



Photographing an Action

Sunrise Movement

Last updated 10/27/2020

This guide walks you through how to photograph an action. You don't need a fancy camera! Everything in this guide you can do with a smartphone.

Table of Contents

[How to Photograph Emotion](#)

[Where to Put Your Camera](#)

[Working With Your Action's Art Marshall](#)

[How To Photograph Ethically](#)

[What To Do With Your Photographs](#)

[Community and Support](#)

Your Role as Photographer

Imagine your team plans and executes the most badass Sunrise action the movement has ever seen...and nobody takes pictures. Did the action even happen?

Our actions build power when they enter the popular conversation and help shift the narrative. This happens through the filter of press and social media. Quality photography has a lot to do with whether everything else about the action — the planning, the art, the staging, — has its intended impact. In fact, the actions that our movement remembers as epic often weren't more epic than others in person...it's just that **someone took effective pictures**. As the photographer, you're the keystone that helps everyone else succeed.

The good news is that with this guide and a camera phone, you have everything you need. You don't need any experience or fancy gear. Let's get started!



High Priority Shots

Before you leave the action, make sure you have solid examples of **1) staged shots of the art** and **2) photos that focus on individual people**. The staged shot should be a clear shot of the group, where the main banners and signs are legible, everyone is facing forward and has a facial expression and posture that fits the action narrative. The photos of individuals should be close ups that communicate emotions of the people taking action (more about the specifics below).

(Don't stop there, but these are the absolute essentials!)

Photograph Emotion: Here's how

Emotions show our humanity and make our actions powerful, but people like to hide their feelings, so even at really energetic actions, we often look bored on camera. What do you do?!

GET CLOSE!!

Getting close to someone helps us see the emotions on their face. Your best shot is going to be an individual in the foreground and context for the action (usually the crowd with action art) in the background. If there's a speaker, try to get close to them. If someone's standing around, ask them for help and move them to the perfect spot. Here are some tips for getting emotion from them:

PHOTOGRAPHING “SUNRISE FACE”

Want the perfect portrait of someone looking militantly optimistic and determined af? Ask them to close their eyes, relax their face, and take a deep breath in and out. Then tell them to open their eyes and look into the camera. *Snap!*

When people are self-conscious, breathing helps them relax. Some people need more time to breathe than others—just be patient and keep telling them they look great. You being confident makes them confident, too.



PHOTOGRAPHING “HYPE”

Walk up to a group and recruit them into your photo. Then lead them in this chant: “three word chant! Three word chant! THREE WORD CHANT!” It's goofy and fun, and in photos it will look energetic.



PHOTOGRAPHING “HOPE”

Hold your hand up over your shoulder and ask your collaborator to look at it. Ask them to take deep breaths until their face has a neutral expression...*snap!*



PHOTOGRAPHING “JOY”

We shine bright, and it's a huge part of our movement. Ask people to dance! Tell a dad joke and catch a laugh! Ask two people to tell you what they appreciate about each other and wait until it gets cute.



A NOTE ON ASKING FOR HELP...

To do your job well, you need to get up in people's faces, and that means asking for help. Luckily, you'll learn that 99% of people in Sunrise spaces are eager to help out movement photographers—it can be scary at first to approach people, but participating in photography builds our power, and that's why we're all here!

WHAT EMOTIONS SHOULD I PHOTOGRAPH?

Before the action (ideally while you're planning it, not day of), huddle with the action and art leads to discuss the story of the action and its tone. This will help you decide which emotions to look for.

Where to Put Your Camera

Where you put your camera affects the emotional impact of your photograph. As you're learning, move constantly up and down, back and forth, side to side...try every position and see what works. You can tell a good photographer because they're constantly trying different things and contorting into strange positions to find the perfect shot. Experiment and see what works. Here are some tips to get you started:

LOW CAMERA

Photographing from below makes people look powerful. (Think about how silly the photographer must look crawling on the ground...worth it!)



HIGH CAMERA

Photographing from above can help put people in context. Scenes also look fresh and interesting if you put your camera directly above them.



Move around constantly to get good examples of each of these!

WIDE SHOT

Wide shots contextualize the action. Where is it? Why are we here, and what are we demanding? Work with the art marshall to make the art stand out, because that's what will explain all these things! You can often stage these shots before an action so that you can focus on closer shots once things heat up.



