

## AN INTRODUCTION TO UNTITLED (STRUCTURES)



Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with Bradford Young  
*Untitled (Structures)*, 2012. Production Still  
Courtesy of the artists and Lucien Teras, Inc.

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 Erwitt, 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.

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF MEMORY

The earliest memory I can recall takes place when I am about three years old, eating ice cream on a stoop in Hyde Park with my sister. Later I came to realize that this memory was almost identical to a family photograph, which led me to wonder if I had even remembered the moment at all—or if it had been implanted in my mind by the photo. As it is with personal memory, so it is with historic memory and, specifically, with the transference of the legacies of the Great Migration and the Civil Rights movement for the generation that was born in their wake. So recent was this historical moment, so prevalent were the anecdotes, so frequent were the documentary films and images, that the line between personal memory and historic memory has become blurred. Leslie Hewitt and Bradford Young are two artists born in that wake. They are of a generation for whom these movements are a source for personal identification as much as they are part of a greater American story.

Hewitt and Young's second film collaboration, *Untitled (Structures)*, explores sites of memory and identification, and at the same time exists at the intersection of photography and cinema, where still and moving images are at times indistinguishable. This nonnarrative film consists of several vignettes in which the stationary camera lingers on a scenario as if staring in reverie. This technique allows Hewitt and Young to reverse the photo/film dichotomy explored by Chris Marker in his now-famous *La Jéte* (1962), a film composed entirely of still photography that, like *Untitled (Structures)*, is a treatise on time and memory. Yet Hewitt and Young's cinematic concerns owe more to the Third Cinema movement than postwar French cinema.

Third Cinema was founded by South American and African filmmakers, such as Ousmane Sembène of Senegal and Haile Gerima of Ethiopia, who allied their artistic vision with the postcolonial social movements of newly liberated nations. These filmmakers pushed against European aesthetic conventions—as their nations politically separated themselves from centers of European control—in an attempt to develop new narrative formats by foregrounding the cultural memory and traditions of their respective locales. Hewitt and Young transfer such cinematic impulses onto a contemporary US context, seeking a new visual framework for representing received stories and iconic images. The artists describe themselves as “urban archaeologists finding the trace of history in the density of contemporary life,” or, uncovering a lost history hidden beneath the rubble of time rather than beneath the physical remains of a long-gone civilization. The archaeological analogy is apt. Dieter Roelstraete, curator of the exhibition *The Way of the Shoel: Art as Archaeology*, which preceded this film's screening at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, argued, “One of the dominant trends in the art of the last decade or so ... has revolved around the radical reconsideration and reformulation of art's relationship to *history* [italics in original], both its own ('art history') and that of others ('history' proper).”<sup>1</sup>

The use of the archaeological metaphor is also telling because it implies the exploration of physical edifices—historical sites provide the foundation for Hewitt and Young's exploration rather than the documentary images that initiated the project. The very title of the film, *Untitled (Structures)*, implies architecture and, more specifically, the kind of edifice that acts as the base to a larger complex. This metaphor is made most literal in the points of the film where the camera lingers on architecture—a church, the remains of a Progressive-era housing complex, the offices of a black media empire—and focuses on what Hewitt describes as the “notion of place,” which she tellingly couples with “the paranoia of displacement.”<sup>2</sup> Yet there are moments where the camera places the viewer in sites that are visual realizations of certain linguistic ideas. We see “amber waves of grain,” an “open door,” “stairs

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 Erwitt 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 Albrite,” 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 35 mm 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.

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## 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 *arkheion*, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 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 index, or direct physical imprint of this world.<sup>2</sup> It's through this filter that *Untitled (Structures)* reminds us that history is subjective, truth absolute.

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### Notes

1. The issue of intentionality versus effect is discussed in Michael Fried's book *Why Photography Matters: Art, 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).



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## COLLECTIVE STANCE

Leslie Hewitt and Bradford Young's installation, *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012, poses critical questions of the historicity of the archive and photojournalistic modes. Hewitt and Young's close examination of such matters through the exploration of architecture, still photography and body memory, moves away from nostalgia and re-enactment as conventions of image-making and towards a reflection on space, structure, and temporality. With its New York premiere at SculptureCenter, the architectural and spatial aspects of this two-channel installation are brought even further to the fore. Through the assertion of the work's contemporaneity, Hewitt and Young's project explores the tension between still photography and the cinematic experiences of moving images, between the past and the present, between the physical and the psychological. Hewitt and Young take from the archive an opportunity to focus on aspects of image construction, on spaces and places that hold both specific and collective memories, and how such images, and places, now exist in a contemporary moment. The three-screen installation *Stills*, 2016, Hewitt and Young's most recent collaboration, incorporates footage from their shoots (2010–2012), along with carefully inserted appropriated film leader from the late 1970s, exposing their experimental film influences and prompting their nuanced and structural approach. As with *Untitled (Structures)*, *Stills* calls attention to the physical experience of viewing and the social and political spaces of filmmaking.

In her photographs, sculptures, and the film installations produced in collaboration with Young, Hewitt pushes the limits of form to take on multiple meanings and considerations, from individual and collective relationships to memory, history and, ultimately, time. Her formal compositions often comprise fragments that produce the possibility of both seeing and experiencing in unexpected ways. The sculptural installation *Untitled*, 2012, employs the fold to turn from two dimensions to three in five sheet metal sculptures that define the space they occupy. The fold insists that there is no fixed perspective; no front or back, interior or exterior. As with the film installations, the body of the viewer is implicated and in motion. The work and the viewer are contemporaneous and coexistent.

