

Jessica Helfand

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VC 60 - Art/Media - Title: Studies in Visual Biography

How can we understand the stories of others if we can't tell our own stories first? In this class we'll combine discussion, critique, and primary-source research in an effort to rethink the visual language of personal identity. We'll begin by considering authority as a kind of formal grammar, looking at examples through history—from stamps to selfies, fingerprints to signatures, diplomas to passports to identity cards and even social media platforms—questioning the graphic marks and physical attributes that give these artifacts their fascinating and enduring power. How will our own biographical narratives be transmitted to future generations? How should we approach material culture in a digital world? And how might we better understand the requirements of the system alongside the needs of an individual? Through weekly prompts and visual exercises, students will reconsider the historical, cultural, and increasingly vital role for visual and biographical narratives that might, in the future, constitute legitimacy, connectedness, and proof of selfhood.