



Riffs on Real Time (5 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print
Miller Meigs Collection

TIME/FRAME:

Leslie Hewitt's *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–2009)

Leslie Hewitt makes photographs, sculpture, and site-specific installations that explore how we rely on photography to provide our memories of personal experiences, to frame our understanding of who we are, and to shape and preserve our collective memory of historical events. Her distinctive visual language derives in equal measure from her instincts as an archivist, gathering and sifting through the documents and objects that bear witness to experience, and her formal concerns, which find their roots in twentieth-century film theory and sculptural practice, and most recently in the often overlooked history of optics embedded in seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting.¹ In *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–2009), ten photographs that are part of an ongoing series begun in 2002, shown together here for the first time, Hewitt sets up a dynamic between personal and family iconography and images in newspapers, magazines, books, and other widely circulated material. In juxtaposing a casually composed photograph of a backyard family gathering with a magazine image of crowd of protesters, for example, or a snapshot of a grand American landscape combined with a book cover showing a detail of a vintage, homespun quilt, she explores how images influence what we learn about ourselves individually and as members of a particular generation, culture, or country.

Born in New York in 1977, Hewitt has been described as a member of the post-civil rights generation, which understands the civil rights movement through images and text rather than direct experience. More specifically, she is of a generation growing up just outside the immediate shadow of pressing political change, and one which also has a particular relationship to photography. Social and political activism and the rise of amateur photography have each played a role in the late twentieth-century understanding of American history as American *histories*. Hewitt clearly recognizes this multiplicity of contemporary perspectives and the political and cultural significance of



Installation view from *the everyday*
Center for Curatorial Studies
Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Photo: Chris Kendall



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Ann and Mel Schaffer Family Collection

documenting them. In conjoining personal and publicly distributed images from the present and the recent past, she creates windows into lives that might otherwise fall outside of history's frame.

In her 2006 book *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, historian and theorist of modern media culture Anne Friedberg suggests that whether seen through a window, in a frame, or on a screen, the question of how the world is framed may be as important as what is in the frame.² The metaphor of the rectangular frame of painting as an open window originated in the fifteenth century, haunting centuries of thinking about perspective as it relates to painting, architecture, and moving-image media. Today, however, the metaphor of the window as applied to computer software evokes a different set of assumptions about the viewer and the view. Now, each window may be seen as one of many coexisting on a desktop. Thus the metaphoric hold of the fifteenth-century idea—with its presumption of a singular-perspective view—is giving way to the idea of multiple frames of reference, a multiplicity of windows within windows, frames within frames, screens within screens. In *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–2009), Hewitt's layered imagery creates just such frames within frames. Further, the seemingly disparate images and objects of each frame are juxtaposed in precisely distilled compositions whose connections seem to arise from the very fact of being bound together within a frame.

Hewitt has said of herself, "I think through pictures. I guess I was completely socialized by Eastman Kodak to think that every important moment needed to be documented and compressed, with a shimmer from sunlight. And that you would experience it in your hand. Though that may sound basic, I came to photography thinking of it as an object, something tangible, and something that you're not always included in; you may be looking through someone else's eyes or through someone else's gaze."³ By viewing the photograph both as an object and as an image, Hewitt is able to explore the sculptural weight and portable nature of the photograph, and to reveal the fact that we encounter photographs transported in time as well as in space. A photograph always documents the past, and also always exists displaced from the location it represents, yet it maintains an indexical relationship to the time and place of its origin, pointing to it, and inextricably tied to it. This relationship to past and place has led Hewitt to consider how we process memory through images. In her words, "You can't address photography without discussing its relationship to memory. I started to make work from that position, thinking about how an image shifts over time...that it's not necessarily locked into the particular moment we thought it was linked to."⁴

The foreground layer in each of Hewitt's compositions in *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–2009) is usually a familiar-looking souvenir or keepsake snapshot. Viewers of a certain

age read the vintage of a snapshot not only by its content, but by its format, from small black-and-white images with white borders and date-stamped edges, to larger rectangular color prints dropped off for commercial processing at the once ubiquitous Fotomat. Some images include figures seen engaging in commonly photographed activities such as travel and family gatherings. Despite the highly personal nature of the individual snapshots, however, the scenes and faces recorded here are indistinct and could be anywhere and anybody. This anonymity or universality, along with evident technical errors common to amateur photography, suggests that these are activities we all share, photos we all have taken. Photography is democratic in that way.

In *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–2009), Hewitt operates within an unvarying compositional structure. Each image includes a document showing clear evidence of use—perhaps a book with worn corners, a magazine folded open to a particular page, or a sheet of paper with inscrutable writing. On top of this document a snapshot of American life is placed. These layered constructions are arranged and photographed directly on the floor, which serves as a literal ground for the composition. Whether soft, grainy wood or richly textured domestic carpet, this ground speaks to the interior nature of Hewitt's work and its metaphoric and physical location within the built spaces of human construction and occupation.

