This essay examines the problem of presentation of the photographic project in visual sociology. The discussion begins with Barthes’ analysis of the relationship between text and image. It then addresses conventions of sociology and art, showing how these disciplines offer alternative solutions to the problem of display. Finally, a review of an exhibit of the work of visual sociologists illustrates the operation of conventions, which, seen from Barthes’ perspective, appear problematic.

A persistent problem in the development of visual sociology concerns the establishment of standards for taking and disseminating photographs that are more distinctly sociological than artistic or journalistic in function. Such commentators as Becker (1974) and Curry and Clarke (1978) have opened discussion on deciding what to shoot, that is, with sampling, reliability, and validity. Except for some brief references to the use of captions by Becker, no one has yet addressed issues in the presentation of the photographic project.

Here I will examine briefly the problem of display. The discussion begins with Barthes’ analysis of the relationship between text and image. It then addresses conventions of sociology and art, showing how these disciplines offer alternative solutions to the problem of display. Finally, a
review of an exhibit of the work of visual sociologists illustrates the operation of conventions, which, seen from Barthes’ perspective, appear problematic.

TEXT AND IMAGES

Roland Barthes’ (1961) analysis of press photographs seems particularly illuminating for the study of display. He argues that photographs of this type, the purpose of which is primarily the reproduction of reality, are unique messages without codes, that is, continuous messages with no second-order meanings.

Of all the structures of information, the photograph appears the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a ‘denoted’ message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence. In front of a photograph, the feeling of ‘denotation’ or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of a photograph is literally impossible. (1961:18)

In other words, “realistic” photographs in themselves are purely denotative.

Paradoxically, Barthes adds, photographic messages have a connotation derived from their production (the norms governing how they are composed, printed, edited, and so on) and their reception (the way they are read by a public). He identifies six categories of image-based connotation procedures: trick effects, pose, objects (as physical qualifications for signs), aesthetics, photogenia (lighting, exposure, and printing techniques), and syntax (the sequencing of several photographs).

A well-developed theory of the role of these photographic meaning sources has yet to be developed. This may be because as a culture we are drawn more to the importance of the text. As Barthes has observed in another paper: (1964:38):

Today, at the level of mass communication, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image; as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon. Which shows that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image—we are