

A shock to thought: Curatorial judgment and the public exhibition of ‘difficult knowledge’

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Abstract

Many institutions of social memory have moved away from a singular emphasis on affirming presentations of patriotism, triumph and great deeds toward an appreciation of the potential for aggression inherent in human relationships. The result has been a proliferation of practices of remembrance related to violence, loss and death, topics often characterized as ‘difficult knowledge’. This is amply illustrated within contemporary museum practices. Exhibitions commonly understood as offering ‘difficult knowledge’ have concerned not only histories of violent conflict and traumatic loss, but the aftermath of such. Despite this commonplace understanding, it remains important to consider what it is about such exhibitions that render them ‘difficult’ and what might be achieved by making these painful histories public. These questions are explored through a series of comparative studies of varying museum exhibitions that, while drawing from the same archive of images and documents, have presented them in different ways.

Keywords

curatorial judgment, difficult knowledge, museum exhibitions, pedagogy of remembrance

As we begin the second decade of the 21st century, the media through which cultural memory is enacted has become substantially complicated. Museums and galleries are situated in relation to cinema, television, radio, newspapers, books and internet websites as institutions of memory with a potential public role in constituting what members of any given society understand as their cultural heritage. Beyond presenting what has been institutionally designated as revered heritage, many of these institutions have begun to acknowledge that taking one’s historical inheritance seriously requires a commitment to critically engage a past that is both inspiring *and* despairing. Thus it is no surprise that over the last 30 years, many institutions of cultural memory have attempted to move away from a singular emphasis on affirming presentations of patriotism, triumph and great deeds toward a greater appreciation of the complexities, competing motivations and potential for aggression inherent in human relationships.

Cultural institutions have increasingly become willing to initiate practices of remembrance related to conflict, violence, loss and death, topics often characterized as ‘difficult knowledge’. This is amply illustrated in a consideration of contemporary museum practices. In this

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context, exhibitions commonly understood as offering 'difficult knowledge' have concerned not only histories of violent conflict and traumatic loss, but as well the consequent personal and social aftermath of such, embodied in and sustained by particular practices of cultural memory. Despite this commonplace understanding, it remains important to consider what it is about such exhibitions that render them 'difficult' and what might be achieved by making these painful histories public. To begin this discussion, I shall put aside for a moment a number of epistemological and political issues that have often sparked emotion-laden controversy regarding exhibitions of historical violence. Examples of such issues include disagreements over the historical adequacy and accuracy of an exhibit's narrative strategies and interpretative frame, the ethical problems associated with exhibiting ideologically charged or morally taboo artifacts, and the pedagogical and political consequences of the inevitable exclusions that any given exhibition enacts. Certainly such concerns are important and I will have to return to these and other similar concerns later on. However, I want to begin in a different vein, digging a bit deeper into what it is that might make the experience of engaging an exhibition a 'difficult' encounter.

One way an exhibition may be said to offer a difficult encounter is when it confronts visitors with significant challenges to their museological expectations and interpretive abilities. This may occur when an exhibition offers multiple, conflicting perspectives on historical events resulting in narratives whose conclusions remain complicated and uncertain. As a consequence, such an exhibition might require some visitors to re-think their expectations, demanding they complicate their desire for relatively straightforward and conclusive ways of telling a story. In the face of such a demand, a specific exhibition may be contested or refused while provoking degrees of anxiety, anger and disappointment. Somewhat differently, an exhibition might also be encountered as difficult if it is experienced as eliciting the burden of 'negative emotions', those vexing and troublesome feelings of revulsion, grief, anger and/or shame that histories can produce, particularly if they raise the possibility of the complicity of one's country, culture or family in systemic violence such as the seizure of aboriginal land, the slave trade or the perpetration of genocide. Finally, exhibitions may be judged as difficult if they evoke the heightened anxiety (and the potential for secondary traumatization) that accompanies feelings of identification with either the victims of violence, the perpetrators of such violence or those identified as bystanders passively acquiescent in regard to scenes of brutalization.

Evident in the above examples is the thought that what might be experienced as 'difficult knowledge' does not lie inherently within particular artifacts, images and discourses, nor the histories of those events to which these indexically refer. Rather the experience of difficulty resides in the problematic poietic relation between the affects provoked by engaging the sensory and discursively constituted *mise-en-scène* of an exhibition and the articulated sense possible within one's experience of this exhibit. In other words, at the heart of the matter regarding questions of difficult knowledge is the provocation of affect, that is, affect's relation to the possibilities of thought.¹ This means that what is particularly difficult about difficult knowledge comes to the fore when the affective force of an encounter provokes substantial problems in settling (at least provisionally) on the meaning and significance of the images, objects, texts and sounds encountered within an exhibition. In their explorations of what constitutes difficult knowledge, Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003) make it clear that what is difficult in representations of the experience of others is not only a matter of what histories are represented but also the prospect of 'encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge'. What Pitt and Britzman are referring to here are those moments when knowledge appears disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding. On such terms, what is difficult about historical knowledge associated with violence and conflict is not just that the materials exhibited elicit anger, horror and disgust, and judgments that past actions were shameful

and unjust. More to the point, what defines the difficulty in the encounters offered by exhibitions addressing violence and conflict is what happens in that moment when one receives the terrible gift that an exhibition enacts, when one comes face to face with the task of inheriting the troubling consequences of 'the otherness of knowledge' (Simon, 2006). Understood on these terms, difficulty happens when one's conceptual frameworks, emotional attachments, and conscious and unconscious desires delimit one's ability to settle the meaning of past events. In such moments one's sense of mastery is undone and correspondingly one may undergo an experience that mixes partial understanding with confusion and disorientation, the certainty of another's fear and suffering with one's own diffuse anxiety and disquiet.

