

aperture On Sight

Lesson 10:

Picturing the Street

Form + Content + Context = Meaning

Materials needed:

Computer
Digital projector
Cameras or smartphones

Reference works by:

Alex Webb
Rebecca Norris Webb
Tim Davis

Students will

- ➔ **Know:** Before, during, and after they make a photograph—photographers make choices.
- ➔ **Understand:** Photographers control the meaning of their pictures by making choices in real time. They work in the moment, often intuitively, but they also edit their choices afterward.
- ➔ **Do:** Look at one subject from multiple points of view.

Artist bios and project info

Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb work together but are each artists in their own right.

Alex Webb (born in San Francisco, 1952) worked in Brooklyn and now lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. He is a photographer who looks at the act of photography as a way to connect different places, experiences, and people. Many of his images meditate on times in his life that feel disjointed or in which he feels displaced and wants to return to a sense of belonging. During the 1970s and '80s, Webb pursued photojournalism in the southern US, Mexico, and the Caribbean, depicting candid street life across cultures. Webb returned to this practice in photographing Brooklyn, the borough in which he lived, showcasing the vibrant communities of new and native families, children, and pedestrians across the many different neighborhoods. His photograph *Williamsburg* (2014) shows a fast-paced sidewalk outside of a subway station, where two folks quickly pass each other amid construction, street signs, and graffiti. Webb's photograph *Williamsburg* (2016) complements this scene, depicting a shopkeeper and customer in motion, leaving traces of the interaction that preceded the moment the photograph was created. Webb and Norris Webb collaborated on this project documenting Brooklyn, and each of them focused on a different aspect of the borough: Alex, the streets, and Rebecca, the green spaces.

“Certain pictures I’ve taken in the past that . . . bother me in some ways because I realize I may not ever get ones quite as special as that ever again. . . . We photographers go out into the world, we take pictures, and we look at them elsewhere. . . . There’s this sense of rediscovery when you look at the picture two weeks after you’ve taken it.”

—Alex Webb, “Alex Webb and Denise Wolff Discuss ‘Dislocations,’ by Aperture, YouTube, 2023

Rebecca Norris Webb (born in Rushville, Indiana, 1956) worked in Brooklyn and now lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She is a photographer who explores the complicated relationship between people and the natural world in her work. Norris Webb often combines text and images to properly express her ideas. Focusing on documenting the parks and gardens of Brooklyn, her home borough, Norris Webb spent time photographing

Prospect Park, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and Green-Wood Cemetery. Her image *Winter Storm, Prospect Park* (2016) depicts through a snowflake-covered lens the relatively desolate park lawn during a snowstorm, where a few brave Brooklynites walk and ski through snow cover.

“I consider Brooklyn my creative home. It’s where I became the bookmaker I am today, working in a hybrid personal-documentary form, which weaves together my photographs and spare text to explore our complicated relationship with the natural world. . . . With Brooklyn I hope that, taken together, my words and images expand on the notion of green space, to include not only the shifting light illuminating a particular elm tree or mute swan or young woman’s face, but also the deep shadows of history falling across Prospect Park—once the site of a former [Revolutionary War] battlefield—and the reverie and memory flowing through it.”

—Rebecca Norris Webb, *Brooklyn: The City Within* (Aperture, 2019), 204–5

Tim Davis (born in Blantyre, Malawi, 1969) lives and works in Tivoli, New York. Walking is one of Davis’s favorite pastimes, and bringing his camera along allows him to document his witty observations about the world around him, which can be seen in his many images. *Sunset Shooters Downtown* (2021) and *Mirror Makeup Hollywood* (2021) both demonstrate Davis’s interest in documenting different people’s personas and activities in the city, showing, respectively, folks huddled together snapping photographs of the sunset or a woman applying her lipstick in a discarded mirror on the sidewalk. His forthcoming attitude and fearlessness have allowed him to develop his signature street style—he’s unafraid to lie down on the floor, to ask people to move out of his way, or to trespass in the name of creating a photograph.

“A thing can be interesting, but a picture of a thing isn’t necessarily more interesting than the original thing. Looking through [a house] makes it mean more, and the more it means, the more photographable it becomes.”

