

FOTO ESEJ KAO FORMA VIZUALNOG IZRAŽAVANJA

PHOTO ESSAY AS A FORM OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

Maja Strgar Kurečić

Faculty of Graphic Arts, University of Zagreb, Getaldićeva 2, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

SAŽETAK

Foto esej predstavlja specifičnu formu vizualnog izražavanja u kojoj se ideja, tema ili osobno iskustvo autora prenosi kroz pažljivo odabranu i strukturiranu seriju fotografija. Za razliku od obične fotografske serije, foto esej oblikuje vizualnu naraciju koja jasno reflektira autorski stav i interpretaciju stvarnosti. Ovaj rad donosi pregled pedagoškog i kreativnog potencijala foto eseja kroz projekt FOTO ESEJ, koji se provodi u okviru kolegija Primjena digitalne fotografije u reproduktivskim medijima na Grafičkom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Rad analizira iskustva stečena kroz rad s više od tisuću studenata tijekom sedamnaest godina, s posebnim naglaskom na važnost foto eseja kao suvremenog oblika vizualnog pripovijedanja i kao učinkovitog alata u obrazovanju budućih fotografa i dizajnera. Projekt potiče studente na autorski rad, eksperimentiranje s fotografskim tehnikama i interdisciplinarnim pristupima koji povezuju fotografiju, video, animaciju i grafički dizajn. Najuspješniji studentski radovi svake se godine predstavljaju javnosti na izložbi FOTO ESEJA, čime studenti stječu vrijedno iskustvo prezentacije i produkcije vizualnih projekata.

Ključne riječi: *foto esej, vizualno pripovijedanje, fotografsko obrazovanje, vizualna komunikacija, fotografski projekt*

ABSTRACT

A photo essay represents a specific form of visual expression in which an idea, theme, or personal experience of the author is conveyed through a carefully selected and structured series of photographs. Unlike a simple photographic

series, a photo essay creates a visual narrative that clearly reflects the author's perspective and interpretation of reality. This article provides an overview of the pedagogical and creative potential of the photo essay through the PHOTO ESSAY project, carried out within the course Application of Digital Photography in Reproduction Media at the Faculty of Graphic Arts University of Zagreb. The paper analyses experiences gained through working with more than a thousand students over the past seventeen years, with particular emphasis on the importance of the photo essay as a contemporary form of visual storytelling and as an effective tool in the education of future photographers and designers. The project encourages students to engage in authorial work, experiment with photographic techniques, and explore interdisciplinary approaches that connect photography with video, animation, and graphic design. The most successful student works are presented to the public each year at the PHOTO ESSAY exhibition, providing students with valuable experience in presenting and producing visual projects.

Keywords: *photo essay, visual storytelling, photography education, visual communication, photographic project*

1. UVOD

1. INTRODUCTION

Photography plays a significant role in contemporary visual culture and communication, where it is regarded not only as a means of documenting reality but also as a way of interpreting and shaping meaning. In this context, photography often serves as a narrative

medium, enabling the author to convey ideas, emotions, and social commentary through visual elements [1] [2]. A particular form of such visual expression is the photo essay, which consists of a sequence of carefully selected photographs that together create a visual narrative.

In this paper, the photo essay is defined as a sequential visual medium in which meaning is constructed not at the level of an individual photograph, but through the relationships between photographs, thereby achieving a specific form of visual storytelling and authorial interpretation of reality. Unlike a single photograph or a random series of images, a photo essay involves a conceptually considered structure in which the relationships between individual photographs generate additional meaning and enable the development of a visual story. This mode of visual storytelling connects photography with other narrative media and creates opportunities for authorial interpretation and experimentation with different photographic techniques [3] [4].

This paper examines the photo essay as a form of visual expression and as a pedagogical model in photography education. Particular attention is given to the PHOTO ESSAY project, conducted within the course Application of Digital Photography in Reproduction Media at the Faculty of Graphic Arts, University of Zagreb. The paper analyses experiences gained from working with more than one thousand students over seventeen years of teaching the course and considers the potential of the photo essay as a method of visual learning that fosters the development of authorial expression, visual thinking, and visual storytelling skills among students.