To provide a better sense of what is at stake here, consider remarks drawn from the set of visitor comments written in response to engaging the exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America* presented at the Andy Warhol Museum (AWM) in the Fall of 2001.² Central to the *mise-en-scene* of this exhibition were a selection of images from the Allen and Littlefield collection of 140 photographs taken at lynchings held in the USA from 1880 to 1960 (an overwhelming number of which targeted African Americans). Not just clandestine acts witnessed in secret by a few, many lynchings during this period of US history were public events attended by scores of men, women and children. Often at these events, commercial photographers would appear and take photographs not only of the person(s) subjected to torture and death, but as well, the crowd who witnessed the spectacle. The photographs would then be sold as souvenirs, often in the form of picture postcards. It is the experience of viewing such photographs in the context of a contemporary museum exhibition that is being commented on in the following:

I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do when I leave here today. Things just can't go back to normal. I feel very sad when I look at the black faces hanging from those trees they look like my family, friends, people I see on the street everyday. What makes [me] more upset is to see those white faces, looking at the bodies with pride and accomplishment. Those white faces also look like the people I see on the street. (I'm very confused as what I should feel right now) PEACE. (AWM 92)

What I have been attempting to convey regarding the experience of 'difficulty' is evident in these comments. Clearly the writer is communicating a heightened affective intensity provoked in an encounter with images of violence and death. Read symptomatically, one can sense the spectral presence of the past co-mingling with the everyday surroundings and unconscious psychic life of the comment writer. This seems to have resulted in a loss of previously secured meanings and concomitantly a deeply felt set of uncertainties as to how to respond. In her consideration of such moments, Britzman (1998) has most intensely explored how the affects spawned by aspects of transference lead to a resistance to thought and a narrowing of what might be learned from such encounters. No doubt a disruptive affective force may be provoked by the sight of deadly violence, intensified not only by identifications bolstered by existing sets of social relationships, but, as well, unresolved psychic conflicts in one's own past. These considerations are clearly evident in the comment above, but there is something else at work as well, something that points us in a somewhat different direction, one that might usefully extend our discussion of difficult exhibitions and the implications of such for curatorial judgment.

The visitor's concluding comment, the orthographically marked, strongly underlined 'peace', is a word written under subjection to the force of the exhibition and cannot be read as simply as a conventional gesture of closing for a communication. It is offered simultaneously as a relational posture, a plea, moral injunction, a question and a hope for oneself. It is to be read as an over-determined response that suggests an inability to remain indifferent to what one has just seen.

Something must be done, though what it is, is not apparent. Most importantly, the ambivalence of this sign is a semiotic trace of an embodied situation in which as a consequence of visiting an exhibition, a person has become charged with an affect that is itself a force to thought, particularly to the extent to which this thought is that which seeks some alteration as a result of the witness that provoked it. I do not mean that this affect is only an epistemophilic desire to understand or make intelligible (i.e. to master) the violence and brutality one has just seen (although this desire may indeed be operative here as it is in many other similar responses). Differently, I want to suggest that this affect as a force to thought (and possibly action) is the first moment of what Stanley Cavell (2002) calls “acknowledgment” of another’s pain and what Emmanuel Levinas (1998) has understood as the responsibility inherent in the suffering for the suffering of others. In saying this, I am proposing we consider what it might mean to open our understanding of curating ‘difficult knowledge’ to the realization that the material rendered in an exhibition may elicit an affective force to thought, anchored in a responsibility not simply tied to issues of identification or culpability, but importantly to an a priori ethical responsibility rooted in the physical response to the suffering of another. It is in this respect that I am most concerned with the question of curatorial judgment and how the *mise-en-scène* of specific exhibitions contextualizes this affective force, impacting on the possibilities for thought that any given exhibition enacts. To take this idea further and ground it in the actualities of curatorial work, I will now turn to some of the specifics of a comparative study of exhibitions, reintroducing some of the epistemic and ethical issues I initially put aside.

Variations in the presentation of lynching photographs

The previously mentioned *Without Sanctuary* exhibition at the Warhol Museum was one of seven exhibitions held in the USA that presented images from the Allen and Littlefield collection. Rather than a single institution creating a traveling exhibition that would be more or less uniformly presented at different venues, various museums in the USA have drawn differently from this collection, staging and supplementing the presentation of selected photographs in, at times, quite dissimilar ways. These exhibitions of lynching photographs have attempted to render what were once viewed as tokens of racial dominance and superiority into socially instructive scenes documenting instances of historical injustice and shameful barbarity. All the exhibitions of these lynching photographs have assumed that, properly sited and presented, the rendition of these deeply troubling images enacts a valuable form of public pedagogy. Of course, such pedagogy is not without its questions. Even when it is done as a display of evidence, a demand for justice and/or a warning as to the horrendous consequences of racism, there is an anxiety associated with photography’s possible complicity in the production of sensationalism and exploitation of death, particularly racialized death. While defending the necessity of the public exhibition of the images from the Allen and Littlefield Collection, Dora Apel has exemplified this concern in recognizing that ‘the photos display the vulnerable black body and risk reproducing the prurient interest and humiliating effect of racist violence’ (Apel, 2004:2). Nevertheless Apel empathically defends the decision to exhibit the images arguing that ‘through the act of “bearing witness” to these photographs, the traumatic history they represent is re-framed through the shifted context of contemporary exhibitions, providing new insights into this deeply troubling part of American history and countering a demonstrated will to historical amnesia’.

Arguments such as Apel’s do not, however, dispel another form of skepticism regarding the consequences of viewing images of suffering. This disquiet is rooted in a suspicion that the act of viewing photographic images of suffering and death will be taken in itself as a sufficient act of ethical witness, sufficient as an act of historical repair requiring little further thought and action

(Reinhardt and Edwards, 2006: 8). Thus the concern that, after attending an exhibition of photographs from the Allen and Littlefield collection, viewers may feel they need to look no further to understand the events rendered by these photographs, that historical violence requires only a personal empathetic response, and that the calamity that has occurred has now passed with little remaining consequence for contemporary life. Such concerns indicate that much is at stake in regard to the exhibition practices within which lynching photographs are rendered in public view. Certainly, the exhibitions of lynching photographs held in the USA were intended to be more than social rituals wherein those possessing a consciousness of the history of racial injustice in America could gain some satisfaction by experiencing the grief and indignation provoked by viewing irrefutable documentary evidence of the horror of racism. On very different terms, these exhibitions were created as visual events that offered the possibility of provoking a witness that might substantially alter the continued existence of what it witnesses. Such provocation in part is addressed to a deep skepticism as to photography's capacity to arouse a moral impulse. This skepticism was eloquently articulated by Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography* (Sontag, 1977). However, 25 years later, Sontag had second thoughts. In the text *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) she wrote: 'Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say ... Don't forget' (Sontag, 2003: 115). In this later reframing of the problem of viewing images of suffering and death, Sontag understood such images as a form of 'invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, [and] to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering' (Sontag, 2003: 117). In this respect, she was beginning to attend to the circumstances and conditions that might form the basis for an effective invitation that initiates a relation between remembrance and thought, a problem quite central to my concerns here.

