

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 170 Central Park West, New York, NY. 14 March 2000 to 1 October 2000.

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, with essays by JAMES ALLEN, HILTON ALS, JOHN LEWIS, and LEON LITWACK. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000. 212 p. ISBN 0-944092-69-1.

Academics often criticize history museums for their institutional conservatism, nostalgic approaches, family-oriented fare, and failure to confront the darker aspects of the American past. Leftist scholars, ranging from Mike Wallace to Mark Leone to Richard Handler, frequently charge that historical societies represent and reflect the hegemonic perspective of America's power elite.¹ Held captive by their corporate sponsors and upper-class patrons, so the argument usually goes, mainstream museums develop inoffensive and celebratory programming for a white bread, middle-class audience. Entertainment trumps education, as watered-down exhibits offer consensual interpretations and fail to challenge established beliefs. Excessively cautious administrators, especially fearing retaliation by right-wing watchdogs and government funding agencies after the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, privilege the bland and flag any deviation from the middlebrow norm.

At first glance, the venerable New-York Historical Society (N-YHS), established in 1804, appears to fit the stereotype. Best known to many archivists as a twentieth-century case study in financial mismanagement, the N-YHS has long attracted the scorn of social historians. Journalists and academics throughout the early 1990s sneered at its supposedly elitist collecting policies, derisively characterized its museum as "New York's attic," and viewed its exhibitions as peripheral to urban intellectual life. The society nearly closed its doors in 1993. It survived only when a potent combination of private philanthropy, foundation support, academic connections, and the shrewd choice of Betsy Gotbaum as executive director coalesced. Still, critics wondered whether the N-YHS would emerge as a revitalized institution or merely remain on life support. When the society's newly refurbished museum produced a publicity blitz for its "Elvis and Marilyn" exhibit in 1995, many New York intellectuals collectively rolled their eyes and knowingly nodded their heads. Popular culture masquerading as serious discourse would rule the

1 Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia, 1996); Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, 1997); and Mark Leone, "An Archaeology of the DeWitt Wallace Gallery at Colonial Williamsburg," in Susan Pearce, ed., *Museums and the Appreciation of Culture* (London, 1994), pp. 198–212.

day. Shameless efforts at mass appeal would compromise scholarly standards. Disneyfication, which had already either subverted or beautified 42nd Street depending on one's cultural stance, now appeared inevitable on Central Park West as well.

Without Sanctuary certainly complicates this narrative. Quite simply, this exhibition of lynching photography, with its accompanying book and Web site, easily constitutes the most overtly controversial, challenging, disturbing, and gut-wrenching programme that the society has ever mounted. The basic story behind the exhibit itself has been scrutinized extensively in the popular media. James Allen, an Atlanta-based antique dealer and collector, began accumulating these photographs in the late 1970s, after he happened upon a commercial postcard that recorded the lynching of Leo Frank at Marietta, Georgia, in 1915. Flea markets, pawnshops, gun shows, musty cellars, and Web sites turned up myriad additional examples of this genre, and Allen ultimately spent thousands of dollars on his new-found collecting emphasis. Eventually, he persuaded a small Upper East Side gallery in New York to exhibit the prints and postcards in the summer of 2000. Minimal textual commentary accompanied the items. Overflow crowds flocked to the gallery, and lines wound around the block. A sharply polarized discussion occurred within the scholarly and African-American communities. Some viewed the exhibition as voyeuristic, pointless, insensitive to suffering, dehumanizing, and fundamentally pornographic in its exposition of violence. Others, echoing the words of Congressman John Lewis (D-GA) believed that *Without Sanctuary* might "inspire us, the living, and as yet unborn generations, to be more compassionate, loving, and caring."