2. FOTO ESEJ KAO FORMA VIZUALNOG PRIPOVIJEDANJA

2. PHOTO ESSAY AS A FORM OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

The photo essay is a distinct form of visual storytelling in which the author's idea, theme, or personal experience unfolds through a sequence of interconnected photographs. Unlike a single photograph, which captures an isolated moment, the photo essay allows for the development

of a more complex visual narrative, where the relationships between individual photographs generate additional meanings and interpretations [5]. It is this sequentiality that sets the photo essay apart from an ordinary photographic series, as the photographs in a photo essay are not only thematically linked but are arranged so that together they form a complete visual structure.

In this sense, the photo essay can be seen as a form of visual language, with each photograph functioning as an element of a broader narrative whole. Meaning does not reside solely in the individual image but emerges from the relationships between images, their arrangement, rhythm, and visual transitions. This organisation resembles narrative structures found in film and literature, where the story develops through a sequence of individual segments. However, unlike a linear narrative, the photo essay may also have a more open, nonlinear structure, in which meaning is constructed associatively and interpretatively [6].

Historically, the photo essay has played an important role in the development of documentary and reportage photography, especially in illustrated magazines of the 20th century, such as Life magazine, where photographers developed complex visual narratives on social and political themes. Such works enabled a more detailed and deeper exploration of a particular topic than is possible with a single photograph, making the photo essay an important medium for communicating complex social content [2].

In contemporary photography, the photo essay appears in various forms, from documentary projects to conceptual and experimental approaches. Authors often use staged scenes, symbolism, and metaphor to convey specific ideas or emotional states. Openness to different authorial strategies is also characteristic of contemporary art photography [7]. The development of digital technologies has further expanded the possibilities of this form, enabling the combination of photography with other media such as video, sound, and animation. Such interdisciplinary approaches allow the creation of more complex visual narratives and bring the photo essay closer to contemporary multimedia practices [3].

In addition to formal and technical aspects, the authorial perspective also plays an important role in the photo essay. Unlike neutral documentation of reality, the photo essay always includes the author's subjective interpretation, which is evident in the choice of theme, the manner of photographing, the selection of photographs, and their interconnection. This combination of conceptual reflection and visual shaping makes the photo essay one of the most complex forms of photographic expression [1].

In the context of contemporary visual communication, the photo essay can be viewed as an interdisciplinary form of expression that connects photography with other visual and media practices. Its ability to convey complex ideas and emotions through a sequence of images makes it relevant in the digital environment, where visual content is increasingly consumed in the form of narrative sequences. In this way, the photo essay retains its importance as a form of visual expression and as a means of visual storytelling adapted to contemporary media contexts.

3. FOTO ESEJ U OBRAZOVANJU

3. PHOTO ESSAY IN EDUCATION

In contemporary education for photographers and designers, there is increasing emphasis on developing conceptual thinking, creativity, and visual communication skills. In this context, the photo essay is a particularly valuable pedagogical tool because it integrates the technical, aesthetic, and narrative aspects of photography into a unified learning process. Unlike assignments that focus on a single photograph or technical execution, creating a photo essay requires students to adopt a comprehensive approach, from developing an idea to the final visual realisation.

The process of creating a photo essay begins with selecting a theme, which requires students to engage personally and reflect on their own interests or experiences. This approach encourages the development of authorial expression and enables students to use photography as a means of personal and professional communication. In the next phase, students develop the concept, define the visual approach, and plan the method of realisation, thereby fostering structured and analytical thinking.

The three types of photo essays most frequently chosen by students are: narrative, conceptual, and experimental (Figure 1).