Such pedagogical aspirations clearly point to the need for curatorial work that provokes viewers to move through and beyond engaging the photographs as historical referents that denote the "who, what, where, and when" indexed by an image. The significance of these photographs does not just rest on what history they indexically signify, but how they might inhabit the present, becoming a force within which the images intertwine with the movement of one's thoughts and the concomitant possibilities one imagines for oneself and one's community. This force is felt as an encounter with an immanent dynamism moving from image to viewer with indeterminate yet potentially significant effects. This means that the force of a photograph needs to be considered in relation to what images do to us. Caught in an image's gaze, the force of this gaze works affectively and not simply in terms of the legibility of its way of in-scripting aspects of a past event. The idea that photographic images may embody vitality and hence do things to us remains an important topic of consideration in regard to the relation of images and memory studies. This has been so ever since Roland Barthes presented his notion that a photographic image has the potential to register more than it is meant to denote. In this respect, Barthes argued for the notion of the punctum, an indeterminate aspect of a photograph tied to the movement of time and certainty of death, with the potential to disrupt the settling of an image into a clear comprehension of its representation (Barthes, 1980). While the force of an image under discussion here has clear affinities with Barthes's punctum, it is not tied solely to imperative of death but rather is linked to a felt encounter with loss and the various disruptive, often conflicting desires this initiates. While the affective consequence of the force of an image is no guarantee of its ethical and political consequences (as indeterminate, it might elicit evasion or a passive voyeurism and hence not operate as what Brian Massumi (2002) might call 'shock to thought'), without such a force, the photographs of concern here risk the death of their own vitality if they are solely rendered as artifacts illustrative of a museum's authoritative narrative.

In this sense, it is not just the histories grasped as a result of viewing such photographs that matter; it is also the implications of the affective legacies physically experienced in this visual encounter. This is not just a matter of collateral emotional damage. That the *Without Sanctuary* photographs were often colloquially described as ‘shocking’ is an inadequate but still telling indication that the public presentation of these difficult images rendered a presence that cast forward a force whose very tactility is embodied in a felt intensity, an indeterminate affective potentiality to compel various possible forms of thought.

While I wish to hold open for a while the question of the character of this compulsion and what in this context is meant by ‘thought’, at this point I simply want to underscore the museological importance of Deleuze’s insight that: ‘More important than thought there is “what leads to thought” ... impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think’ (Deleuze, 2000: 95). The value of this insight is that it opens up an enquiry as to the different ways affect may ‘lead to thought’, thus setting the stage for a comparative consideration of the various exhibition *mises-en-scène* that organize and order the public presentation of what is experienced as ‘difficult knowledge’. As I will show, this allows us to ask the important questions as to how curatorial judgment is implicated in the containing, channeling and disciplining of the movement and substance of the relation between affect and thought. Such explorations go to the heart of contemporary considerations regarding public history and museology, considerations that undo the autonomy of the images or artifacts and emphasize the dependency of such objects on the conditions of presentation (Bal, 2010). To provide a more concrete sense of such considerations, I will now turn to some specific contrasting exhibition scenarios.

The fact that there have been multiple *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions that have drawn differently from the same archival source has provided the opportunity to explore variations in how specific museums have pursued the practice of selecting and representing photographs from the Allen and Littlefield collection. In this regard, I and my research team have been carrying out an in-depth study of the differences between the exhibitions presented at the Chicago Historical Society (CHS) and the AWM. We have collected detailed documentation of both exhibitions, interviewed museum staff and considered hundreds of visitor response records. While the analysis of this material is taking form as a book length monograph (Simon and Teather, n.d.), all that can be provided in this text is a brief sketch of the differing ways lynching photographs were presented at the AWM and the CHS.

The *Without Sanctuary* exhibition at the AWM opened on 21 September 2001. Entering the exhibit hall one faced text explaining the provenance of the images displayed and a justification for doing so. Also provided was a brief definition of lynching and the importance of its history to the experience of African Americans. Beyond these text panels was a gallery space displaying 92 images, all from the Allen and Littlefield collection. The photographs/postcards were placed in black frames with a large black mat, and hung at eye level on muted cream walls with lighting providing what museum personnel considered a ‘somber and intimate space’. The collection was sequenced by the date of the lynching pictured in each photograph. However, where one started viewing images was indeterminate and, therefore, there was no specific path that structured a visitor’s movement. This gallery also included several table cases for pamphlets and other ephemera. Leaving the display of the photographs, visitors encountered a very large detailed timeline of African American history indicating various moments of struggle, progress and achievement. Subsequent to this were a series of rooms providing supplemental information on various forms of anti-lynching activism as well as a contemporary visual collage by a local artist responding to the theme of the exhibition. There was substantial space for public discussion of the exhibition via

written comments, video comments and open dialogues as well as abundant information regarding various contemporary social justice projects.

