

## NAOMI BECKWITH INTERVIEW WITH BRADFORD YOUNG

Naomi Beckwith's interview with cinematographer Bradford Young was conducted between August 10 and August 17, 2012, via e-mail.

**NAOMI BECKWITH: Let's start with your background: Where did you go to film school, and who have been your influences?**

**BRADFORD YOUNG:** I went to Howard University [in Washington, D.C.] for both undergraduate and graduate school. I studied under Haile Gerima for almost 10 years. Haile taught me so much about what film could be when culture is the foundation of the image. He introduced me to the works of Ousmane Sembene, Dibiri Diop Mambety, Kathy Collins, Charles Burnett, and Andre Tarkósy. Mambety's *Touki Bouki*, 1973, and *Hyanas*, 1992, and Haile's *Ashes and Embers*, 1982, are films that inspire me to try to be brave as an image-maker. Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, 1979 and *To Sleep with Anger*, 1990, are pillars when thinking about the visual complexities and nuance of Black life. These are the films and filmmakers that influence me today.

Haile is one of the fathers of Third Cinema and taught me so much about moving one's voice toward a more imperfect cinema. I'm mostly concerned with grounding myself in a cinematic ethos that's about decolonizing my mind. As a cinematographer, I'm engaged in an art form that was forged by *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915. I'm hyperaware of my own agency, as an image-maker, as carrying the baggage of such a corrosive legacy. Third Cinema as pedagogical engagement is my foundation and defense against that baggage. It's allowed me to break the toys of cultural-majority film grammar and find peace in a language that best suits my temperament as a person from a particular community.

**NB: Leslie Hewitt has also spoken of her affinity to Third Cinema. How is culture as a foundational material for an aesthetic project realized or expressed?**

**BY:** Haile helped me realize that small, local things are where “the voice” resides. I'm still very much trying to find that voice in my work, so it's difficult to determine my aesthetic bridge to culture. However, when I'm contemplating the impact of light on particular bodies and their relationship to site, I'm constantly thinking about winter nights in my grandmother's South-Side Chicago apartment. The lighting in her apartment was masterful—a few dim lamps, two or three gas burners on the stove turned on for warmth, and the flicker of an old TV in a distant room. These are the beginnings of my cinematic process. Mama was culture, and I appropriate from Mama.

So many sophisticated, aesthetic things are right up under our noses. The trap, especially in the film context, is that we often invest in conventional tropes as a way to leverage ourselves into a conversation with cultural gatekeepers. The unfortunate fallout of this is that we're not in conversation with ourselves but instead with people and things that can't contain the currents of our turbulent existence. Haile pushed the idea of engaging with culture, however you define that for yourself, as a means of bringing calm to the rushing current and voice to one's work. Filmmaking is a language; it has grammar and culture and is the keeper of both.

**NB: In addition to film, do you spend time engaging with visual art?**

**BY:** Strangely enough, it's rare that I use films as the counterpoint to a developing visual style. I spend most of my preparation time on films engaging with other visual artists, and I'm constantly scouring the art world for inspiration. Two years ago, I discovered the work of painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and her work blew me away. Her approach to color density and its relationship to time is something that I would love to achieve in my cinematography work. Her use of black has subtle nuances that communicate the imperfectly perfect nature of time and memory. I'm constantly trying to find that painterly black in my work—how can

the color black on a piece of film emulsion have the same oscillating chromatic and density values you find in Lynette's work? Time in cinema is cognitive; it's tethered to the relative cognition of characters. This is so apparent in her work. I'm hoping one day someone will say the same thing about the work I'm doing in the film context, and especially the work I'm doing with Leslie.

**NB: I perceive a very specific engagement with time. Would you care to talk about that?**

**BY:** “Persistence of vision” is about bending time. It's a science that balances deprivation and abundance in real time and is the foundation by which cinematic time is achieved. I think it's ultimately a question about how the mind compensates for the “missing frame” in a 24-frames-per-second iteration of time. I think the mind uses notions of time to compensate for the missing frame. Time as an element of culture and history is how we construct nuance in a 24-frame time/space variable. History and culture become the missing frames.

