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(RE)ARRANGING PICTURES
AND (RE)READING
HISTORIES

The surface of an artwork may beckon touch but rarely gives it. This is the unrealizable desire of the photograph. A delicate, descriptive rendering—of wood, a softly worn book, or a glossy snapshot—will never give tactile satisfaction.

The objects in a still life cannot be held, felt, or smelled. One can only imagine memories of their density, softness, or rough edges through a mediated visual. The matte surface of a photographic print seems to exude the soft glow of daylight filling a studio, as if each print in its frame on the floor is a window that may be reached through. But the surface cannot be breached, as with a memory that can never be known or seen closely enough (fig. 1).

Leslie Hewitt's photographic series of in-studio assemblages, *Still Life*, explores dynamics of collective memory. Hewitt arranges a library of archival and everyday materials and photographs those arrangements for the camera. Each photograph rests inside a large wooden frame and features a square of wood, a critical Civil Rights-era book atop two other anonymous books, and a rotating selection of vernacular photographs, citrus fruits, and other ephemera. Through the qualities of the photographic object, archival research, found photographs, and sculptural arrangements, Hewitt addresses the multiplicity of personal and collective memory as retained in and shaped by visual culture. The *Still Life* series explores legacies of the Civil Rights Movement through photographic and sculptural means. The arrangement of different memories forms a new, changing, sometimes disjunctive whole. Hewitt's (re)arrangement and (re)photography are active processes of remembering: ways to read histories, evolve them, and keep them alive.

Hewitt's photographs lean against the wall and floor, resting unattached in heavy wooden frames. At a first glance, the photographs seem identical. However, looking at the other images reveals their object system: a block of wood, a small stack of books, a rotating cast of photographs, and a cut lemon. The meaning constructed in Hewitt's work is poetic and open. There are few clear indicators



Figure 1. Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Median)*, 2013. From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).

of the specificity of photographs (who is in them, or where), leaving them less as specifically personal considerations and more like broad questions about the tenuousness of memory. “Much of my work creates relationships between images and objects whose connection is not necessarily apparent,” Hewitt writes. “Elements that seem dissimilar, when paired in a formal space, reveal unexpected affinities.”¹ The arrangements interweave objects of different origin, without distinguishing what is Hewitt’s and what is found. Slight shifts in arrangement underscore the slippery nature of memory—its inevitable cracks and conflicts in collective remembering. The stark similarity between the photographs is what beckons for a closer look. Differences are foregrounded and become the entry point to objects occupying multiple meanings. Similarity and repetition also speak to Hewitt’s hand, placing objects in conversation with one another in different dialogues within subtle (re)arrangements.

The square of wood in the center of each photograph recalls the shape of snapshots commonly found in the 1950s and ‘60s, the wood’s blank surface simultaneously a void and a possibility. It is a receiving surface for meaning derived from object relationships and the viewer’s specific library of personal and collective memories. Constructed from the same maple as the photograph’s frame, the wood references the function of framing devices, calling to mind photographic process as well as museological presentation. The plywood presents a moment of pause within the photograph, one that allows imaginative possibility for any who view it. One may attempt to read Hewitt’s work by deducing the significant relationships between objects and images, but the centering of the wooden square obstructs and interrupts this possibility. The blank wooden square is almost frustratingly ambiguous. It leaves the photographs intentionally open and available to the limitations and conflicts of memory.

The wood and objects around it become a site of departure to Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory. Postmemory explores modalities of working with inherited memories in ways that neither appropriate previous generational experiences nor let the past supersede the present impact of those histories by exclusively elevating the memories of previous generations.² Hirsch also identifies archives as recurring artistic material for artists working within postmemory. Central to these works is the transformation of the original meaning of existing objects to connect to and stand in for elements of

1. Leslie Hewitt, “Leslie Hewitt Talks about *Untitled (Structures)*,” *Artforum.com*, December 15, 2012, <https://www.artforum.com/words/id=38369>.

2. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing*

and Visual Culture after the Holocaust (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2012), 35.

the artist's history. These found materials become pathways and possibilities to (re)envision established narratives in the artists' lives. This found material often contends with an absence (of a narrative, of information, of a significant person) through the presence of an object, whether photographic, text-based, or otherwise.³ The assembly of objects from different origins alludes to the composition of memory, a collection of different, sometimes disjunctive, parts that add up to a continually evolving whole. In this sense, though Hewitt's autobiographical experience is certainly a part of the work (or perhaps an origin point), it is not the single or root meaning. Memory can also be passed outside of familial lines, a fact that is particularly salient when community works as a source of historical record to augment or counter institutional history. Hewitt's work accesses postmemory by arranging a space in which the Civil Rights Movement and history are not defined within a single narrative. Multiplicity of meaning underscores memory's particular mutability when affected by the arrangement of information. Firsthand memory is not the singularly defining historical narrative, thus opening entry to postmemory.

In the lower third of *Untitled (Perception)* is a stack of worn hardcover books (fig. 2). The only book whose title is discernible is *The Fire Next Time*, which rests atop two other hardcover books, their inward-facing spines a pedestal on which James Baldwin's text rests, symbolizing all that led to its writing. The book's precarious physical form will continue to age, to the point where the already-degrading title will no longer be readable; fraying threads and cracked glue will further wear away to dismantle the binding holding together the pages. The delicate state of the book transforms with the passage of time: marks of wear signaling hands that have held it and turned its pages, frayed edges developed from the transportation of the object across land and time, discoloration from the sun bearing down on a dust jacket that will eventually become lost or discarded.

Throughout *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin illuminates the psychological impact of a raced society on national culture, identity, and the human experience. He raises the impact of dominant cultural narratives of race on both Black and white communities, underscoring that systemic racism is a narrative that spreads harmful effects across lines of race. Baldwin calls for an expansiveness of thinking, to realize a multiracial national identity fueled not by fear and stereotype, but

3. Hirsch, 36–38.



Figure 2: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Perception)*, 2013. From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).

rather by inclusion and openness to newly conceived (and multiple) cultural narratives of race. This calls for historical memory that is not singularized but rather is multilayered and allows for contradiction. The first of Baldwin's two essays is a letter written to his young nephew—a missive form that *Still Life* echoes. The arrangement of vernacular objects to form a reading of the past that is preserved and transmitted across temporal and spatial lines is not unlike the impact of a letter, particularly Baldwin's in mass distribution.

In *Untitled (Solidity)*, an already simple composition is made further minimal. *The Fire Next Time* has turned to face the wall; its spine faces inward and refuses to be named. This move to withhold information, however, is not obfuscation. It is, instead, a beckoning. Meaning within Hewitt's work lies not within a single photograph, but across the series. A reading of *Untitled (Solidity)* before realizing that one of the books is *The Fire Next Time* will shift after engaging another photograph like *Untitled (Perception)*. The intentional inclusion of smaller objects (text, snapshots, all appearing close to life-size) coaxes the viewer toward changing their bodily habits in the gallery. The photograph directs the viewer's physical relationship to itself. The photographs say: bend down, read, look closer, take time. In this, difference, meaning, and multiplicity emerge (figs. 3, 4, 5, 6).

The photographic objects in *Still Life* are formally characteristic family snapshots of the 1960s–1990s, marking a span of Hewitt's childhood and young adult years: warm-toned prints with rounded corners and date-marked margins, and 4 x 6 in. glossy one-hour photo prints. Temporality embedded in the form of these objects echoes how memory is passed across generations, constructed through these documented visual moments, then arranged into albums, and shared again through story. Artists working within postmemory utilize archival language to these ends. The found photograph is not a tabula rasa, ready for artists to find new life within. It must be transformed via a mark-making that decouples the found photograph from its prior lives. Hewitt's materials evoke the sharing of firsthand experience through recollection, though they do not enclose their meaning to a specific origin point. These photographs, and specifically the wood within, exude the power of ambiguity within inherited memory; these works intentionally hold their cards so as not to privilege one reading or perspective over another.⁴ The photographs ask questions, rather than lead the

exclusively through a lens determined by this fact is one that closes the work, rather than opening it as the work asks us to do.



Figure 3: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Solidity)*, 2013. From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).