When CHS opened its *Without Sanctuary* exhibition in June 2005 the gallery space was over double that at the AWM, yet in displaying only 55 lynching postcards and photographs, the CHS presented just over half the number of images that had been presented at the AWM. At the entrance to the exhibit were images and text not only explaining the purpose of presenting the history entailed in the exhibit, but also linking this history to the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a significant event within the history of the American Civil Rights Movement. Entering the exhibit space, visitors moved through an extended narrative presenting lynching as a historically situated form of systemic violence against African Americans. Quite differently from the AWM, the CHS exhibition began with images and text telling the story of a particular lynching, that of William James in Cairo, Illinois in 1909. Following from this, the exhibition was organized into various sections using substantial wall text to provide a context for the images. These sections included explanations of what constituted a lynching, an account of lynching photography and the way lynching operated as a form of terror, information as to who were in the mobs that perpetrated lynching, and a concluding section that recognized that other minorities besides African Americans were also lynched. Moving on, one encountered a memorial space offering a respite from the intensity of viewing the photographs. This space contained a semi-circular wall on which was written the names of 500 lynching victims. Extending further into the exhibit was a display of artifacts and memorabilia referencing anti-lynching activism. The final section was devoted to the memory of Emmett Till and included photographs of Till, his funeral in Chicago and artist sketches made during the trial of those accused of his murder. Just before the exit to the exhibit was a small space allotted for visitors to write comments and where one could take a memorial card on which had been printed the name of a person who had been lynched.

To further contrast the two exhibitions, there was a significant difference in the number of photographs used where victims were unidentified. At the AWM, victims were unidentified in 21 of 92 photographs displayed (nearly 1 in 5) while at the CHS there were only 4 of 55 (less than 1 in 10) that were unidentified. Furthermore, the labeling at each museum was substantially different. Consider the labels for the photograph entitled *The lynching of Rubin Stacy, July 19, 1935, Fort Lauderdale, Florida*. At the AWM, under this title appeared the following:

Onlookers, including four young girls. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm.), In the Allen Littlefield Collection at Special Collections at Woodruff Library, Emory University.

At the CHS, the following appeared:

After he allegedly assaulted a white woman, the police arrested Ruben Stacy and slated him for transfer to the Dade County Jail in Miami. According to Deputy Virgil Wright, more than 100 masked men overpowered his deputies during the transfer. The mob seized Stacy, shot him and hung him from a roadside tree, and continued to riddle his body with bullets. According to the *New York Times*, subsequent investigation revealed that Stacy, a homeless tenant farmer, had gone to a house to ask for food. The woman became frightened and screamed when she saw Stacy's face. The number of young witness participants at Stacy's lynching is almost as troubling as this unjust murder. Capturing the disconcerting tone of this photograph, James Weldon Johnson describes the epidemic of the lynching of African Americans as a 'problem saving Black America's body and white America's soul.' The NAACP later used this photo in their anti-lynching propaganda.

The exhibitions presented by these institutions gave a very different weight to the visual history manifest in the Allen and Littlefield collection resulting from divergent 'solutions' to the problems of displaying this 'difficult' material. At the CHS, it was decided that the exhibition would require substantial historical context for the limited number of photographs presented, many of which would serve as documents in regard to the rendering of personal stories of victimization. As the exhibition curator put it:

We chose those images where there were stories we could tell. If you notice, there are very few [photographs we chose to exhibit] where there is nothing known about the person who's been lynched. At first we were thinking about using more images, but we didn't want people to become overwhelmed. ...

We wanted to give people enough where they would understand that this was an epidemic but not so much that it just becomes exploitative in that you're just showing death to be showing death.³

In a different vein, at the AWM the decision was taken to minimize context in order to maximize the act of closely looking at the photographs. The assumption was that reducing labeling and other explanatory text would intensify the affective experience of confronting the actuality of these photographs. The museum's Assistant Director for Education and Interpretation was well that aware this approach might be seen as problematic. She admitted, 'we definitely had criticism that there wasn't enough information to contextualize the images, and on one level, you do need this in order to have the story'. She argued: 'Yet, at times, the historical context creates safety buffers and so in a way having that kind of very intense visual and emotional experience, perhaps [avoided creating such buffers].'⁴

A shock to thought

As I argued above, at stake in these instances of the contemporary exhibition of lynching photographs is the very basic question of how those responsible for presenting such exhibitions might reframe a selected set of images so that they function to contest the very purposes for which they were taken in the first place, purposes perhaps still resonant with certain aspects of contemporary life. In both instances, each institution recognized that the contemporary exhibition of lynching photographs was not just a matter of the public presentation of historical documents but also a practice of rendition that returned a presence felt as a potentially overpowering heteronomic force. In justifying the exhibition at the Chicago Historical Society, the then Director of the CHS, explained that his intent was not to 'embarrass, cause pain, or be unpatriotic', but rather to recognize that these 'shocking, unimaginable images reveal much about the terror and lawlessness that shaped race relations in America in the 19th and 20th centuries', thus '*forcing us* [my emphasis] to confront a shameful part of our history, a part many of us would rather forget'.

The question remains: how then might we conceive of this force and its consequences? If the photographs were felt as a 'shock to thought', on what terms might such a shock be conceived as a force that compels thought rather than a traumatic disruption that leads to the extended abandonment of thought? And to return to a question posed earlier, if the photographs were felt as a shock to thought, what forms of thought became manifest and how might these be shaped in part by the *mise-en-scène* in which the photographs appeared? Much like the comment read earlier, more than one visitor to the *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions reported leaving the exhibit in a highly agitated state feeling that they should think more deeply or do something productive as a result of viewing the photographs, not knowing, however, what could possibly be adequate to such felt responsibilities.

The last thing organizers of the *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions intended was for visitors to leave with the sense that seeing these photographs served little purpose because they were images of past events that one could do nothing to change, images of suffering that one could barely imagine and that one was in no position to rectify.

