



The Dugout

by Beate Sass



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Commentary

I suppose almost any form of art creation follows certain structures, or perhaps we can think of them as *conventions*. In music, for example, there are certain chord progressions that are repeated in almost every style of music; in novels, the long story is almost always broken into chapters which function in approximately the same way as does a *scene* in theater; and of course in poetry, although most of us have tried desperately to forget this from our high school years, there is the curse of iambic pentameter. Photographic storytelling has a trick of its own which is easily demonstrated in this project by Beate Sass.

The strategy is simply this: look for a “visual hook” that can be revisited time and again throughout the project. Think of this as the equivalent of a musical riff that occurs throughout a song, a reoccurring theme that connects the various parts of the project to one another. Sass discovered a great visual hook for her project about minor-league baseball — *hands*. In fact, hands are such an integral part of baseball that they become an obvious visual hook once we think about it. The way the pitcher’s hand grips the baseball for various pitches, the hand signals that are used to communicate between the players, the grip of the bat, and the even artificial oversized hands that are used to catch the ball — all of these contribute to this repeating visual riff.

Whether this occurred to Sass on a conscious level or not, we would never know without asking her.

At some level, however, it clearly did or she would not have so many pictures of hands in her project. Perhaps she just found them interesting photographic subjects. Either way, the photographs of hands sprinkled throughout her project helps define it and give it an intimacy that would surely be missed without these images.

It should be noted that, just as in music, a riff can become repetitive if played sequentially, over and over again. The obvious solution is to intersperse the visual riff in the project so that it is not a cluster but rather an occasionally-appearing, repeating theme. Similar to photographic dodging and burning, if it’s so obvious as to be a ploy, then it’s overdone.

Purposefully look for the visual riff (or riffs) that define your subject and can be used intermittently as a repeating visual theme. When I was recently in China photographing musicians in the park, I thought of Sass’s baseball hands and realized I could use the same element in my small project. Once we become aware of them in the work of others, it becomes easier for us to see them and use them in ours. Perhaps a second part of this strategy is to look for repeating themes in the books, exhibitions, and other photographic media we consume.