

16 Ways of Looking at a Photograph

Class exercise, Introduction:

To get at one of the key differences between looking versus looking at a photograph, try this: Wherever you are sitting, abruptly and immediately turn in the exact opposite direction. Now write down everything you saw when you were sitting the other way. What color shirt was the student wearing who was sitting directly in front of you? What was the precise angle at which the wall meets the floor? What's the size of the window? Whatever details are relevant, write them all down, take your time, don't hurry, but also don't cheat, that is, do not turn around to remind yourself what you saw. When you are done writing, turn around and take out your cell phone: take a photograph of the view in the direction you were originally facing. Now compare the photograph to your written description. How is it different? A photograph, if not digitally altered, is all about the details. It does not synthesize, subtract, make sense of, re-order, what is there. In this sense, even though we often use photography to commemorate events, people, places, a photograph is not like memory; instead it supplants and corrects the synthetic process and seeing and remembering that emerges from the eye and the brain.