All versions of the *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions attempted to render these moments of suffering and dying as a felt presence that claimed one's attentiveness and demanded one's acknowledgment. The public display of lynching photographs brought forth a spectral presence that was exposed and embodied through the rendition of a disfigured human singularity subjected to the violent hands of those pictured as celebrants at the scene of death. As Jean Luc Nancy put it, rendered here 'is not, presence pure and simple; *not* the immediacy of the being-posed-there, but rather, that which draws presence out of this immediacy insofar as it puts a value on presence *as* some presence or another' (Nancy, 2005: 36). The value exposed through the presence rendered by these images is not just that grasped in the moment of recognition of an objective depiction of suffering, but includes the tactile impact or force felt as the sensation that accompanies the exposure to the rendition of a person undergoing extreme degradation and pain. In this sense, the photograph exhibitions under discussion here are as much transactive as they are communicative. As Jill Bennett (2005: 36) helpfully observes 'images have the capacity to address a viewer's own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event' depicted. In this respect, the photographic image of a lynching has the potential to register more than it is meant to denote. This 'more' is not just a felt loss (of individual life, of the adequacy of a known history, of a trust in uprightness of the nation), but a felt responsibility that one cannot remain indifferent when faced with the pain of another. In this sense, such a photograph is not just to be understood as a representation of the world but a visual perlocution that registers and produces sensation. This is affect, not as opposed to thought, but as a possible means through which a claim is made on a viewer to both acknowledge the pain of another *and* begin the thought required to come to terms with the felt presence of that pain in the present. The affective force brought forth in the violent images of lynching do not simply interpellate the already morally predisposed viewer as a particular kind of subject (expressing horror at the act of racial violence, sympathy for the victims and outrage for its perpetrators), but rather it instantiates a tactile connection that, *despite who we are*,⁵ bodily impacts on us. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that all viewers of such images respond to the pain of another with the same empathic concern. Clearly, issues of personal history and the dynamics of identification will be implicated in this response. However, it would be a mistake to too quickly move to a concern with accounting for individual 'audience responses'. It is important to understand that the response to images of suffering addressed here is not limited to the dynamics of identification with people now dead, but exists at that moment when the rendition of the disfigurement of another is felt bodily as a deep disturbing anxiety. To respond to this presence is both to acknowledge past injustice *and* the continuing affective heritage of the lynching photographs. On such terms, *the consequences of seeing the lynching photographs cannot be determined in advance*; it is uncertain as to the substance of the thought that will be provoked. Nevertheless, central here is the realization that violent images of lynching are not just 'shocking' but also compelling in that they require an acknowledgment of another's pain that might lead to some yet to be decided thought and action commanded by the felt experience of viewing the photographs. Provoked by the rendition of historical documentation, this thought and action can be performatively understood as a continuous negotiation with (and in) the present in regard to an indeterminate link to the past.

Such negotiation needs to be directly connected to the exercise of curatorial judgment and to do this I want to say a few things about the range of activities that are included in my notion of 'curatorial practice'. On my terms, curatorial practice encompasses a very broad set of activities that

define the discursive and affective framing of any given presentation of combinations of images, objects, text and sound. Against the grain of institutional arrangements that hive off curatorial work from education and marketing departments, when I write here of curatorial practice what I am referring to are judgments such as: the selection of what is to be shown, the placement of these in space, the creation of the textual environment that will inscribe that space and the materials in it (including such texts as object or image labels, brochures, press releases, etc.), and the 'programming' immanent to what appears in that space understood as deliberate provocations that stimulate people to simultaneously interact with the material aspects held by this space *and* with each other. On such terms, curatorial practice is inherently pedagogical with much of the substance of the pedagogy at work in any given exhibition determined by the exercise of curatorial judgment. It is at this point that I can now make clear the substance of my assertion that curatorial practice is central to how we might think of the relation of affect and thought. If the sensory intensity initiated by the experienced image (experienced in the event-bound act of looking) is to be reflectively attended to by the one who looks, how this intensity is brought into consciousness, how it is named, understood and assessed as to its significance has much to do with the curatorial judgments that have concretely composed and therefore framed an exhibition as an image-event.

The exhibitions at the AWM and CHS were image-events that attempted to couple affect and thought while endeavoring to restrict the indeterminacy of this relationship within the terms offered through specific exhibition logics. At the CHS the force of the image was restrained (but not finally contained) by the extensive text offering both a historiography of lynching in America and a series of '*petite histoires*' that rendered intelligible individual narratives of racial violence. The extensive text employed by the CHS made it possible to read one's way through the exhibition enabling visitors to both look and look away at the same time. The risk taken at the CHS was manifest in the creation of a visual event in which the photographic images could fade into historical knowledge channeling the affective force of the images on to an un-reflexive memorialization of those subjected to a tragic injustice. The possible jeopardy was the disregard of how the visual composition of the images themselves might give pause to consider the contemporary significance of the circumstances of the production and circulation of the photographs as photographs. Arguably, at the AWM the affective force of the images of lynching was heightened by the minimal historical context provided. Standing in the photograph gallery at the AWM, it was much more difficult to both look and look away. Yet it was quite clear that much work was done at the museum to restrain the indeterminacy of the affect provoked by these images and channel these sensations into affirmations of the struggle against racial discrimination. Inadvertently, perhaps, the restraint of this indeterminacy also produced the risk that by enjoining individuals to virtuous behavior, this might be accompanied by a looking away from the singular photographs of lynching focusing instead on the personal actions one might take to fight racism. The possible unanticipated consequence of this would then be a short-circuiting of the thought provoked by an attentiveness to 'the way of seeing' offered in the photographs. The photographs of lynching from the Allen and Littlefield collection are not only documents of events that have happened in a certain place and time, but also bear witness to modes of encountering the world that are deeply problematic. While these archival photographs may seem to offer a practice of looking that appears foreign or even unimaginable, what is worth considering is if they are more closely related to 'ordinary', contemporary positions of engagement than their contents seem to suggest. Mobilized differently, the affect-thought coupling consequent with viewing the lynching photographs might otherwise consider how such 'inconceivable' ways of seeing resonate with modes of perception complicit with the foundational relations responsible for much of the present-day problems of racial inequality.

Hamburg Institute for Social Research – Crimes of the Wehrmacht

What is at issue in the two risks articulated above can be further discussed in the relation to two recent exhibitions presented by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) in Hamburg. The first of these, *War of Extermination: Crimes of Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944* opened in 1995 and subsequently appeared in 33 cities in Germany and Austria until, in response to controversy, it was suspended in 1999. Based on archival photographs not previously shown in public, the exhibition presented evidence of extensive war crimes committed by ordinary German soldiers serving on the Eastern Front during the Second World War. The intention of the ISR was to confront the treasured image of the German army as fighting a difficult war, but one guided by military – and not racist and inhumane – principles. For this reason, the exhibition offered many images that documented an army that was complicit, and often an active agent, in a program of extermination. While the exhibition gave rise to an extremely intense national controversy, my concern here is not so much the controversy itself or the larger question of post-war German memory, but the exhibition's particular use of photography. This first exhibition employed over 1400 photographs, many taken as personal mementoes. In a substantial number of these photographs, soldiers and their comrades were present in the images – laughing, triumphant or business-like, and cold while fulfilling acts of humiliation, incarceration and murder. The most controversial curatorial decision in regard to the display of these photographs was to place a large number of them in thematic groupings without labels for individual images. These groupings were labeled by the activities depicted in the photographs making up each group: tormenting Jews, the operation of gallows, shooting operations, deportations, etc. Some of these photographs were placed on curved display walls whose negative space defined a large Iron Cross (the medal for bravery and honor awarded to German soldiers since 1813). Curator Hannes Heer stated that the exhibition was intended to “block the work of forgetting” and “immortalize” [the] death[s] caused by the Wehrmacht's extensive involvement in the Nazi war of annihilation’ (Tymkiw, 2007).