**NB: This film project focuses on segments of the civil rights movement in relationship to site, yet we also know that era by its images and documentation. How did you describe your received wisdom about the civil rights era? Did you rely on this in the shaping of the film?**

**BY:** My family, especially on my mother's side from Louisville, Kentucky, was involved in “The Movement.” My curiosity was piqued from all of those after-dinner conversations about The Movement at my grandparents' place. There were so many stories but very few images tied to those grand narratives. The stories moved me, but I wanted to see what The Movement looked like. I looked at so many magazines and photography anthologies of the era as a young person. These were some of the first images that made me conscious of image-making. The photographer Roy De Carava was my entryway. His images of the era are what I hope the work I'm doing in the film world and the work I'm doing with Leslie Hewitt could feel like. His images hold so much photographic density in relationship to time and space. I'm not sure if anyone is as brave as him when photographing two lovers on a bench kissing under a street light.

Leslie and I got a chance to look through a set of loosely titled “Civil Rights” photographs that the Menil had just acquired. Out of all the photographers of that era represented in the collection, Elliot Ervitt's work inspired us the most. His work has and had a certain level of attention to site that the work of other photographers in the collection didn't have. Up to this point, I can't say I paid much attention to site; my gaze was focused on the figure. This collaboration was our opportunity to focus on site and the way in which it grounds the body, the figure.

**NB: This is your second project with Leslie. What does it mean to you to take filmmaking into the visual arts world?**

**BY:** It's interesting how much pain one endures in the process of helping to create one frame in the film context. Making images with Leslie in the art-world context is a space of great pleasure. We have structured our own liberated zone where we are 100 percent responsible for the perceived gravity of each frame. We're more aware of what the next installation will feel like, considering our current one. It's our grammar. And it's about the cumulative value of one's work that counts in our collaboration. With so much commercial ambitions tied to filmmaking, it's often difficult to talk about the cumulative value of a collaboration. A cumulative analysis is too volatile for people who are waiting to make a return on their investment. We're invested in growth, not perfection.

## A CONVERSATION WITH LESLIE HEWITT AND MICHELLE WHITE, CURATOR AT THE MENIL COLLECTION

This project began in 2010 when I invited Leslie Hewitt, and subsequently Bradford Young, to come to the Menil Collection in Houston to go through a major gift of civil rights era photographs from Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil. I was prompted by how the questions Hewitt had been asking in her own work might activate the contemporary relevancy of this work's political urgency, as well as my curatorial desire to seek ways to facilitate a deeper engagement with the work that did not just confine it to the past. The photographers represented in this group were all active participants in the grassroots movement to fight racial injustice. While their artistic approaches differed, they were united in their belief of using the power of images to create consciousness and draw attention to the violence and victories that were igniting profound social change. The collection has tremendous depth. It includes the indelible moments of the civil rights movement that took place in the Southern United States in the 1960s, from the Birmingham campaign in Alabama to the march from Selma to Montgomery. It also contains quiet and poignant images from everyday life in the years preceding the 1960s—moments that speak to the transformative shifts in urban centers in the North taking place as a result of the Great Migration in the 20th century, when an estimated 8 million African-Americans moved from the South to seek opportunities and the promise of a more just life.

**Michelle White: When you and Bradford first went through the photographs at the Menil, what was your initial impression or assessment of the holdings?**

**Leslie Hewitt:** The scale and the proportions—meaning the size of each photograph in relation to what was revealed within the photograph—was extremely illuminating. That is what struck me immediately. The sheer fact that each revealed moment was a fragment of American history. From how light hit the corner of a room to the slight fold of an individual's arms in the photojournalistic moments made each fragment epic and far-reaching.

