



Alternative Photography Summer School

Homemade cameras

Analogue cameras for paper negatives and further experimentation.



Breathing new life into old cameras by exposing paper negatives is great fun and enables the tricky time duration of 5 minutes to several hours to be captured.

Some of this information relates to the 'Basic' paper negative camera PDF.

Using an available camera

You will need an old manual control camera. 35mm, Box Brownie, bellows, Hasselblad, or anything with a 'B' or 'T' setting. Many automatic or auto wind cameras can't do timed exposures so you may need to do a bit of research.

Some old cameras, as well as having a 'B' (time exposure) have a 'T' setting. With 'B' you hold (or tape) the shutter down to keep it open. With 'T' you press once to open and then press again to close. Very handy for long exposures. You may find a lockable cable release useful for using a 'B' setting or could try taping a shutter in an open position and make a light tight 'lens cover' which you can remove and replace for the exposure.



35mm cameras

Any manual shutter 35mm camera with a 'B' setting works well. It also gives the opportunity for focussing the image. Try and avoid using small aperture zoom lenses if possible. You may need a lockable cable release to keep the shutter open and ideally a tripod to keep the camera angled at the ideal position.



Exposure times

5 – 10 minutes in sunlight at f4. A bit of a guess but it seems to work. Indoor exposures should be several hours. As with the solargaphs, this technique is very forgiving with overexposure. Old bellows and box cameras have a very small aperture so in cloudy conditions require exposures of several hours.

Building a camera around a 'found lens'

Great fun this! Here's one I made built around a war time reconnaissance lens for a festival celebrating time (cancelled!). I intended to re-introduce the lost art of the 5 minute timed exposure portrait (scanned in situ and emailed to the participant). I'm still working on the Victorian 'keep still' clamps!

Find the infinity ∞ focussing distance and fit the lens on a light tight container with a longer distance. (See basic paper negative camera PDF and videos in the resources page)



Types of paper

Any light sensitive* black and white photographic paper can be used (including fogged paper) however papers have different sensitivity. Resin coated vs fibre based, variable contrast vs fixed grade, glossy vs semi matt. There can also be a difference in colour in the final image all of these are worth experimenting with. Glossy paper will also enable a sharper scan due to the surface of the material. Positive photo paper however won't work as it doesn't darken without developer.

(*Light sensitive photographic paper is not the photographic paper used in ink jet printers.)

Subjects

This is where conventions rule the roost and need to be broken. An exposure of several minutes doesn't mean we should photograph marble statues or a hazel broom resting against our barn!

Double exposures, (swap the camera with a friend?) Remember photographic paper is red insensitive so anything red will come out white!

Self-portraits.

Re-enact the early days of photography:

"He sat for 8 minutes with sunlight shining on his face and tears trickling down his cheeks while the operator promenaded around the room, watch in hand, calling out the time every 5 seconds until the fountains of his eyes were dry".

Excellent stuff from the Victorian era.

Why not set the camera up and, have a game of scrabble? Uno? Have a cup of tea? Read a chapter of a book? Dismantle a Sturmeys Archer hub etc. etc.



Self-portrait, (sitting for 8 minutes with sunlight shining on my face and tears trickling down...)

Further experimentation suggestions

Pre-soaking the paper

Pre-soaking the photographic paper in water (or theoretically an alkaline solution) can sensitise the paper enabling shorter exposure times. Ideally use fibre based materials rather than resin coated as it will hold the moisture for longer during time exposures. If you have a darkroom and chemistry you could pre-soak photo paper in developer and let it dry over several days in a dark cupboard. This will sensitise the paper (and is how Fox Talbot's original 'photogenic drawing' process worked).



Valerie
(Paper pre-soaked in water)

Using printing filters.

With variable contrast papers exposing through a grade 5 filter may give a more contrast than exposing through a grade 0 however this may not be worth it due to the increase in exposure time.

Fixing

Preserving these images is tricky if not impossible. If you use fixer, most of the image will wash away. I store mine in a box titled 'scanned paper negatives' but, although they won't darken in a light proof container, once they hit daylight they will. Always make sure you scan the image so you have a permanent record. I often keep a scanned copy of the negative as well as an adjusted positive. F

For more paper negative info see [Joe Van Cleaves](#) videos



2020 paper negative re-enactment of Fox Talbot's 'The Soliloquy that opened a door' (with 'Dyson' replacing broom)

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