Bernd Hüppauf has argued that the visual power of the images in this ISR exhibition greatly contributed to a process that was changing the German collective memory of the Second World War: ‘freeing its history from the isolation and disciplinary constraints of conventional historiography given a new concern with images, especially the photographic image’ (Hüppauf, 1997: 6). It was just on these terms that the exhibition was accused of irresponsibly creating the general impression that all German soldiers had been criminals. The controversy that ultimately led the ISR to suspend the exhibition was centered on charges that the exhibit misrepresented (or, some suspected, even fabricated) the photographs on view. While these accusations were directed at a very small number of the images, the public controversy engendered threw in to question credibility of the entire exhibit (and its sponsoring institution). It was under these circumstances that the ISR suspended the exhibition and appointed an independent commission to assess what errors (if any) had been committed in its production. While the commission absolved the exhibit organizers of forgery, they did criticize the exhibition for its intellectual sloppiness and lack of historical rigor. Faced with this report, ISR Director Jan Phillip Reemtsma ordered the exhibition redone. A new curatorial team was appointed and subsequently, in 2001, a completely new exhibition opened entitled: *Crimes of the Wehrmacht: Dimensions of Wars of Extermination 1941–1944*.

Taking up twice the space of its predecessor, the new exhibition contained considerably more text but only 450 photographs. Gone was the use of the Iron Cross as a display space, utilized instead were a large number of individualized glass booths presenting documents and text. Within the revised exhibition logic, photographs functioned primarily as denotative illustrations of the principal message supplied by text. Only 10 percent of the photographs that appeared in the first exhibition were present in the second and all images were individually labeled and accompanied

by a large amount of contextual information – mostly in the form of written documents. The smaller role ascribed to photography was a result of a more rigorous historiography that required extensive cross-checking in regard to identifying the content of any given image as well as the desire of the new curators to provide contextual information for all the photographs shown. A further shift in emphasis occurred so that the new set of presented documents and text narrowed the focus of criminality primarily to German officers, rather than all soldiers.

Both ISR exhibitions argued that the Wehrmacht was involved as an organization in the crimes perpetrated in the course of the war on the Eastern Front and that the war itself, taken as a whole, was criminal. However, it is obvious they did this in very different ways. Reflecting on the entire experience of presenting the two exhibitions, Reemstma (2004) wrote that although the first exhibition showed much of the reality of the war of annihilation, forcing people to think and ask questions (about perpetrators and witnesses, about those who photographed what they saw), ultimately this exhibition could not answer the questions that were being asked. While implicitly acknowledging the affective force to thought of the first exhibition, Reemstma concludes that this force was problematic given that the exhibition could not properly channel the thinking it helped initiate. In other words, in his view, the affective force of images of atrocities needed to be contained by the demands of proper historiography. It is not surprising therefore that Reemstma concluded the second exhibition ‘took up the problem the first exhibit initiated and rectified it as far as possible’. Responding to the criticism that the second exhibition was tantamount to a ‘walk-in book’, he wrote: ‘is that really an objection? The only question is whether the book has, in fact, been walked into and read’ (Reemstma, 2004).

What Reemstma’s remarks convey is that the redeployment of photographs within the exhibition logic of the second exhibit involved more than ensuring that the images shown could be reliably offered as documentary evidence in support of a particular historical narrative. In the service of producing an exhibit as a historiographic argument, one that was as clear and well documented as possible, the redeployment of images was seen as a necessary attempt to contain the indeterminate affective legacy of the souvenir atrocity photographs. Given the intent of the second ISR exhibit, this need not necessarily be construed as a problem. However, as in the case of the CHS and AWM exhibitions of the *Without Sanctuary* photographs, the ISR strategy was not without its risks. One of the risks of the second ISR exhibition was the fading of photographs into historiography. In such a circumstance, images are to be read as documentary evidence of criminal actions taken by the German army, forgetting the conditions facilitating the operation of what Didi-Huberman (2003) calls the photographic *dispositif*. There is little question that the second ISR exhibition did its best to minimize not just the horror of the atrocities depicted but also the horror of the gaze through which they were recorded. Whether in the context of the public rendition of photographs of atrocities committed by the German Army on the Eastern Front or of photographs of atrocities committed by white racist mobs in the USA, when public history is practiced through such forms of visual pedagogy, it is crucial to consider not only what a photograph means, but also what the public presentation of a photograph may do. This requires not only a rigorous historiographic method for the treatment of photographs as documents, but a way of thinking that grasps how the visual perlocution performed by a display of photographs is structured by practices of exhibition through which their images come into view.

Photographs from S-21/facing death

To extend the reach of my argument a bit further, there is one further set of contrasting exhibitions that I want to consider: the various differing exhibitions of photographs taken at the Cambodian Khmer Rouge S-21 detention and torture center that operated between 1975 and 1979. Of the

14,000 people who arrived at S-21, only seven are known to have survived. All prisoners were photographed on arrival. When the Vietnamese entered Phnom Penh in 1979 and discovered S-21 and evidence of its bloody history, they converted its buildings into a genocide museum. In the process, the negatives of the photographs taken when the center was in operation were discovered, cleaned, cataloged, printed and exhibited on-site in the new museum. In the mid-1990s two US photographers, Chris Riley and Douglas Niven, were granted the rights to 100 of these images, which they chose for their photographic quality, historical value and accurate cross-section presentation of victims.⁶ The stipulation was that they had permission to print six sets, produce a book of the images⁷ and to facilitate the exhibition of the photographs outside of Cambodia.⁸ While these images have been exhibited in many locations in North America and Europe,⁹ of interest here are those moments when curatorial staff at specific venues made their own judgments as to which photographs would be shown and in what manner.