Figure 4: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Blue)*, 2013. From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).



Figure 5: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Candid)*, 2013. From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).



Figure 6: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Myopia)*, 2013. From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).

4. Here it is worth recalling Barthes's "The Death of the Author," to ground conversation about multiplicity of meaning and reading in text and photographs. It is worth foregrounding the idea that though Hewitt is the author of these works, so to speak, to read these works

viewer to discover answers. There is no singular meaning to deduce, but rather an associative conversation between images and objects that changes over time.

Still Life imagines what else these photographs could become if recontextualized, rearranged, and reread. Family photographs are intimate, and the subjects within are distinctly known when in the family album. When Hewitt incorporates decontextualized snapshots in her work, there is a palpable sense that these images have been separated from their origin and thus their history, though they do not lose affective resonance. Instead, they resonate a collective familial imaginary. When these photographs depart their album contexts through the winds of discard, those photographed become impenetrably anonymous. Who are the people photographing each other in *Untitled (Median)*? Are they part of Hewitt's family, or strangers? The snapshots are not deductive objects, but rather visual markers from which to conjure meaning through relationships between the object and context within the photograph. Working with vernacular images can be an exploration of the mutability of photographic veracity. *Still Life* decontextualizes already ambiguous photographs from original—or at least prior—truth, then recontextualizes them to weave new, different meanings. Hewitt's use of family snapshots is not to construct empirical truth as much as a site for the possibilities of imagination.

A photograph, like memory, is not only a site of arrival at remembrance, but rather a site of departure. As with the composition of a memory, the objects in a *Still Life* photograph exist individually before being assembled into a stitched-together interpretation of a whole. A key mark in *Still Life* is thus the arrangement within each photograph. In *Untitled (Zenith)*, for example, a horizon is not always a horizon. A clockwise turn makes the snapshot's horizon a vertical line. Varied, conflicting memories can come together, not seamlessly and singularly, but rather as a multivalent whole that acknowledges the complexities of remembering and knowing. In the movement from the book at the bottom of the frame up through the imaginative space of the wood to an image whose literality has been flipped, photographic veracity morphs. Arrangement transforms a seemingly fixed horizon into a new zenith. Seams are visible across *Still Life*; the edges between books, wood, wall, and floor remain intact. Collective memory takes shape disjunctively, its conflicting perspectives and

access to different stories creating a collection of visible parts.

While Hewitt's arrangements evoke assemblage, *Still Life* also embodies qualities of the family photo album, drawing upon the power of the family album and family snapshots to establish and upend historical narratives. Family albums and personal vernacular collections within African American history are key counterarchives that upend white-colonialist narratives of the Black familial experience. Hewitt uses materials that reclaim and recontextualize in order to realize and make present physical objects that contend with the reality of absences. In the absence of representative canonical histories within postcolonial contexts, family albums become stand-ins and rewritings. Shawn Michelle Smith explores W.E.B. Du Bois's *Georgia Albums* in her *Photography on the Color Line*, and in particular their role as a core rewriting of the African American slave narrative. Du Bois organized these albums to illuminate a vernacular picture of African American life that bypassed existing "evidentiary" photographic records constructed to maintain a system of Black subjugation. Intriguingly, Du Bois provided minimal explanatory text to identify the specific content of the photographic archive. He presented the images largely without caption text or a clear chronological, geographical, or familial organization method. The photographs did the talking.⁵

The existence of the photographs alone was meant to evoke an alternative document of the African American community of the time through affect, rather than fact. By invoking the familiar structure of the family album, Du Bois positioned viewers of the albums to feel the affective impact of the photographs and thus experience this work as a counterarchive to the dominant photographic narrative of the African American experience.⁶ Smith notes:

Once an archive is compiled, it makes a claim on history; it exists as a record of the past. The archive is a vehicle of memory, and as it becomes the trace on which an historical record is founded, it makes some people, places, things, ideas, and events visible, while relegating others, through its signifying absences, to invisibility. In this sense, then, archives have an ideological function not only in the moment of their inception but also across time, for they determine in large part what will be collectively remembered and how it will be remembered.⁷

5. Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
6. Smith, 15.
7. Smith, 8.

