

# Images of Peer Review

Photos by Michael A. Lang, Ph.D.

Center for Scientific Review  
National Institutes of Health  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

By Don Luckett



One of 36 photos in the Images of Peer Review exhibit. [Click here to view the entire exhibit.](#)

For many scientists, the Center for Scientific Review at the National Institutes of Health is a black box. Their NIH applications go in and get reviewed. Months pass in the process, and NIH eventually sends back a score and a summary statement. At best, they see peer review as a mysterious process. At worst, a confusing or threatening one.

"Very often investigators who haven't been a reviewer say their application didn't receive much consideration," says Michael Lang, Scientific Review Administrator for CSR's Biophysics of Synapses, Channels and Transporters Study

Section. But if they were at the review meeting, they would have seen something different. "Reviewers make a significant effort," says Lang, "they care about what they are doing, feel the responsibility, and take their roles very seriously . . . you may not agree with their critiques, but they do care and have spent time."

Lang is the first to admit his words do not convey the intensity of thought and emotion found in NIH peer review meetings. He knows that photos could do a better job, because he is an accomplished photographer, who has received rave reviews by the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun* for his honest and intimate documentary photos.

CSR recently recruited him to photograph some of its study sections, and the resulting pictures have been assembled in an exhibit: "Images of Peer Review." These photos have been incorporated into CSR's new traveling exhibit, which will be set up at major scientific meetings to help applicants learn about the review system, avoid problems, and make the process work for them. These photos have also been posted in a PowerPoint file on [CSR's Web site](#).

"I tried to capture the feeling of a study section," Lang says, "to capture reviewers at their emotional, physical peak of action." He often does this by shooting at slower shutter speeds, snapping the blur of reviewer hands in action. He also uses black and white film. "It has a simplicity about it," he explains. "Color draws you away from the action in a scene . . . Whereas when you work with black, whites, and grays, you can better communicate the mood."



Lang captured CSR reviewers at their "peak of action."



A reviewer takes a second look at an application on his laptop.

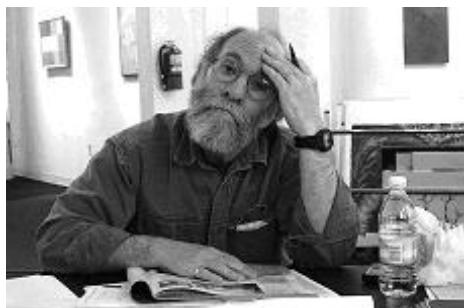
Lang got his start in photography when he was a kid growing up in Baltimore. "I just had a feel for it," he says. However, he didn't have a feel for the "pictorial" photos popular at the local camera club. "I wanted to go

out and do . . . street photography. It was a way of communicating to people my experiences."

Though Lang quickly found his medium and a life-long passion, he didn't choose a career in photography. "I wanted to do photojournalism," he says. But the most appealing assignments were also the most dangerous, and many of the photographers he admired struggled to make a living from their work.

"I was fortunate enough to have choices and went into science," he explains. Lang earned a Ph.D. in biophysics at the University of Maryland in College Park. An academic and research career eventually brought him to an intramural lab at NIH. He enjoyed his years at the bench. "It's your life and that's wonderful," he says, adding that he "dreamed about the experiments." The bad part was that "it's so intense that there is no room for other things."

Something had to give, because Lang had a nagging desire to get back to his photography. In 1985, he left the lab and came to the NIH Division of Research Grants, which is now CSR. He currently coordinates the reviews of grant applications assigned to the Biophysics of Synapses, Channels, and Transporters Study Section. "My job is ideal," he says. He has a great deal of independence, he gets to work with some of the best scientists in his field, *and* he has enough of his own time to indulge his desire to take pictures.



In the last few years, Lang has had two one-man shows at a gallery in Washington, DC: "A Nice Clean Room: Pool Hall Portraits from 1950s Baltimore," and "Thailand - Street Photography."

Stephanie Shapiro, a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* praised his pool hall photos for the unique way they showed "a grittier side of an American decade forever linked to prosperity and bland self-satisfaction." Frank Van Riper gave even higher praise in writing for the *Washington Post*: "Lang produced black-and-white pictures that at their best rival the work of such documentary giants as Bruce Davidson, Arthur Leipzig and Dorothea Lange."

Taking photos of CSR reviewers may not seem as exciting as snapping folks on the back streets of Baltimore and Thailand, but Lang says it was an eye-opening experience. "I was surprised at the variety of what goes on at study sections—how different reviewers react, how different SRAs run things and how crises are solved," says Lang. "But these were differences of style, not substance . . . everywhere, there was the same concern and activity of the reviewers."

### **View the Video!**

#### **Inside the NIH Grant Review Process**

CSR has produced a video of a mock study section meeting to provide another inside look at how NIH grant applications are reviewed for scientific and technical merit.

View the video via the Web:

<http://www.csr.nih.gov/Video/Video.asp>

### **Learn More About CSR**

CSR organizes the peer review groups that evaluate the majority of grant applications submitted to NIH. CSR also receives all NIH and many Public Health Service grant applications and assigns them to the appropriate NIH Institutes and Centers and PHS agencies.

Visit our Web site or call for more information:

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