From 15 May to 30 September 1997, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented an exhibition entitled *Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979*. Displaying just 22 of the 100 images available for exhibition outside of Cambodia, the photographs were printed in a 10 × 10 in. format hung equidistant from each other at eye level on three walls of a small space within the museum's photography galleries. In the middle of the exhibition were two small sofas with a coffee table between them on which were placed several copies of the book of S-21 photographs published by Riley and Niven, other publications displaying photography from the museum's permanent collection, and a comment book for visitor responses. There were no labels accompanying individual prints. Thus the individuals portrayed in each photograph were left unidentified and the photographer was listed as unknown. Introducing the exhibition was a brief wall text outlining the purpose of the detention center, Niven and Riley's work in Cambodia in aid of preserving the memory of S-21, and the funding sources for the image preservation project and the exhibition itself.¹⁰

In marked contrast, from 19 September to 7 November 1997 the Photographic Resource Centre (PRC) at Boston University presented a differently entitled exhibition: *Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia's Killing Fields*. This exhibition presented all 100 images available for display. Most important to note about this exhibition is what was added to supplement the photographs. This included a map that located Cambodia in Southeast Asia, a brochure providing basic historical and geographic information about the country and a bibliography that one could use to learn more about the events of which the images were a part. The gallery also continuously presented a BBC documentary on Riley and Niven's photo archive project that had been produced when the work of cleaning and cataloguing the negatives was underway in Phnom Penh. This video provided an explanation of not only the origin of the photographs and how they had been preserved, but also how the photographs came to be shown in North America. It included interviews with people who had worked at S-21 under the Khmer Rouge as well as the recollections of people who had lost family members there. Quotations from an S-21 interrogators' manual were enlarged and displayed as wall text. Also on the wall was a reprint of a newspaper story about Nhem Ein, the S-21 photographer. In this story, Nhem Ein offered an explanation of how he came to be the one who took the images as well as an account of his experience working for the Khmer Rouge. Conjointly with the exhibition, the PRC also exhibited large-format platinum prints of Cambodia's Angkor temples built between the 11th and 13th centuries. As these two exhibitions were in close proximity to each other, this allowed visitors to move from the S-21 mug shots to the serenity of the temple photographs. It is also worth noting that, unlike the MoMA, the PRC contacted Cambodian community organizations in the greater Boston area to invite them to the show.

As is evident from this comparison of the MoMA and PRC exhibitions, the S-21 photographs have been presented with considerable variation as to how the images have been supplemented by

text, additional images and objects. Much like the various *Without Sanctuary* and *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibitions, the contrasting S-21 exhibitions offer much to think about with regard to how images produced by perpetrators of systemic violence and death might be rendered for contemporary public display. In this respect, it is the MoMA exhibition that has drawn the most commentary, much of it deeply critical of this choice of venue in which to display the images as well as the problematic minimal historical contextualization within the exhibition's *mise-en-scène*. As Lindsay French argued: 'if the historical context of these objects/photographs is what gives them their particular power and significance, curators working with them ignore this at their peril ... The less the audience knows about a topic, the greater the responsibility the curator has to inform' (French, 2002: 149). Within this perspective, and in specific contrast to the PRC exhibit, French condemned the MoMA exhibition as an essentializing production that misrepresented particular people, distancing and universalizing their experiences through an aestheticizing objectification.

However, this preference for a curatorial responsibility that underscores the referential, evidential meaning of the S-21 photographs cannot be left as the final word on the MoMA exhibition. While it is certainly important to critique this exhibition in regard to its failure to place the photographs within a history that demands to be grasped in its full contextual complexity, still to be reckoned with is the quite intense visual experience that this exhibition seemed to offer so many of its visitors. Surely curatorial judgment in relation to the exhibition of the S-21 images also needs to take into account the power of these images to disturb, to effect an agitation that provokes viewers to not only think about the circumstances of their making but as well to consider the significance of the fact that they remain deeply troubling today. Thus it is important to consider various exhibition *mises-en-scène* devised to work with the affective legacies of these images, resisting their singular reduction to documents whose significance reside in their substantiation of juridical or historiographic narratives. To illustrate one possible conversation on this theme, consider for a moment what it is about S-21 photographs that distinguish them from the photographs previously discussed. First of all, there is no overt violence depicted in these images. Not knowing that each person in a photograph is soon to be executed, each of the S-21 photographs might be appreciated as one in a series of compelling, somewhat unnerving portraits (more than once they have been said to recall the portraiture work of Richard Avedon). Second (and relatedly), there is little question that many viewers have judged these images to have an aesthetic aura not present in the abject lynching photographs or those taken as souvenir photographs by soldiers in the German Army. It is interesting to note that in an interview conducted at the time that he and Riley were amassing the photographs for exhibition, Douglas Niven remarked that 'even though they were of horrible subject matter, with horrible histories', he and Riley saw 'the possibility of making beautiful photographs' from the negatives they helped restore (I-Jong, 1995:96, 98). Niven is not the only person who has commented on the aesthetic character of Nhem Ein's photographs. Such a characterization remains deeply controversial and it is not my intent to enter into this controversy here. Rather, what I want to emphasize is the importance of not just acknowledging aesthetic force of these images, but of thinking through how this force might be implicated in the affective intensity provoked by their public rendition in galleries and museums. Helpful here is Thierry De Duve's writings on the implications of the S-21 MoMA exhibition as well as the exhibition of S-21 photographs presented at the 1997 version of the photography festival *Les Rencontre Photographiques d'Arles* (De Duve, 2008). Unhinged by the affective intensity he experienced viewing the photographs at Arles, De Duve had been thinking through the implications of the experience for over a decade. Given his clear awareness of the historical significance of the photographs, in an article in the journal *October* published in 2008, De Duve writes of the exhibition at Arles, 'the moral responsibility I felt I had

vis-à-vis these images entailed a refusal and a rejection of the aesthetic feelings they yielded. Of course, this couldn't be done, because aesthetic feelings are involuntary.' Interestingly, it was the impossibility of rejecting the aesthetic feelings evoked by the photographs that made the exhibition unbearable for De Duve. It was when De Duve figured out how to view the photographs in a way that embraced this tension, that he found a way of coming to terms with his experience. Moving through a sense of individuality 'draped in a generic humanism', he had to 'address each photo, each person in the photos, individually' from within his aesthetic response before he could 'acknowledge receipt of their gaze as if it were addressed to him in person'. As he writes, 'only then did the people in the photos rise from the dead, and only then did this unbearably controversial exhibition acquire its true legitimacy', its spectres inhabiting the present and entwining with contemporary concerns (De Duve, 2008).