Counterarchives employ vernacular material to fill gaps in histories that have been lost or un/miswritten; bringing such ephemeral or excluded material into the archive preserves it from invisibility. Hirsch also sees the album as a counterarchive and site of resistance to both institutional narrative and erasure. During the Holocaust, family albums of imprisoned Jews were secretly kept by allied non-Jewish families. Jewish photographers made pictures in ghettos and concentration camps that were often kept secret in some way. Photography is a site of power in the perpetuation of propagandistic and fictional narratives, and it is also a site of resistance within underground documentation and archival practices. The family album, in form, function, and content, is a site of possibility for artists working in postmemory.⁸

Although Hewitt's arrangements are constructed for the camera, to be photographed and represented as prints, it is worth considering why they are not shown as sculptures. The reproducibility of the photograph allows visualization of the impact of iterative changes in arrangement and also creates a boundary that mediates and determines how closely the viewer can look. Hirsch notes that the postmemory impulse approaches vernacular photographs by scaling miniscule details to large sizes, in an attempt to see beyond the limits of sight. Hirsch writes of zooming in to the collar of a parent's overcoat in a photograph, to try to reveal the star patch that would indicate the pain of the Holocaust, as if that would reveal information hidden within the grain. However, as Annette Kuhn writes, "You will get nowhere...by taking a magnifying glass to [a photograph] to get a closer look: you will only see patches of light and dark, an unreadable mesh of grains. The image yields nothing to that sort of scrutiny; it simply disappears."⁹

Resisting the urge to look closer and closer at a photograph is a turning away from the search for fact and toward "an expanded context for more affective knowing."¹⁰ Peering at a print through a magnifying glass reveals only more grain, not more detail in the photographs. The surface of the print becomes a wall as much as a window; the objects beckon but are not given. A book cannot be opened and read. A snapshot cannot be turned over to read the inscription. There is a clear degree to which the viewer can know, and the rest is left tantalizingly ambiguous.¹¹ In this way, Hewitt constructs the experience of and represents memory as a concept, rather than the content of it. The detailed rendering of the objects makes it feel

almost possible to lift the cover of the book or peek around a corner to see more, as if the objects are *there*. But it cannot be done. There is a palpable promise of more information within the depths of the frame, then a boundary that cannot be crossed. Unlike with the possibilities of a sculpture or object in hand, Hewitt uses the formal qualities of the photographic object to both pull a viewer toward the work and maintain distance. Knowing more has to be reached through imagination rather than concrete fact, a key link to artistic methods of postmemory.

Hewitt's investigations of photographs, memory, and archival practices challenge assumed photographic veracity, deductive reading practices, and singularity of meaning. Her works both imply and implicate autobiography, yet do not rely solely (or sometimes at all) on images and objects that point exclusively to the artist's autobiographical archive as the through-line for the work. *Still Life* engages with the slippages and complexities surrounding family photographs and other vernacular images by underscoring how multiplicity is inherent to the derivation of meaning from visual culture, in connection with the unreliable experience of memory and the reading of histories as an ongoing process. In this, exactly who or what is pictured within each photographic object matters less than how the picture sparks a memory that may be totally separate from the specific content within the frame. From this work emerges the concept that photographs do not have inherent truths or meaning, but rather are read through context and exist within a multiplicity of meaning. Returning to the back-turned books, this other move away from legibility points to the possibility of knowing more, even if arriving at some "right answer" is ultimately futile. The photographs tempt with the notion that perhaps if one continues to search for pictures, if the figures could somehow turn to face us, if the books could open, if the right arrangement is made, we would find who and what we are looking for (fig. 7).

8. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*.

9. Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London, New York: Verso, 1995), 13.

10. Hirsch, 75.

11. To recall Barthes again, here *Camera Lucida*, the very notion of *looking* for the punctum becomes upturned in Hewitt's work, in that a key source of punctum—the face, the place—is left unknowable, to find emotional resonance less in specificity than in what these visual markers raise for each person viewing the photographs.



Figure 7: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Zenith)*, 2013.
From *Still Life*. Digital chromogenic print in
custom maple frame, 52 x 60 in. (framed).