Hewitt's two-dimensional photographs are thus of three-layer collages, and are sculptural as well as image-bearing.⁵ Within that set structure, Hewitt creates what she calls syncopation and variation: visual patterns and breaks, or points of rest, between elements within each frame, and from frame to frame in the series. The mundane visual language of snapshots of backyard barbecues or family vacations, or of much-handled pages torn from printed matter, is contravened and complicated by Hewitt's systematic placement, which juxtaposes and relates, obscures, and only selectively reveals. The effect is viscerally, physically perplexing in its perspective. The image is almost exaggeratedly flat, which seems to simultaneously underscore its undeniable existence as a two-dimensional photograph and its strange, palpable three-dimensionality, creating an experience not dissimilar to viewing a trompe l'oeil painting.

In her installations, Hewitt often calls attention to this push/pull between the flat and the multidimensional, and to the viewer's physical relationship to the works. At the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, the ten photographs are shown with one sculpture, which leans against a wall and mirrors the dimensions of the gallery doorways. Borrowing the language of the building's architecture, the sculpture creates new relationships between the works on view, shifting the viewer's attention back and forth between the visual, pictorial images in the photographs (which exist in the past, and are experienced visually, mentally, and emotionally through our eyes and minds), and the experience of physically encountering these eleven objects displayed in particular

relationship to each other in the gallery (existing for us in real time). Questions of context are therefore integral to *Riffs on Real Time*, as Hewitt invites contemplation of not only the subject matter of any given image, but of where and how a viewer comes to experience an image, and how the gallery setting effects that experience.

Hewitt also invites us to consider how Americans have engaged or disengaged with the visual language of race in recent decades, how we grapple with its traces in contemporary culture, and how it effects our assumptions, given what we see or do not see. As art historian Huey Copeland writes:

Hewitt highlights vernacular photographic practices that conjure alternative visions of black life. Not content to target the brief intervals in which African American politics perennially unfolds in mainstream narratives, she proffers the expansive envelope of everyday temporality. And instead of allowing a single image to sum up a specific time, she presents various pictures as elements in a scenario of her own production (construction), so that earlier visual and textual discourses (conversations) appear as they are lived with, pored over, and thumbed through (contemplated), bringing fragments of the past into contingent configurations that newly open onto the historical record.⁶

Indeed, it is the relentless persistence and serial repetition in Hewitt's *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–2009) that challenge the objective distance and authority of a single archive and single perspective, as if by meticulously singling out and rearranging both documents that hold individual memories, and those that contribute to our collective picture of the past, we might come to know something new about ourselves now.

—Randi Hopkins, Associate Curator

NOTES

1. This essay evolved out of Leslie Hewitt's lecture at the Radcliffe Gymnasium at Harvard University on January 27, 2010, and at Harvard's Carpenter Center on April 7, 2011, and from conversations with the artist in her New York studio in September 2010, and in Cambridge, MA, in April 2011.
2. Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1.
3. Leslie Hewitt, Grange Prize 2010 panel discussion (audio), moderated by Dr. Kenneth Montague, independent curator and collector, recorded September 22, 2010, Jackman Hall, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada.
4. Ibid.
5. Hamlett Dobbins, in his essay accompanying *Leslie Hewitt: Riffs on Real Time* (Rhodes College, Memphis, TN; 2009) describes the series as paralleling a haiku, where the three lines of the delicate and distilled form of poetry translate into a stack of three visual layers.
6. Huey Copeland, "Openings: Leslie Hewitt," *Artforum* (February 2010), 185.

BIOGRAPHY

Leslie Hewitt graduated from The Cooper Union School of Art in 2000 and earned an MFA from Yale University in 2004. From 2001 to 2003, she studied Africana Studies and Cultural Studies at New York University. She was included in the 2008 *Whitney Biennial* and in the Museum of Modern Art's *New Photography 2009*, and was a recipient of the 2010 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Individual Artist Grant. Her work has recently or will soon be seen in exhibitions at venues including Project Row Houses, Houston; Sculpture Center, New York; Artists Space, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; LAXART, Los Angeles; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and The Kitchen, New York. Hewitt has held many residencies, including at The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture; and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. She will be in residence at the American Academy in Berlin in 2012.

CHECKLIST

Riffs on Real Time (1 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Ann and Mel Schaffer Family Collection

Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Collection of Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté

Riffs on Real Time (3 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Collection of Beth and Richard Marcus

Riffs on Real Time (4 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Collection of Noel Kirnon

Riffs on Real Time (5 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 24 x 30 inches
Miller Meigs Collection

Riffs on Real Time (6 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 24 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

Riffs on Real Time (7 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Collection of Alvin Hall

Riffs on Real Time (8 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Miller Meigs Collection

Riffs on Real Time (9 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Collection of Noel Kirnon

Riffs on Real Time (10 of 10), 2006–2009
C-print, 30 x 24 inches
Collection of Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté

Untitled, 2011
Fabricated wall
Site-specific, dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York