Betsy Gotbaum, who had strolled by the gallery and noticed the commotion, clearly thought she had stumbled upon an important story that needed broader exposure and a larger audience. She aggressively pursued the project. Gotbaum offered the N-YHS's exhibit gallery on very short notice, secured funding from Peter Norton and the Gilder-Lehrman Foundation to sponsor the exhibit and accompanying symposia, and collaborated with the Community Service Society to assure broader public input into the project. Only seven weeks elapsed between the closing of the exhibit at the gallery and its opening at N-YHS, prompting frenetic curatorial activity. New York City had constituted one of the centres of America's early twentieth-century anti-lynching movement. The N-YHS elected to highlight this aspect of lynching history, thereby turning the exhibit into something of a New York story and adding several cases of contextual material. Individual photographs also received supplementary captions. Both the exhibit text and the accompanying book featured a broader discussion of lynching in America and drew out many of the individual stories and narratives that lay behind the spare visual evidence.

The N-YHS also embedded the exhibit itself within an elaborate context of public history programming. The society engaged a group of outside consultants,

Facing History and Ourselves, to train museum and library personnel in dealing with visitors who might become upset or angry. Historians on staff conducted a series of approximately two public forums per week, during which time they led discussions and engaged in a mutually informative dialogue with audiences. The N-YHS sponsored an interactive Web site, which included soundtrack, text, and the opportunity for public reactions. Visitor observations may be viewed at the Web site, <http://www.journale.com/without_sanctuary>, which continues to receive considerable commentary. Clearly, the society viewed this exhibit as a major institutional undertaking, welcomed the opportunity to generate dialogue on a very problematic aspect of American history, and recognized the need to move beyond conventional curatorial techniques in order to exhibit this controversial and troubling material with care and sensitivity.

Responses and reactions to human suffering remain intensely complex, personal, and perhaps necessarily non-verbal. Dismembered bodies. Mutilated corpses. Charred human remains. Nude condemned men being exhibited and paraded before their executioners. These words describe the visual materials on display, but they appear inadequate, lifeless, disembodied, and ultimately trite. I came to this exhibit with a general intellectual understanding and sense of the history of lynching, based primarily on my own graduate training. I found it difficult, however, to connect emotionally and viscerally with the images and the people. Neither the exhibit captions, nor the two principal essays by Leon Litwack and Hilton Als in the companion book, helped me in this regard. Litwack's fine essay, "Hellhounds," effectively recounts the historical basics and reinforces the impressionistic evidence found in the gallery: lynchings occurred primarily (though certainly not exclusively) in the South; they typically (though again by no means exclusively) involved vengeance directed against African-Americans in retaliation for both actual and perceived crimes, as well as for crossing racial boundaries and challenging the canons of white supremacy.

Litwack presents the lynchers as just plain folks. They often dressed in their Sunday finest for the event, brought along the whole family to enjoy the entertainment, sometimes circled their own images in crowd photos, and occasionally inscribed messages on postcards such as the following: "This was made in the court yard in Center, Texas. He is a 16 year old black boy. He killed Earl's Grandma. She was Florence's mother. Give this to Bud. From Aunt Myrtle." Lynching activity reached staggering proportions beginning in the 1890s, following the re-establishment of white rule in the South, when terrorists routinely murdered an average of two or three black southerners per week. For reasons which remain somewhat unclear, it declined but did not disappear during the 1930s. So, intellectually, we may understand. Visually, we can comprehend. But perhaps we do need to listen to bluesman Robert Johnson's *Hellhound On My Trail* or Billie Holliday's haunting *Strange Fruit* to truly emotionally engage the issue.

Hilton Als's essay, "GWTW," a reference to *Gone With the Wind* and replete with considerable commentary on Vivien Leigh, satisfied me far less than the Litwack piece. For Als, the story of lynching becomes intertwined with his own identity politics. It becomes the story of Hilton Als being asked to contribute an essay to *Without Sanctuary*. Perhaps, as I suggested earlier, all reaction to human suffering inevitably becomes self-referential and lacks larger meaning. If Als truly believes, however, that for white editors "a black writer is someone who can simplify what is endemic to him or her as a human being – race – and blow it up, to cartoon proportions, hereby making the coon situation 'clear' to a white audience," (p. 39) then he needs to learn to just say no.