MEDIUM SHOT

Who's at this action? Don't be shy about asking people to pose, and feel free to move them to different spots that you think are going to give a good background that says something meaningful about the action.



CLOSE-UP

Close-up shots show the little details of an action. Get some pretty closeups of the art at the action, because these are useful for social media.



LOOK FOR LINES

Lines in a scene can elevate your photo from “good” to “great”: when you use them well, they create a dynamic image that draws your eye in and holds your attention. When you’re at an action, look for lines formed by action art, telephone wires, streets, houses...can you arrange them so that they move your eye from one part of the image to another?



This image is interesting and dynamic because the lines of the hallway start far apart and get closer in the distance. Can you feel yourself getting kind of sucked down that corridor? Your eyes follow the motion of the lines, tricking your brain into seeing *actual* motion. It’s an optical illusion!

Photographers call these “leading lines.” [Here’s an article](#) with more tips on what to look for, but for now, let’s just look at some examples. The good news is that you don’t need a plan going in. Just the act of intentionally looking for lines will elevate your photography.

This photographer found lines made by street paint and telephone wires.



This photographer positioned their camera so that the lines made by signs lead your eye to a group of people standing around. The lines make what could be a boring image feel artistic.



Work With Your Action's Art Marshall

Arranging the crowd and the action art is a critical role that you should ideally have help with—it's almost impossible to be an art marshall and take photos at the same time! Before an action, find or recruit an art marshall and talk through some shots you're going to look for. How will you work together to get them?

For background on action art, and how it intersects with action photography, check out this [Visual Strategy Guide](#) and [Staging Guide](#).

Work With Your Social Media Team

Think about how your action photos can be best used by your hub. Have someone posting on social media during the action or directly after, make sure you're in communication with them so they're ready to post on all of your platforms as soon as possible.

Although this guide focuses on photos for the day of your action, to make the best use of our social media, you should also think about sharing the entire arc of the action (preparing for the action, doing the action, and after the action) on your hub's social media. Check out this [Shot List and Social Media Guide](#) to learn more about how to do this.

For more specifics about captions and posting on social media check out this [Social Media Guide](#).

How to Photograph Ethically

ASK FOR CONSENT

Ahead of your action, or the day-of, before the action starts, go to this link and make a copy of it for your hub <https://smvmt.org/photoconsent>. Ask everyone to fill out the form to ensure you have permission to photograph people. The day of the action, ask your action lead to gather the group and ask for verbal consent to film or photograph. This way, you will know if you need to avoid photographing someone. It also helps you out later on because people know why you're there and are more eager to pose for you. You can even wear an armband to help people remember that you're the official photographer!

At Sunrise actions, people are usually there to be photographed, because images of our actions are a critical part of our strategy. **This isn't always the case, so you need to use your best judgment and check in with organizers.** Especially if you're at escalated actions or in coalition spaces, be aware of

the risk your photos could pose for people. For example, protesters—especially Black leaders—have been targets of violence and police repression for their role in the 2020 uprisings. At protests for Black lives, we should never share strangers' faces online without explicit consent.

REPRESENT RACE HONESTLY

Think critically about how you represent race in your photography. Clearly, it's an issue if you over-represent white people, but photographers focusing too much on BIPOC Sunrisers can also be alienating because it tokenizes their participation and leadership. Try to represent the group you're documenting honestly.

Share Photos with the Movement

Be sure to upload your photos (that you have consent to share) to Sunrise's [Digital Asset Library](#) as soon as the action ends. This is a good place to keep track of all of your photos, and it also allows Sunrise national to share your photos. It's also a way for other people in the movement to have access to your photos, both to share and amplify your message, and also to learn from!

What To Do With Your Photographs

1. Send them to your hub's social media team
2. Upload them to the [Digital Assets Library](#) (DAL) so that the movement can use them!
3. Post them to the #art4actions Slack channel

Community and Support

We've got your back! There is a whole community of Sunrise creative leads to connect with, who can answer any questions you have. Lots of us learned photography from peers and YouTube tutorials, and we're here to help. Here are ways that you can plug in:

#art4actions Slack channel — in the national Sunrise Slack workspace (request photo coaching here)

Join the Action Art Role Network — register HERE: smvmt.org/actionartnetwork