

***aperture*** On Sight

# **Lesson 12:**

# **Defining Context**

**Form + Content + Context = Meaning**

## Materials needed:

Computer  
Digital projector  
Cameras or smartphones  
Collage materials  
Glue sticks

## Reference works by:

Hank Willis Thomas  
Philip Montgomery  
Elliott Erwitt

## Students will

- ➔ **Know:** Context refers to both the situation in which a photograph is made and the circumstance in which it is used or seen.
- ➔ **Understand:** The context in which we encounter images influences their meanings.
- ➔ **Do:** Recognize context when reading an image and use context to bring out themes in photographs.

## Artist bios and project info

**Hank Willis Thomas** (born in Plainfield, New Jersey, 1976) lives and works in Brooklyn. Thomas has an artistic career that spans both sculpture and photography, public art, and advocacy. His work often analyzes stereotypes surrounding race, ethnicity, and gender. The artist places his commentary on race relations and political tensions in the US within specific contexts to which we can easily connect: popular culture, professional sports, and history. The image in this lesson, *Basketball and Chain* (2003), utilizes a visual language common in compositions of advertisements, focusing on branded and symbolic focal points. Often incorporating recognizable sports metaphors and posed athletes in his work, the artist photographs a basketball player at the height of his jump restricted by a chain binding him to the basketball. The iconic Nike swoosh logo is visible, as well as *NBA* written across the ball. The photographer places the concept of a Black basketball star within the context of US history, referencing slavery and the contemporary commodification of Black talent.

“In photography programs, they teach you ways of seeing. Because photography is all about perspectives and timing, it’s not just about making a good image, but actually thinking about how the image will function in the world, the connections that viewers might have to it, how you might get closer to your subjects and further explore. Depending on where you stand, it affects what you see, and everyone is negotiating different perspectives.”

—Hank Willis Thomas, *All Things Being Equal* (Aperture, 2018), 78

**Philip Montgomery** (born in California, 1988) lives and works in New York. Montgomery is a documentary photographer whose work chronicles contemporary social issues including racial violence, the opioid epidemic, housing insecurity, natural disasters, and the coronavirus pandemic. His photograph *Landfall of Hurricane Irma, Miami, September 2017* (2017) shows a pedestrian in knee-high rainfall, bracing himself against the pole of a street sign. Montgomery presents this image in the context of climate change and the intense storms that are expected to render large areas of southern Florida uninhabitable by the end of this century.

“[Montgomery’s images] capture the reality of Americans in crisis, in all our flawed, tragic, ridiculous glory. They are not myths, but an unblinking portrait of the reality of American life . . . a frontline worker, exhausted to the point of collapse. A hand swathed in a surgical glove,

reaching into a casket to form a last moment of connection with a dead loved one. A group of election officials, mostly Black women, all masked, working late into the night to safeguard our democracy. . . . The solidarity of people in the streets, marching despite the risks, dreaming not of what this country was before or what it might be now, but of what it could become.”

—Patrick Radden Keefe, *Philip Montgomery: American Mirror* (Aperture, 2021), 153

**Elliott Erwitt** (born in Paris, 1928; died in Manhattan, 2023) was a photographer known for his memorable images of political and social divides in the mid-twentieth century, as well as his humorous and ironic depictions of the world around him. Erwitt, who taught himself photography as a teenager before studying at the Los Angeles City College, accomplished a career of commercial photography, photojournalism, and documenting people around the world. The photographer created images of couples, children, crowds, performers, his own family, and, notably, dogs. In *New York, New York* (1974), and *Amsterdam, Netherlands* (1973), note how Erwitt creates comedic images by responding to people and animals during moments in daily life, documenting situations as they happened naturally, but with a keen sense of humor.

“What stands out from [Erwitt’s documentary photography], and all his reportage, is a remarkable sense of timing and compositional clarity. Erwitt’s wide-ranging photojournalism documented many of the crucial events of the time and gave visual shape to the Cold War. Published in the leading venues of the day, his pictures carried enormous weight in helping Americans understand the tumultuous world in which they lived. . . . Whether taken in a Cold War model kitchen or a Texas courthouse, Erwitt’s journalistic photographs bear the immediacy and spontaneity, and the visual cohesion, of someone whose camera always seems to be in the right place at the right time.”

—Steven Hoelscher, *Elliott Erwitt: Home Around the World*, 106

## Lesson plan

- **Discuss key term:** To get the students thinking about how groups of images work together, begin with a discussion on context. Can anyone define *context*? Consider with the students: In what context do the students see photographs on a daily basis? The context might be understood as the mediums or formats in which they see photos—e.g., social media, newspapers, magazines, TV, books, or advertising. The context might also include the type of story in which the photos are included in or the perspective of the author or the intention of the distributor of the image. Also, the context might include the feelings or knowledge or experience of the person viewing the photos. List all their answers on the board.
- Types of contexts to keep in mind:
  - **Host of image:**
    - \* Format or medium (e.g., magazine, social media, advertising, etc.)
    - \* Any institutional or circumstantial affiliations (e.g., a company, an individual, the news)
    - \* Their intention (to make money, to get likes, to support a political cause)
  - **Maker of image:**
    - \* Their perspective, experience, intention
  - **The viewer’s context:**
    - \* Their experience, knowledge, identity
- **Consider reference works:** Invite the class to choose one of the reference works to discuss. Ask the students what they see and what it means to them. Ask them to surmise the context in which the original picture or visual objects were made: What was it intended for? What did it mean originally? How did the artist change the context of the image? Did they alter it or place it near an image that changed its meaning, or something else?

- **Discussion activity:** Get students to go through a photobook by one of the artists they've seen in the reference works and describe the contexts the sequences create, emit, reveal, etc. Describe how their own personal context allows them to see deeper into the sequences or limits their understanding of the sequences.
- **Photo exercise:** Ask students to either use four photos from their camera roll or memory card or to make four new photos, and share a one-sentence message or story they see in the selection. Then, have them present to peers and get the viewers to describe what kind of context they would need to better understand these photos. For example, thinking about Ervitt's photographs of dogs and people in his series on dogs—individually, one might not understand the photographs all play with scale, but together, they do. End by considering: How will putting their photographs into the context of a photobook affect their individual meanings?
- **Looking ahead:** The next lesson invites students to work with some of their own prints. If possible, have a printer ready for students to print out their work.



### Going further

**Read:** “The Cotton Bowl and the Super Bowl,” Eli Wilson Pelton. This essay is excerpted from *Aperture*, issue 223, “Vision & Justice.”

**Read:** “How Elliott Erwitt Found His Signature Humor and Joy,” Stuart Alexander. This essay is excerpted from *Elliott Erwitt: Home Around the World* (Aperture, 2016).



**Lesson 12: Defining Context**

**Hank Willis Thomas, *Basketball and Chain*, New York, 2003; from *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal* (Aperture, 2018)**



**Lesson 12: Defining Context**

**Philip Montgomery, The flooded living room of a home in the Energy Corridor neighborhood after Hurricane Harvey, Houston, Texas, August 2017; from *Philip Montgomery: American Mirror* (Aperture, 2021)**



**Lesson 12: Defining Context**

**Philip Montgomery, Landfall of Hurricane Irma, Miami, Florida, September 2017; from *Philip Montgomery: American Mirror* (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  
aperture.org

Aperture is a nonprofit publisher dedicated to creating insight, community, and understanding through photography.