The exhibit itself proved far subtler in its interpretive particulars and hidden messages than the book. Two concepts especially inspired reflection following my visit. First, I had not realized the extent to which entrepreneurial photographers and postcard manufacturers felt comfortable commodifying lynching and eagerly marketing their wares to consumers. Edies Photo in Anadarko, Oklahoma, should be historically indicted for depicting the body of Bennie Simmons, who had been soaked in coal oil prior to being set on fire in 1913. So should H.M. Hatch, an "artist" in Kearney, Nebraska, who sold stereograph cards in 1878 of suspected cattle rustlers Ami "Whit" Ketchum and Luther H. Mitchell for thirty-five cents apiece, or three dollars per dozen. They had been stripped, partly skinned, and burned alive prior to hanging. Exposing such historical horrors, asking tough questions about the past, and coming to terms with inhumanity in the finance capitalist culture of Gilded Age America all remain very worthwhile enterprises.

My second reaction proved more ambivalent. It is quite possible to absorb the contextual information provided by the curators and authors, yet read this narrative as fundamentally a success story. Bloodthirsty southerners, half-crazed mobs, and vicious racists become just another "other" that we, the good guys and gals who populate postmodern America, have transcended. A snickering white man in a straw hat, a smiling Florida teenager in her Sunday dress, and a grinning Arkansas gentleman poking a corpse with his cane make us feel better about ourselves, after all. Smug and self-satisfied, we can blissfully ignore the state-sponsored execution of a retarded citizen in George W. Bush's Texas, or the city-sanctioned violence that ended the life of Amadou Diallo in Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's twenty-first century New York City. *Without Sanctuary* successfully contextualizes individual items and objects within the larger history of lynching, but never quite places lynching within the even more complicated history of violence and oppression.

But the New-York Historical Society, for its part, successfully inaugurated a debate that has raged from the pages of the *New York Review of Books* to the halls of New Rochelle High School. This remains quite an accomplishment for an institution still attempting to overcome its own past, and to stake

its claim in urban intellectual culture. Controversial history can happen. And at times, both traditional historical societies and the general public appear even more receptive to debate and dialogue than many academics and intellectuals might imagine.

Peter J. Wosh

Archival Management and Historical Editing
New York University

The Space of Silence and Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia's Killing Fields. CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY. Ottawa, Ontario. 6 October 2000–14 January 2001.

The unifying theme of *The Space of Silence* and *Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia's Killing Fields*, two concurrent exhibitions at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, is an exploration of acts of genocide, but the unequivocal subtext of both exhibitions is the communicative power of the photographic image. Photographs transcend language. Their images seep into parts of the mind that words cannot penetrate, and they resonate more profoundly than any utterance. In concert with these capabilities are immense responsibilities – not only of authorship, but also of dissemination. How and where photographs are circulated and exhibited are as important as the content of the images themselves. These parameters are even more pressing in the context of these two exhibitions, as the subject matter is so acutely heart-wrenching as to risk overwhelming the viewer entirely, and thereby run contrary to the artists' or curators' desires to elicit social change, either through empathy and compassion, or through anger and grief.

The Space of Silence, organized by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, features installations by Jack Burman, Isaac Applebaum, and Alfredo Jaar. Burman and Applebaum, both Canadian artists, explore the incidents and aftermath of the Holocaust, while Jaar, a Chilean born artist now living in the United States, addresses the massacres in Rwanda during 1994. All three artists confront issues of representation specific to photography. Their installations consider photographic images as proof, that is, imbued with an ability to tell truths and to expose lies.

Jack Burman's installation, "*Remain Silent*": *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, employs as its title a translation of "Verhalte dich ruhig," the Nazi orders stencilled in black letters on the inner walls of the concentration camp's latrines. For Burman, the call to "remain silent" becomes a metaphor for memory, and in the quiet contemplation of the landscape and ruins of Auschwitz-Birkenau, there is an opportunity to feel the magnitude of the spirits lost to this place. By way of serenely beautiful panoramic photographs exhibited alongside