**MW: Were you already familiar with these photographs?**

**LH:** Yes and no. Many of the photographs in the collection are extremely iconic and were used in editorial spreads at the time they were originally recorded. The iconic nature of the photographs, either through the situation that was recorded or the historical figures that mark the occasion or the moment in time, make many of the photographs feel familiar in ways that they are perhaps unfamiliar. Many of the photographers in the collection really needed no introduction, but their relationship to the subject matter and the time period were new for me and really set up a series of questions about access and commitment.

**MW: In going through the archives, how did you come to decide on the Great Migration as the focus of the project? It encompasses such a broad time frame in the 20th century, and it is also such a historically under-recognized, yet pivotal phenomenon of the Southern diaspora of African-Americans in the United States.**

**LH:** We did not decide on the Great Migration as a focus per se; it is more of a counterpoint that moves along the visual pacing of Untitled (Structures). The earliest image from the Menil Collection of civil rights era photographs is from 1948, and the latest image is from 1980. The informal, yet formalizing bracket produced a platform to approach the question of invisibility in the archive. It became extremely interesting to explore a defining moment in American history such as the Great Migration, the shifts that occurred in terms of bodies moving from one landscape to another, and—considering what was brought and what was left behind—what changed and informed a new cultural sensibility and political awareness of space and self-actualization. These ideas became very attractive as a starting point to explore the gaps and silences in the archive.

## DIRECTOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

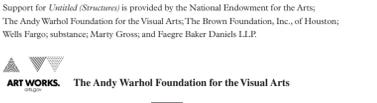
In 2011, the Art Center purchased a work of art by the artist Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Sudden Glare of the Sun)*, 2011, a digital C-print in a custom birchwood frame, is a photograph of an assemblage of books, wooden boards, and a Polaroid picture that functions somewhat like a sculpture. It rests on the floor, leaning against the wall. Each time I walk into the gallery that houses the work, I hesitate slightly. Something is not quite right. I think something is unfinished in the space.

Something is unfinished. The conversations and questions that Hewitt's art evokes will constantly shift focus, and therein lies the work's effectiveness. The artist reexamines not only her own personal history, but our collective histories and memories as well. The Art Center, along with the Menil Collection in Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, is proud to have commissioned Hewitt, in collaboration with Bradford Young, to create the dual-channel film installation, *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012. I thank the artist and Young for sharing their visions with us. I would also like to acknowledge the support and participation of Michelle White, curator of the Menil Collection, and Naomi Beckwith, curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, for facilitating the collaborative process. Lucien Terras and Melissa Timarchi of Lucien Terras, Inc., and Michael Jenkins of Sikkema Jenkins & Co. assisted in numerous elements of this project. At the Art Center, Senior Curator Gilbert Vicario, Assistant Registrar Mickey Koch, Chief Preparator Jay Ewart and his staff, Director of Marketing and Public Relations Christine Doolittle, and Director of Education Jill Featherstone facilitated the many components that made this presentation possible. Special thanks to Development Director Emily Bahsen and Development and Communications Associate Barbara Briggie-Smith for their successful ability to secure funds. Finally, Connie Wilson of Connie Wilson Design for this unique publication. I thank each for the hard work they contributed to make this exhibition a success.

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Jeff Fleming | Director

Support for *Untitled (Structures)* is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; The Brown Foundation, Inc., of Houston; Wells Fargo; substance; Marty Gross; and Faegre Baker Daniels L.L.P.



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Cover Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with cinematographer Bradford Young, Untitled (Structures), 2012 Poster. Courtesy of the artists and Baro-GDS. Copy edit: Carrie Schmitz Opposite Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with cinematographer Bradford Young, Untitled (Structures), 2012 Production still. Courtesy of the artists and Lucien Terras Inc.

**MW: How did you decide on Memphis and Chicago as the locations of the shoots?**

**LH:** The idea to explore locations that were significant to the synergy of the era in the fullest sense was primary. The landscape each city afforded us in historiographic terms gives a clear sense of place and an uncanny sense of time.

