

### Assignment 3

Read Susan Sontag's essay, *America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly* and respond.

Explain what Sontag means when she writes that Walker Evans' photos "confer importance" and "democratize" their subjects through "leveling up." In Sontag's view, how did the MOMA exhibitions, *The Family of Man* and the retrospective of Diane Arbus' work differ? What differences in American culture between the 1950s and the 1970s did these exhibitions reveal in Sontag's perspective? How did Diane Arbus choose her subjects, and what were the inherent problems with this method? As a result, how do viewers typically respond to the works and the subjects depicted? Compare an Arbus photo to a photo made by a later artist. What is the general tone in each image and how is this tone constructed? What is revealed in each work?

- or -

Read Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and answer the following questions.

Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* perceptively anticipates and defines important artistic concerns of the 20th century just as photography became readily available to the masses via the hand-held camera and modern reproduction technologies. How does Benjamin define the "aura" of a work of art? To what does the aura, and "art," depend? What did technical/mechanical reproduction "emancipate" the work of art from? Once art ceases to relate to this, what are the negative consequences and benefits of this freedom? In other words, according to Benjamin, how did photography "transform the entire nature of art?" Discuss a photo made after 1980 that demonstrates the ideas, transformations, and consequences that Benjamin predicted.

- or -

Attend a professional exhibition that includes photographic works. The Getty Museum, LACMA, MoCA, UCR California Museum of Photography, the Annenberg Space for Photography, OCMA, and the Bowers Museum regularly feature exhibitions of photographic works. Plan ahead by checking museum websites to be sure that relevant works will be on view when you plan to visit.

Choose one work seen in person and develop a visual analysis. Visual description involves communicating what you see and feel when viewing a work

of art to a general reader who may or may not have experienced the work themselves. Assume that your reader has a background in art, but has not seen the work you are discussing in person. Begin your description with the basics - let your reader know the artist's name, the title of the work (being sure to distinguish the title in your text by italicizing or bolding your font), and the date the work was made. Describe what you see, drawing the viewer's attention to key elements (objects, figures, symbols). Discuss the work's subjects. What are the main components, what is represented, who is portrayed, where does the story take place? While you may want to keep your visual description concise, remember that you cannot assume that what you are seeing and experiencing is universal.

Next, identify important formal elements (shapes, textures, lines, colors, etc.) in the work. While this may feel descriptive, what you're focusing on in this section are the qualities and characteristics of compositional elements such as *atmospheric* perspective, *asymmetrical* balance, *irregular* rhythm, *organic* shapes, *faint* line work, and *bold* color harmonies. The handouts on design and the elements of art from the Getty Museum may be helpful. Finally, connect your private experience with the work and its visual elements. What meaning do the objects, subjects, and symbols suggest? What meaning is conveyed by the work's form and visual elements? What story is told, or view of the world expressed by this work of art?

Please include a photograph of yourself at the museum with your essay.