not using words, I am hoping to avoid the anecdotal, and incidental, to free the imagination to rely on social conditioning to make these constructed narratives, and in the case of a few (I hope) to challenge their own ideas of how they view portraiture.

End.