Rea Franković

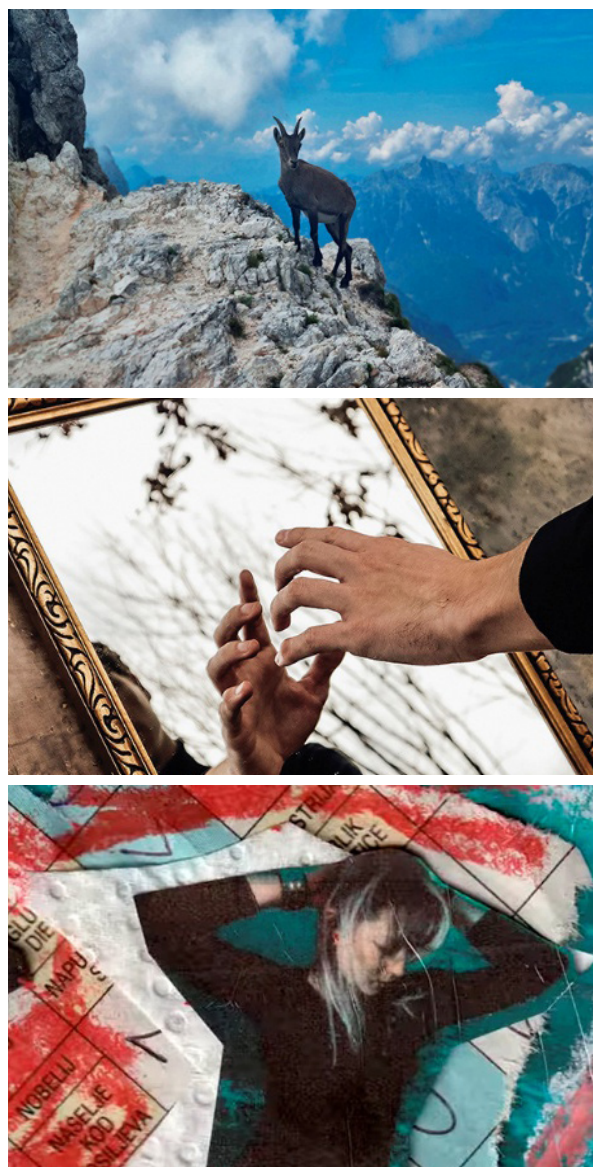
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLX2H0Cpd60>

Mara Tomašević

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztUVX-DivXQ>

Luka Jukopila

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJQ7zCOS3cI>



Slika 1 Primjer tri vrste foto eseja: narativni (Rea Franković „Čudni su putevi kozji“, konceptualni (Mara Tomašević „Nedovršeni odraz“) i eksperimentalni (Luka Jukopila „Iščekivanje“)

Figure 1 Example of three types of photo essays: narrative (Rea Franković, “The Ways of Goats Are Strange”), conceptual (Mara Tomašević, “Unfinished Reflection”), and experimental (Luka Jukopila, “Anticipation”)

One of the key elements in creating a photo essay is the selection of photographs. Students face the challenge of choosing images that function not only individually but also as part of a whole. In doing so, they develop the ability to critically reflect on their own work and learn to recognise the relationships between individual visual elements. This selection phase represents an important step in developing visual literacy and understanding the structure of visual narrative [8].

In addition to selection, structuring the sequence of photographs is also an important aspect of working on a photo essay. Students learn how the arrangement of photographs influences the interpretation of the work, the rhythm of the narrative, and the viewer's experience. In this way, they develop the ability for visual storytelling, organising visual elements into a meaningful and coherent whole. This process can be linked to the concept of multimodal learning, in which meaning is constructed through different forms of expression and their interrelationships [9].

The photo essay also encourages an interdisciplinary approach to learning, as it enables the connection of photography with other media such as video, animation, and graphic design. In contemporary education, where the boundaries between media are increasingly blurred, such an approach is particularly valuable because it prepares students for work in a complex visual and media environment [10]. Thus, the photo essay goes beyond the boundaries of traditional photographic practice and becomes part of the broader field of visual communication.