What De Duve's remarks might mean for the question of curatorial judgment is, I think, clearly indicated by the following exhibition framework offered by Mark Kramer, Exhibits Coordinator at the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis.¹¹ Kramer was responsible for an S-21 photograph exhibition at the University of Minnesota in 2001 and he graciously shared his curatorial framework in the context of an email correspondence. Rejecting placing the photographs in a single line, what he called the dreaded 'bathtub ring' installation, Kramer felt that to give any power to the installation, the 100 faces needed to be seen as a whole. Thus he hung the photos in five rows of 20 photographs each, or a grid of 5 high $\times$ 20 wide. The photos were framed in black frames and white mats, allowing them to stand out in sharp contrast with a deep – almost black – gray painted wall. There were no spaces between the frames so the photographs created a solid rectangle of faces. Kramer explain his *mise-en-scène* as follows:

I thought the power of the subject was best portrayed by seeing all 100 faces at once. It was possible to see them individually; the photos were large enough that it was still possible to see each face clearly. What my design provided was a chance to see each in the context of all. It was analogous to hearing one voice or a hundred at once.

What I don't know is whether Kramer was aware that his *mise-en-scène* was remarkably similar to that presented by curator Christian Caujolle in 1997 in Arles. In both cases the curators provided *mise-en-scène* that did not simply concern what worlds of meaning an exhibition provided but as well how it is that exhibitions may stage events that support the indeterminate provocation of affect and its movement into thought.

Conclusion

The question remains as to what would justify a visual practice of public history in which one renders images of violent conflict and traumatic loss. To speak here of the courage to (and responsibility of) witness is not nearly enough. To claim that we owe the dead our witness simply avoids the question as to what would constitute an adequate practice of witnessing. Contemporary ethics would have us attempt to guard against reducing another's suffering to imaginative or quite real versions of our own, by critically attending to the inescapable failure of comprehension that is always a component of ethical witness. Yet Theodor Adorno reminds us that 'even the most radical reflection of the mind on its own failure is limited by the fact that it remains only reflection, without altering the existence to which its failure bears witness' (Adorno, 2003:160). To witness in a manner that opens the possibility of altering the existence of that to which it bears witness requires

a dialectical coupling of affect and thought, implicating the self in the practice of coming to terms with the substance and significance of history. Exhibitions are events that can stage such a possibility. Nonetheless, because the consequences of the affective force of an image are indeterminate, there are pedagogical (and political) risks associated with the practice of exhibition. With this recognition, we might commence a conversation wherein we explore how it is that exhibitions of photographs (and other documents) not only provide social signs but also elicit non-specific affective intensities with the potential to provoke thought. It is at this point we can begin to consider how the lines of movement of such thought are made and how such movement may be framed (but not over-determined) by the curatorial judgments that fashion the concrete substance of an image-event. It is through these conversations that we might attain a better understanding of what is gained and lost in such pedagogies of provocation and containment, for it is such understanding that will determine much of what might be made of the affective legacies ingrained in the 'difficult' visual histories of our contemporary world.

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Notes

1. The position that there is a potential productive relation between affect and thought is relatively new to discussions of documentary photography. Rather, affect is often understood as undercutting the possibility of thought. In a well-cited essay, Alan Sekula writes that 'the genre has contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy, and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world' (Sekula, 1984: 57). For a quite different understanding of the possible relation between affect and thought see (Bennett, 2005).
2. This comment is included in the documentation my research team and I collected it as part of a comparative study of museum exhibitions displaying photographs from the Allen and Littlefield collection.
3. Interview, CHS, April 15, 2006.
4. Interview, AWM, 21 May 2006.
5. The force felt when viewing these images is not to be understood as over-determined by conscious or unconscious forms of identification.
6. Photo Archive Group, n.d. Cited in Hughes (2003).
7. The book *Killing Fields* was published in 1996 by Twin Palms Press (the same publisher of the book version of the *Without Sanctuary* photographs). It contained 79 of the 100 photographs, a short history of Tuol Sleng and the Khmer Rouge revolution, and a memoir by one of the prison's seven survivors.
8. Chris Riley is quoted as saying: 'We thought the images were powerful and spoke with a kind of directness about people's experiences under the Khmer Rouge. But so few people go to Phnom Penh and visit the Tuol Sleng Museum themselves. Our goal was to get the pictures out into the world, to enable more people to see them, and perhaps be inclined to learn something more about Cambodia' (French, 2002: 134).
9. Among the extensive number of sites where exhibitions of the Tuol Sleng prints have been presented are the Museum of Modern Art, the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography, the University of California at Riverside's California Museum of Photography, The Frederick Weisman Museum of Art, the University of Minnesota, the Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco, the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, the Museum of Design in Zurich, the Museet for Fotokunst in Odense (Denmark), the Australian Center for

- Photography in Sydney, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa, the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles (France), and the Parc de la Villette in Paris.
10. The wall text provided a brief history of Cambodia 1975–79. It read ‘When the Communist party, the Khmer Rouge, seized power in April 1975, Cambodia had just concluded five years of disastrous civil war. Between 1975 and 1979, more than 14,000 Cambodians were held captive in S-21, a former high school in the Phnom Penh district of Tuol Sleng.’ Cited in Hughes (2003).
 11. Mark Kramer, personal communication.

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