**MW: Architectural space plays such an important role in this film. You and Bradford decided to work in places with strong historical ties to the movement, including the Clayborn Temple AME Church in Memphis, a site of civil rights activism and the location where the well-known photograph by Ernest Withers of the protester with the “I Am A Man” sign was taken in 1968. How did these sites structure or even build the series of sequences of the work?**

**LH:** The articulation of interior and exterior spaces of architecturally significant spaces, coupled with the overall landscape, helped to describe a sense of place. This sense of place is extremely important for us. The notion of place and the paranoia of displacement were concepts that keep our focus critical in place of nostalgic. We were asking: How could we suggest or infer space or time rather than describe or illustrate it visually? We wanted to select spaces with the history, but ones that also spoke about contemporary reality in terms of the effect of change and the wear of time on these mostly unknown and unmarked spaces. Our interest was first and foremost to respond to the changes, to interact with it. The “change” is our reality. It is the marker for our sense of time and place. We wanted to slow down the act of looking, the act of reflection in this work. Visiting and intentionally seeking out sites that were lesser known in terms of the level of impact on the 20th century was exhilarating. We were similar to urban archeologists finding the trace of history in the density of contemporary life.

**MW: Does this notion of architectural obsolescence and memory relate to your use of the figure?**

**LH:** The locations of interest represent a richness beyond sheer usefulness and occupancy in today's context. Many of the locations were, to say the least, in transition. But each site represents an invisible arc, a high point in the historical narrative of the civil rights era. We pointed the camera at spaces that look different than their actual history; something has changed, and we are living within that change right now. Influenced by the archive we studied, we placed figures in juxtaposition to the site specificity we sought out in the locations in order to reposition the viewer's perspective (even for only 15 seconds of film footage).

**MW: How do you see this new work fitting into your larger project as an artist and your relationship to the archive?**

**LH:** I am fascinated with the ways in which we culturally mark time. The modes associated with such an act have shifted quite rapidly in the later part of the 20th century, making our time that of a paradigm shift. Being born in the later part of the century perhaps prepares us as artists to focus on the shift in relation to the human impulse to record existence. *Untitled (Structures)* explores this in an extended and in-depth manner. The shift for me is that we (Bradford and I) in this work have moved away from still photography toward the moving image, and when we consider what can happen within a cinematic sense of time, there is so much to work with and point to. For example, with motion picture film, how can we explore concepts such as collage or juxtaposition? How can we explore yet be critical of appropriation in the conventional sense? And how can we use the medium to respond to the notion of the archive through its annotations?

## NOTES ON UNTITLED (STRUCTURES)

Leslie Hewitt and cinematographer Bradford Young's collaborative project *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012, explores the intersection of positive and negative space; illusion and form; history versus lived experience through sculpture and the moving image. Partly inspired by an archive of civil rights era photographs recently gifted to the Menil Collection in Houston, *Untitled (Structures)* begs a reflection on the nature of the historic, photographic archive. Questions regarding the fundamental nature of an archive—to whom does it belong and how does it become meaningful for subsequent generations—arise when we think about its relevance to the present day.

The etymology of the term *archive* is derived from the Greek word *arkhion* that designated the place where public records were kept. More importantly, these records were generally important official state records that, when considered as a whole, constituted an identity for a collective body. In recent decades, the nature of the archive and its significance as a fundamental knowledge base has been explored by contemporary artists interested in understanding predetermined political and social conditions that have directly and indirectly affected their lives. In many cases, the notion of the archive bridges the gap between the present and a nostalgia for the historical past that one did not live through. The photographic archive, in particular, has the unique ability to provide a visual testimony rather than a purely objective account of history, thus allowing for greater interpretation.