—Tim Davis, *I’m Looking Through You* (Aperture, 2021), 12

Lesson plan

- **Warm-up:** Share photos from the collaborative portraiture shoot of lesson 9.
- **Discuss Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb:** Introduce the topic of street portraits as you show the images by Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb. Ask the students to consider: Do you think the pedestrians were aware they were being photographed? Why or why not? Work with students to identify the following types of street portraiture:
 - * People as part of the urban landscape
 - * People going about their business, unaware that they are being photographed
 - * People reacting to being confronted by the camera or photographer
- **Consider reference works by Tim Davis:** Show the images by Tim Davis. Ask the students to consider: How do you think Tim Davis made photographs that look spontaneous?
- **Photo exercise 1:** In the last lesson students photographed people who were posing. For this lesson, they’ll make spontaneous photographs of people on the street. Working in pairs or groups, take students outside and have them find an interesting person or situation. Invite students to introduce their project and ask permission to photograph the person, then have them encourage the participant to go about their business (for example: “Hi, I’m working on a photography project for class, would you mind if I photograph you while you are doing X? Thank you!). If they say no, thank them and move on. Encourage students to make more than one photograph and from different angles, points of view, and distances if they have the time to. It’s important to read the situation and not take advantage of the participant’s generosity, so it is fine to make several photographs, but remind students to respect that they are catching people in the middle of something.
- **Photo exercise 2:** How do portraits take into account their environment? Ask if students know the colloquial names for the two orientations of the

picture frame: landscape and portrait. Discuss these colloquial names for the orientations. Landscape includes more of the environment in most cases than portrait. Invite the students to go outside and make a photograph that shows a relationship between people or animals and the environment.



Going further

Read: “[Alex Webb’s La Calle Gives Voice to Mexico’s Streets](#)”

Read: “Photographing in a New Community,” from **Free Learning Guide:** [Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb on Street Photography and the Poetic Image](#), 4

Watch: Aperture Conversations: “Alex Webb and Denise Wolff Discuss ‘Dislocations’” (**Note:** Watch and consider before sharing with students—an especially good time stamp is 19:05)



Lesson 10: Picturing the Street

Alex Webb, *Williamsburg*, 2014; from Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb: *Brooklyn, The City Within* (Aperture, 2019)



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Alex Webb, *Williamsburg*, 2016; from Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb: *Brooklyn, The City Within* (Aperture, 2019)



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**Rebecca Norris Webb, *Winter Storm*, Prospect Park, 2016;
from *Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb: Brooklyn, The City Within* (Aperture, 2019)**



Lesson 10: Picturing the Street

Tim Davis, *Mirror Makeup Hollywood*; from *Tim Davis: I'm Looking Through You* (Aperture, 2021)



Lesson 10: Picturing the Street

Tim Davis, *Sunset Shooters Downtown*; from *Tim Davis: I'm Looking Through You* (Aperture, 2021)

Aperture On Sight was conceived by Sarah Anne McNear, former deputy director for external affairs and public programs. The 2023–24 edition has been written and led by Alice Proujansky, teaching artist; Frances Dorenbaum, content editor and curatorial advisor; Alex Schlechter, education and public programs manager; Virginia Cannella, education and public programs work scholar; and Sarah Meister, executive director, with contributions from work scholars Seth Fields and Sofia Turner. Graphic design: Karina Eckmeier. Illustration assistance: Lu Gan. Copyeditors: Susan Ciccotti, Freddy Martinez, and Claire Voon. The first edition, in 2015, was written by Sarah Anne McNear and Alice Proujansky, with contributions by Zalika Azim, Frances Dorenbaum, Schuyler Duffy, Adair Ewin, Becca Imrich, Alexis Lambrou, Christopher Lopez, Pete Pin, Nancy Schneider, José Soto, Emily Stewart, and Ashley Strazzinski.

Aperture On Sight (2023–24) is made possible with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Thank you to all the artists for sharing their images.

Aperture On Sight (2015) was made possible with support from The Bay and Paul Foundations, The Charina Endowment Fund, The Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, The Pinkerton Foundation, The Reba Judith Sandler Foundation, The Tinker Foundation, The William Talbott Hillman Foundation, and a gift from Agnes Gund. Additional public support was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts and the New York State Legislature, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with City Council, Manhattan Borough President's Office, and Grand Street Settlement.

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380 Columbus Avenue
New York, NY 10024
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