

Lesson 11

CONTEXT: Introduction



Materials Needed: Magazines, newspapers, blank paper, scissors, glue, colored pencils, workbooks.

Masterworks: Susan Meiselas, *Molotov Man*, 1979; Shepard Fairey, *Molotov Man*, 2006; Banksy, *Flower Thrower*; Hank Willis Thomas, *Basketball and Chain*, 2003

Students will:

- **Know:** That context refers to both the situation in which a photograph is made and the situation in which it is used or seen.
- **Understand:** The context in which we encounter images influences their meanings.
- **Do:** Be able to manipulate context in order to change the meanings of photographs.

Lesson Plan: (1 hr, 15 min)

- Most students in middle school and high school will be familiar with how the context in which they encounter a new word can help them decipher the meaning of that word, and further, that the meaning of a word can change based on the context in which it is used.
- For the purposes of the next ten lessons, *context* refers to the situation in which we encounter an image, and how that can influence our interpretation of that picture's meaning.
- Ask the students where they see photographs—in what context do they see them on a daily basis? List their answers on the board. These may include social media, newspapers, magazines, TV, books, or advertising.
- What follows is a series of examples of how single photographs have been used within different contexts, which in turn resulted in a particular interpretation of that image. Some of these examples represent complex questions regarding “fair use” laws or editorial work made for sale and reuse. These topics can be explored as appropriate for the age group, but the point of this lesson is to introduce the role that context plays in creating meaning. Ultimately we will be teaching how the meaning of a picture changes based on the picture placed next to it—image sequencing—and how the extended photographic essay or book combines single images into a complete form of visual expression or storytelling. A photobook invites contemplation of single images and groups of images.
- Open with the image of Susan Meiselas's *Molotov Man*, 1979. Ask the students what they see and what it means to them. Ask them to surmise the context in which the picture was made—what was going on? What is this picture about?
- Then show them the works made by Shepard Fairey and Banksy. Ask students: “*What does the photograph mean in these contexts? How do these images affect the original image made by Meiselas?*”
- Ask students to work with a partner to complete the workbook section analyzing the photograph *Molotov Man* by Susan Meiselas and the effect of the photograph being reproduced in different contexts. (15)
- Ask students to choose a historical, photojournalistic, fashion, or advertising photograph from a magazine or newspaper, or print out copies of student photos. Use collage or add text that changes the photograph's context. They could add a slogan to a historical photograph to make it look like a clothing advertisement, put a comment on a fashion photograph to criticize its message, or a title on a news photograph so it looks like a photobook cover. (30)
- Share work. Ask: “*How does seeing a photograph in a new context change what it means? How will putting your photographs into the context of a photobook impact their meanings?*” (15)

Going Further: Read the article “On the Rights of the Molotov Man: Appropriation and the Art of Context” by Joy Garnett and Susan Meiselas (*Harper's Magazine*, 2007) with your students.