In an era that has seen the complete dematerialization of the photographic gesture, Hewitt's work posits new considerations of “objecthood” within our image-saturated and hyper-mediated existence. To consider this work in the context of SculptureCenter feels particularly timely and critical.

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## ON LOCATION

After two years of research, which began in 2010, Leslie Hewitt and Bradford Young developed the film installation *Untitled (Structures)*, a series of short, silent (nonlinear) film vignettes that explores mid-twentieth-century photography, topographical, and psychological landscapes through a contemporary lens, exposing the tension between still photography and the cinematic experience of moving images. The following text is composed of excerpts from a series of informal conversations held between the creative team while on location in Chicago.

### Chicago

**Bradford Young:** Chicago is the home of my father. Though he raised my two sisters and me in Louisville, Kentucky, his heart never left the “Chi.” Fond memories of my childhood are tattooed on the broken sidewalks of South Side Chicago. For me Chicago is pain, Chicago is love, Chicago is a utopia, Chicago is a Mecca, Chicago is genesis, Chicago is apocalyptic, Chicago is home, Chicago is everything.

**Leslie Hewitt:** The traces of millions of bodies moving across time and space, searching for physical markers, searching for their existence in material terms. A threshold of data left in unexpected places, like the pattern that sunlight projects onto a wall or the moment captured in between breaths or the space between lovers' foreheads and the bridge of their noses as they stand adjacently to one another. These odd fragments, coordinates, or vignettes are part of the larger story. They are part of expanding this historical frame that is often focused on highly circulated images documenting outward displays of discontent. The collapsing of private and public spaces or worlds is perhaps our goal, isn't it?

### The Color Red

**LH:** Power is the color red. To wake up to that color each and every day, to feel the electricity it produces. Incredible, just incredible and unforgettable, red produces a sensation that requires action or movement. It is a color that vibrates next to certain blues or even greens or gray hues. We consistently encountered the intensity of red in Memphis at the First Baptist Church on Beale Street (set next to richly oiled cherry wood, gold leaf, and alabaster). And yet again, we encounter the viscerally charged color in one of the private rooms of Mr. John H. Johnson, which we experienced inside of the former Johnson Publishing Company Headquarters (this time set next to shimmering, reflective, and matte surfaces, all in hues of red). Surely much is conveyed through color. You can feel the intensity in every inch of your body.

**BY:** Red is dangerously unphotographable. It's one of those colors I photograph with great caution. If you overexpose the red layer of emulsion on a strip of film you will literally lose perceived focus across its one-dimensional plane. I remember when we encountered John H. Johnson's office for the first time I was struck by its power to repel, to push back. The red in that room was alive. What it showed me was that color harnesses intention. Its power to live, its meaning is fueled by intent. In movies I've used red as a color to create polarity between the majority and the marginalized, my people. John H. Johnson was harnessing a different set of rules, the proverbial, “If its too hot, don't stand in the kitchen.” His red was a warrior's creed, but that's what you need when you're the only brother on Michigan Avenue. It's a cold street.

### Abstraction

**BY:** It's returning to the raw unfiltered essence of who we are. It cuts right through the imposing reality of rigidity and frees us to feel before we know.

**LH:** How far can we push this? At what point can we push representations of reality into fields of color, light, and pure experience? Why can't the experience of seeing or the experience of being aware of sight and the meaning it produces be enough? We should expect more from the indexical nature of the photographic medium. We expect a narrative delivered in expected or known ways; we expect the logic of a caption or text to complete the triggers of representation set forth by the image. We desire facts and a kind of concreteness or trustworthiness that happen immediately. Why? Abstraction in photographic terms is all about patience.

### Metadata

**BY:** Hidden in plain sight, metadata is the continuous stream of culture that determines how work is constructed, how it is perceived, and how it is handled. Metadata is a reflection of our lineage.

**LH:** Packing each image, frame per frame, with details that are indiscernible to the naked eye—perhaps something else is achieved with this methodology. An aesthetic experience, bound by visual accuracy, that is not at all divorced from historical weight and affect. Cutting away excess information like surgeons with scalpels in hand, we moved through to the core of each image, finding a space for our distinct subjectivities. After laying it out bare, breaking down each image to an elemental state, we had to build, collage, and layer—again. It is sculptural: building an image, constructing and capturing *mediated* time. Every grain from each take transferred to every pixel is packed with information recorded for the purpose of building and expanding our sense of reality.

### Converging Lines

**LH:** I was often overwhelmed by the flatness of the photographic image, how its limits—the geometry of it—are often so very apparent to me. The border created by the square or the rectangle of a given image, this was what we were grappling with from the very beginning. The reality of beginning with blind spots, evidence of historical moments that are so extraordinarily breathtaking that initially we were blinded by conventions of formal beauty and the historical weight of stories we know from personal accounts that we were initially educated/socialized to accept. These interlaced narratives built up quickly in my unconscious, forging the necessity to strive to find a way to structure a visual experience in an effort to include such nuance, demanding a slow and steady course.

**BY:** The day I released my soul from finding the converging line in a frame is the day I broke an aesthetic shackle. Introducing tilt-shift lenses into our process was very liberating. This kind of introduction is Fanonian. It is a necessary and incremental step toward embracing the oblique and freeing ourselves from the rigidity of dogma. Once we free ourselves from the rules, we can revisit the converging line with liberated intentions. Case in point, we shot that magnificent hallway inside of 820 South Michigan Avenue (c. 1972–2011) because it spoke to us on a molecular level, not bound by preconceived notions of right and wrong conventions. Our ancestors fought too hard for that. ...

# UN-TITLED (STRUCTURES)