It is through this contextual lens that Hewitt (b. 1977) and Young's (b. 1977) collaborative project approaches the photographic archive as a way of analyzing larger issues around the power of the image and its capacity for revealing absolute truths. But how do these images affect our understanding of history if we agree that documentary photography is subjective testimony? Michael Fried reminds us that a photographer does not know exactly what he or she has done until the photograph is developed, thereby calling into question how much artistic intention goes into creating a desired effect. Furthermore, one must acknowledge the significance of what has been left out of the frame. These are truths that cannot be contained or analyzed but rather occupy a ghostly aura around the images themselves. The artists are keenly aware of the semiotics at play within the field of photography and are judiciously critical in their use of the medium. By understanding the nature of the archive and the critical role played by photography within the evolution of contemporary art, we begin to understand the positions and approaches taken by Hewitt and Young.

*Untitled (Structures)* was filmed in two locations of historical significance to the civil rights movement in the United States—Chicago and Memphis—reflected through the use of actors and empty, architectural spaces. The two-channel installation projects these images slowly and with little motion. Sitting somewhere between a still and a moving image, the projections deliberately establish a pacing that defies the conventional cinematic approach to the passing of time. The viewer's relationship to the images is established through the placement of the split screens on adjacent walls, creating a triangulation between the viewer and the slowly changing images.

The position of the screens and the viewer establishes a geometry that plays with the notion of pictorial flatness and spatial reality that pervades any conversation centered on the formal structure of the photographic and cinematic image. This becomes augmented through additional works that play with these very same notions, though in very different ways. *Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again*, 2012, and *Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again (Distilled moment from over 72 hours of viewing the Civil Rights era archive at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas)*, 2012, are two independent yet interrelated components of the collaborative project that expand into a three-dimensional space as a way of exploring subtle shifts in perspective and scale. The first piece is composed of five thin sheets of steel, each roughly 4 by 8 feet, that are configured through folds and creases into various geometric permutations.

These open, modular structures, unlike those of Sol LeWitt, are not based on the cube, but seemingly on the flat, white surface of the projected screen.

The second component, *Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again (Distilled moment from over 72 hours of viewing the Civil Rights era archive at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas)*, is an installation composed of two small lithographs illustrating a small detail—the back of a woman's head—taken from one of the original civil rights images and hung on a site-specific wall. The detail is slightly magnified in one of the images, thus creating the illusion that you are walking in the direction of the camera's lens. The effect of seeing the lithographs side by side slowly brings you in closer to the figure in the image and to the surface of the picture plane. Its isolation is further exaggerated by its positioning on an otherwise-empty white wall. As the title suggests, a geometry of alignment and misalignment occurs when viewing these works that functions more on a physical and intuitive level rather than relying solely on the literal or testimonial aspect of the photographic archive.

The real subject of *Untitled (Structures)*, as its subtitle suggests, is to grapple the abstract and oftentimes invisible structures at play within a given social or cultural framework. While the historical archive provided an entry point into a moment in U.S. history when the fight for civil rights was approached with nonviolent forms of resistance, Leslie Hewitt's critical approach to a selection of the photographs is one of intense scrutiny focused on small, poetic fragments—overlooked architectural details within a given image. In some ways, this process reveals an approach one could call archaeological in its identification and analysis of visual material. More importantly, Hewitt's intentionality reveals an abiding interest in the existential nature of reality and the ways that photography becomes an index , or direct physical imprint of this world. *Untitled (Structures)* reminds us that history is subjective, truth absolute.

Gilbert Vicario | Senior Curator

End notes

<sup>[1]</sup> The issue of intentionality versus effect is discussed in Michael Fried's book Why Photography Matters As Art At Never Before, Chapter 9 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>[2]</sup> Anne Korner reminds us that Sol LeWitt was familiar with the studies of 19th-century photographer Edward Muybridge, whose work was instrumental in allowing LeWitt a way to counteract the static nature of singular objects through the notion of photographic progression. “Approaches to Seriality: Sol LeWitt and his Contemporaries,” in Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000).

<sup>[3]</sup> The photograph and its indexical relationship to its object was originally articulated by Rosalind E. Krauss in “Notes on the Index: Part I: The Originality of the Artwork,” in *Acas: Guards and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985).

UN-TITLED (STRUCTURES)

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