Working Assumptions

LESSON PLANS

Environmental Portraits

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Working Assumptions is a cultural non-profit that explores the everyday give-and-take of family and care through visual storytelling, encouraging reflection and dialogue.

workingassumptions.org

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Overview

In this lesson you'll explore environmental portraits using home and surroundings to capture family perspectives. You'll experiment with photography styles and create a short list to make planning part of your creative process!

Environmental portraits use their backgrounds and other visual elements to convey additional context about their subjects. This style of photography sits between candid documentary and formal portraiture and is often seen in editorial magazines. You can think of environmental portraits as mini-movie scenes where the photographer directs the action and the setting. When making these portraits, it can be helpful to use a shot list to organize your thoughts before taking photos. In this activity, you'll learn to create one.

Let's get started!

Remember, these are guidelines, not rules.

Take several pictures of each scene.	Clarity is important, but so is mystery and the unexpected.	Try different things.

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Planning an Environmental Portrait

Go through these Brainstorming and Technical Decisions exercises to help you fill in your shot list worksheet.

Brainstorming (This may take some time)

A) SUBJECT

Think about a member (or members) of your family and how you see them. Whoever you choose to work with will be your collaborator, so ensure they have time and desire to be photographed.

B) LOCATION

Look at places that are relevant to your subject(s), such as:

- **Where do they consider their home to be?** Where do they spend the most time where they live? Do they often use an office, garage, backyard, kitchen, or favorite chair?
- **Where do they spend the most time outside of where they live?** For example, do they frequent a workplace, gym, supermarket, studio, or other location?

Consider the following when selecting locations:

- The places where your subject spends time may reflect their **personal history** or **identity**. They can also symbolize **moods that resonate with their character**, such as the tranquility of lying on a rock at the beach.
- Consider whether there are interesting shadows, colors, shapes, or textures.
- Decide whether the location is better left as is or if it needs to be tidied up.
- **Make sure that the selected locations have enough light.**

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C) ACTIVITY

What your subject does at your chosen location may be interesting to capture (for example, playing piano or fixing a car). **Observe their natural behavior and use it in your photo** (such as how they stand, place their hands, think, or fix their hair). If their action is not very photogenic, you can find good positions to place or pose your subject.

D) THINGS IN THE FRAME

What else is in the scene?) Do you want your subject to hold or interact with something? Consider that some objects have **symbolic weight**, like flags, religious icons, or college sweatshirts. Unlike more purist documentary photography, **you can add, subtract, or move things.**

Technical Decisions

E) LIGHT SOURCE

Light and shadow can add drama to your photo. Consider where the light is coming from, whether it will change throughout the day, or whether it can be altered, such as by flipping a switch or closing curtains. If it's too dark, raise your ISO if your camera allows.

F) H/V (HORIZONTAL/VERTICAL ORIENTATION)

Think about what orientation you want for your photo, or if you want to try both. Vertical tends to emphasize the individual; horizontal shows more of the environment.

G) DISTANCE FROM SUBJECT

Environmental portraits are usually taken at medium or full body range to show the subject in their world, although you can try close range as well. Experiment with different angles and distances.

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H) DIRECTING ACTION

If there's time, waiting for candid moments can produce great environmental portraits. However, you can also preemptively set up your shot using the two methods below. You can alternate between them for variation:

- **Photograph their activity** within your defined location. You may ask your subject to reenact typical actions (such as "Please peel another potato").
- **Lightly direct their position/action/expression**, including **eye contact**, body positioning, hand gestures, etc.
- You can move your subject into a specific spot to be more expressive or for a clearer perspective.

Experienced photographers make most of these decisions in their heads, but many still use simplified shot lists. After consciously planning and taking photos for a while, you will also start paying attention to details naturally instead of writing down every single thing.

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SHOT LIST

A shot list can help you plan and organize your thoughts before photographing. After consciously planning and photographing for some time, you'll also start paying attention to these details naturally instead of writing down every single thing. While experienced photographers make many of these decisions in their heads, many still use simplified shot lists.

Combine the variables above **(A through H)** using the worksheet below to create a photographic scenario for your shot list.

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Example

Name: SHOT LIST WORKSHEET

A) Subject	B) Location	C) Activity	D) Things	E) Light	F) H/V	G) Distance	H) Direction	Notes
Ai Weiwei, Chinese artist-provocateur	his Beijing studio - don't clean up, natural, peaceful space	he creates art here; currently not physically working on a project	bicycle (ref. his older work and Dadaism), photo and studio gear	overhead skylight + soft fill flash upper right of face	H - for magazine layout	half body - feel environment while seeing face clearly	hold bicycle, look directly at camera, serious expression	



Mark Leong, 2013

"To photograph Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei for an art magazine, I had 30 minutes on location to prepare for a 20 minute shoot. He was working on a computer project at the time. This activity was not photogenic, so we prepared a posed image. I walked through his offices and studios and found two interesting, well-lit locations. I listed 4-5 scene ideas in my notebook. For this shot, I only wrote "Skylight w/ bicycle, horiz" but had gone through all the steps in my head. I decided where he would stand, moved a couple of things around, added more light and was ready when Ai showed up to hold the bicycle. He is a humorous guy but had the right serious expression to make the pose more absurdist."

— Mark Leong

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