In the context of education, the photo essay can also be seen as a method of visual learning that connects three key components: concept development, selection of photographs, and structuring of the visual narrative. Through this process, students develop the ability for critical reflection, creative expression, and communication through visual media. Such an integrated approach to learning aligns with contemporary theories of art education that emphasise the importance of experiential and project-oriented learning [11].

Thanks to these characteristics, the photo essay can be considered an effective pedagogical model that enables students to develop the key competencies needed for work in photography, design, and visual communication. Its use in teaching contributes not only to the development of technical skills, but also to the formation of an authorial approach, which is particularly important in the education of future professionals in the creative industries.

4. PROJEKT FOTO ESEJ

4. PHOTO ESSAY PROJECT

The PHOTO ESSAY project has been conducted within the course Application of Digital Photography in Reproduction Media at the Faculty of Graphic Arts, University of Zagreb, since 2008, when the course was first introduced into the graduate study curriculum. From the outset, the course has focused on encouraging a creative and authorial approach to photography, with particular emphasis on developing visual narrative through the photo essay form.

The idea of organising a student exhibition emerged during the first year of the course, when significant student interest in photographic expression was observed, along with the need for a public presentation of their work. The first exhibition was held in the academic year 2009/2010, and since then it has taken place annually at the beginning of the summer semester. Over time, the exhibition has become a recognisable and important event in the life of the Faculty, bringing together students, teachers, and the wider public.

Given the increase in student enrolment, a selection process was introduced from the academic year 2011/2012, with the most successful student photo essays chosen for the exhibition. From the academic year 2013/2014, the practice of exhibiting the ten best works was established, presented in two formats: as digital projections of photo essays with sound and as printed works in the form of exhibition panels. In this way, the project brings together different media forms and enables students to present their work in the context of contemporary visual communication.



Slika 2 Plakati za izložbu foto esejja koje su oblikovali studenti redom: Ivona Denović, Alberto Hadžić, Jana Špiranec

Figure 2 Posters for the photo essay exhibition designed by students: Ivona Denović, Alberto Hadžić, and Jana Špiranec

A particular value of the project lies in the active involvement of students in all phases of the preparation and realisation of the exhibition. Students participate in designing the exhibition's visual identity, creating posters, catalogues, and invitations (Figure 2), as well as preparing and printing photographs and setting up the exhibition space (Figure 3). Thus, the teaching process extends beyond the classroom and includes elements of experiential learning, enabling students to acquire practical knowledge and skills related to the production and presentation of visual content.



Slika 3 Postav i otvorenje izložbe Foto esej u atriju Grafičkog fakulteta

Figure 3 Exhibition setup and opening of the Photo Essay exhibition in the atrium of the Faculty of Graphic Arts

Over seventeen years of teaching the course, the project has included more than 1,160 students, of whom 212 have participated in exhibitions with their works. Since 2011, the course has also been taught in English, enabling enabled the inclusion of international students through academic mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ and CEEPUS. In addition to students from the Faculty of Graphic Arts, the course has also been attended by students from other constituents of the University of Zagreb through horizontal mobility, which further confirms its interdisciplinary character.

The PHOTO ESSAY project has also been recognised beyond its home institution, and student works have been presented in various exhibition and cultural spaces. Such activities contribute to the visibility of the project and enable students to present their works to a wider audience in a professional context.

Thanks to its continuous implementation, the large number of students involved, and the developed work model, the PHOTO ESSAY project can be viewed as an example of a long-term pedagogical model in the education of photographers and designers. Its structure brings together theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and the experience of public presentation, thereby enabling students to develop competencies in the field of visual communication in a comprehensive manner.

The best student photo essays can be viewed on our YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@Fotoesej>

5. ZAKLJUČAK

5. CONCLUSION

The photo essay is a distinct form of visual expression, characterised by the sequential arrangement of photographs and the development of a visual narrative. Unlike a single photograph, which captures an isolated visual moment, the photo essay allows for a more complex construction of meaning through the relationships between images, making it a significant medium for visual storytelling in contemporary visual communication.

