

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, *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 term archive is derived from the Greek word *arkhion*, which 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 and Young’s 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? Art Historian 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.¹ 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 that 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 locations of historical significance to the civil rights movement in the United States reflected through the use of actors and empty, architectural spaces. The two-channel installation projects these images slowly and with little movement. 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. The real subject of *Untitled (Structures)*, as its subtitle suggests, is to grapple with 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 United States history when the fight for civil rights was approached with nonviolent forms of resistance, 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 index² or direct physical imprint of this world. It’s through this filter that *Untitled (Structures)* reminds us that history is subjective, truth absolute.

Gilbert Vicario | *Senior Curator*
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End notes

1. The issue of intentionality versus effect is discussed in Michael Fried’s book *Why Photography Matters: Art As Never Before*, Chapter 9 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008).

2. The photograph and its indexical relationship to its object was originally articulated by Rosalind E. Krauss in “Notes on the Index: Part I” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985).

NAOMI BECKWITH INTERVIEWS BRADFORD YOUNG

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, DC] 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 Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty, Kathy Collins, Charles Burnett, and Andrei Tarkovsky. Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki*, 1973, and *Hyenas*, 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.

Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with cinematographer Bradford Young
Untitled (Structures), 2012
Dual-channel video installation
35mm film transferred to high-definition video
16 min. 47 sec., loop
Produced by Karin Chien
Commissioned by The Menil Collection, Houston, with the support of Jeram and Holland Chaney, in collaboration with the Des Moines Art Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Additional funding provided by Joseph Chung, Marilyn and Larry Fields, and Elliot and Kimberly Perry. Material support provided by Kodak, Panavision, and Harbor Picture Company

Untitled (Structures): A New Film Installation by Leslie Hewitt in Collaboration with Cinematographer Bradford Young is curated by Michelle White.

Exhibition Dates
January 26 – May 5, 2013

Public Program
Negro Building: Space and the Racial Politics of Display
Monday, April 15, 2013, 8:00 p.m.
Columbia University professor Mabel O. Wilson discusses space and cultural memory in black America in relation to *Untitled (Structures)*.

This exhibition is generously supported by
The John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Goldman, Sachs & Co.; Sentinel Trust; UBS; Jeram and Holland Chaney; and the City of Houston.

Cover: Poster for Untitled (Structures), 2012.
Courtesy of the artists and Buro-GDS

Opposite: Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with cinematographer Bradford Young, Untitled (Structures), 2012. Production still.
Courtesy of the artists and Lucien Teras, Inc.

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, Elliott Erwit’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 quality 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.

Naomi Beckwith | *Curator*
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MICHELLE WHITE INTERVIEWS LESLIE HEWITT

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.

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 kept 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 change, 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 latter 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?

AN INTRODUCTION TO UNTITLED (STRUCTURES)



Elliott Erwit, *New York City*, 1948
Gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm)
The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil
© 2012 Elliott Erwit/Magnum Photos

In 2010 I invited artist Leslie Hewitt to come to Houston. The Menil Collection had just been given a significant group of civil rights-era photographs by Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil, and as a curator I was interested in finding ways to facilitate a deeper engagement with the photographs, to investigate them in the present rather than confine them to the past. Hewitt soon asked her collaborator, cinematographer Bradford Young, to join us, and we began going through the collection of 230 photographs. Prompted by the questions Hewitt had been asking in her work and the critical approach to image making in Young’s, I hoped that by providing a space for the artists to create something new, the contemporary relevance of the archive’s political urgency could be activated.

The photographers represented in this archive include Elliott Erwit, Dan Budnick, Charles Moore, Bob Adelman, Danny Lyon, Leonard Freed, and Bruce Davidson. While their artistic and photojournalistic approaches differ, they were united in their belief in the power of images to change consciousness and dedicated to drawing attention to the violence and victories that were igniting profound social change. The collection has tremendous depth. Indelible moments of the 1960s civil rights movement in the southern United States are captured here, from the Birmingham campaign to the Selma to Montgomery voting rights

marches. There are haunting images of segregation and inspiring shots of nonviolent protests on interstate buses and at white-only lunch counters and swimming pools. Poignant, quiet images from everyday life in the years both before and after the turbulent 1960s speak to the transformative shifts in northern urban centers that took place as a result of the Great Migration, when an estimated eight million African Americans moved to these cities from the south in search of economic opportunities and a more just existence.

Hewitt and Young were as interested in the composition and aesthetics of the photographs and the subjectivity of the photographers as they were in the historical moments depicted. During early conversations they were thinking about the small, if not ordinary, moments of connection in the work, like a shared glance or clasped hands, that tell a timeless story about the human experience. The work of Paris-born photographer Elliott Erwit from the collection was particularly important to them. Trained as a filmmaker, he brought his cinematic vision to his still photography, manipulating light and shadow and playing beautifully, and quite unconventionally, with depth of field to provide a quiet yet cunning context in which to address racial inequity. In his 1949 photograph of a subway platform in New York City, passengers are silhouetted against a light background. In the carefully composed image, the dark figures surround an advertisement that emerges from the shadows for “Griffin Allwite,” a shoe polish that used the slogan: “make all white shoes whiter!”

After spending time with the photographs, examining their formal and historical structures, and thinking about how the subjects were captured and presented, Hewitt and Young began to ask questions about the fragility of memory, the complexity of nostalgia, the finite nature of any archive, and the slippery subjectivity inherent to the medium of photography. These questions served as the starting point for *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012. The Menil Collection, with the Des Moines Art Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, commissioned the work, and the resulting dual-projection film installation has exceeded our expectations. With a team led by an artist and a cinematographer, the project was truly a production, requiring the expertise of independent film producer Karin Chien and demanding a collaborative spirit and bureaucratic acumen to secure volunteers, filming permits, and entry to spaces that were not always easy to access.

For the artists, it was these at times unnamed spaces, these untitled structures on the verge of disappearing that served as the heart of their investigation. Footage of buildings and spaces associated with the civil rights movement and Great Migration was shot on 35mm film in three locations: the Arkansas Delta, Memphis, and Chicago. Among the sites chosen are the former Johnson Publishing Company, the Chicago headquarters of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, and the Universal Life Insurance Company building, an important black-owned insurance company in Memphis that served as hub of civil rights activities.

Through their journey into these buildings, displayed via the temporal medium of film as a sequence of paired vignettes or juxtapositions, the historical weight of these spaces is presented as a coalescence of form and content. The work alternates between clear representations of tangible spaces, places that are named, and images that fade and quiver, structures as fleeting and nameless as a memory.

Michelle White | *Curator*
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