This paper outlines the theoretical framework of the photo essay as a form of visual expression and examines its role in the development of visual narrative. Particular emphasis is placed on the pedagogical potential of the photo essay, which lies in fostering conceptual thinking, selecting visual elements, and structuring a cohesive visual whole. This approach enables students to develop key competencies required for work in photography, design, and visual communication.

The analysis of the PHOTO ESSAY project demonstrates how a long-term, systematically designed teaching model can successfully integrate theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and the experience of public presentation. Through work on the photo essay, students develop an authorial approach, critical thinking, and the ability to tell stories visually, while also gaining experience of working under real production conditions.

The project's continuity over seventeen years, the large number of participating students, and its recognition within and beyond the academic community confirm its value as a pedagogical model in the education of photographers and designers. In this context, the photo essay can be seen not only as an artistic form, but also as an effective method of visual learning that unites conceptual thinking, visual selection, and narrative structure into a coherent process of creation and communication.

In today's digital and visually saturated environment, where images play an increasingly important role in communication, the

development of visual storytelling skills has become a key competence. For this reason, the photo essay remains relevant as a form of visual expression and as an important tool in the education of future authors and professionals in the field of visual communication.

6. REFERENCE

6. REFERENCES

- [1.] Bate D.; Photography: The Key Concepts; 2nd ed.; Bloomsbury Publishing; ISBN 978-1350035699; London, 2020.
- [2.] Wells L.; Photography: A Critical Introduction; 5th ed.; Routledge; ISBN 978-0415715408; London, 2015.
- [3.] Company D.; On Photographs; MIT Press; ISBN 978-0262539783; Cambridge (MA), 2020.
- [4.] Freeman M.; The Photographer's Story: The Art of Visual Narrative; Focal Press; ISBN 978-0240811775; Oxford, 2012.
- [5.] Ryan M.-L.; Thon J.-N.; Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology; University of Nebraska Press; ISBN 978-0803287098; Lincoln, 2014.
- [6.] Rose G.; Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials; 4th ed.; SAGE Publications; ISBN 978-1473948903; London, 2016.
- [7.] Cotton C.; The Photograph as Contemporary Art; 3rd ed.; Thames & Hudson; ISBN 978-0500204183; London, 2020.
- [8.] Freedman K.; Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art; Teachers College Press; ISBN 978-0807742340; New York, 2003.
- [9.] Kress G.; van Leeuwen T.; Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design; 3rd ed.; Routledge; ISBN 978-0415319156; London, 2021.
- [10.] Illeris H.; Contemporary Art and Education; Routledge; ISBN 978-1138671729; London, 2016.
- [11.] Eisner E.; The Arts and the Creation of Mind; Yale University Press; ISBN 978-0300095236; New Haven, 2002.

AUTORI · AUTHORS

• **Maja Strgar Kurečić** - (Zagreb, 1972) is a visual artist and photographer, and a full professor at the Faculty of Graphic Arts, University of Zagreb. She obtained her doctorate in 2007 in the field of digital photography. She has been actively involved in photography since 1991, focusing on authorial, experimental, and conceptual photographic projects. She has exhibited in 21 solo and more than 80 group exhibitions in Croatia and abroad, and is the recipient of numerous international awards.

She is the author of more than 50 scientific papers in the fields of photography and visual communication, as well as the university textbook *Fundamentals of Digital Photography* (Školska knjiga, 2017). In her scientific and teaching work, she is particularly engaged with photography as a medium of visual expression and storytelling, and also works in graphic prepress. As a visiting professor, she has delivered numerous lectures and workshops in photography for students and teachers at institutions outside Croatia. She is a member of ULUPUH (Croatian Association of Artists of Applied Arts).

Korespondencija · Correspondence

maja.strgar.kurecic@grf.unizg.hr