

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs And Museums As Their Sanctuary

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Images contain a sense of omniscience, having the power to humanize and dehumanize at the same time. Recently, there has been much controversy over the public exhibition of lynching photographs. James Allen, an Atlanta antique collector who buys and resells rare objects, compiled his collection of violent lynching photographs into a coffee table book, Without Sanctuary, in an attempt to change the meaning of them. They are now shown to make the public aware of this inhumanity and in doing so; the images give a humanizing effect. The publication of these images, however, and their growing number of exhibitions in venues including the Roth Horowitz Gallery, the New York Historical Society, and the Andy Warhol Museum, led to many criticisms about the images being voyeuristic, objectifying, exploitive, and even victimizing. Martha Rosler discusses in "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)" how documentary photographs play an inappropriate role when exhibited in contemporary art galleries, and museums. Rosler believes that these images produce a sense of new victimhood because those who are depicted in the images have no voice. Lynching photographs, however, revolutionized the use of documentary photography and need not be recognized as

negative and demeaning. These ideas bring into question lynching photographs as documentary in museums, and their affect on how the images are viewed. An important concept here is the meaning of institutionalizing lynching photographs in museums and how the institutions play a role in shaping views, knowledge, and history. What is determined by these museums is how important these historical documents are. Although museums may exploit these images as Rosler might see it, this ultimately, much like *new* victimization, does not matter in their overall humanistic intentions. The use of lynching photographs shows the effects of their evolved objective to change the issues of race, victimhood, and their significance. The museums, by using the images as documentary, make a distinction between the new audience/victim relationship; it is no longer the murderers and murdered but the past conscience and today's conscience looking back at history. This distinction is necessary to overcome the horrors of the past.

Lynching photographs, although they were once passed around as postcards and kept in safekeeping as one cherishes a snapshot of friends and family, are now displayed to the public to show how frequent this disturbing activity once was. This change in function of lynching photographs has major implications. The photographers' original intent was to dehumanize those lynched in the images, glorify the act of lynching, and warn other potential victims of their fate, while saving the morbid images as a memento of the event. Through time, the photographs went from the homes of those that attended the lynching to the home of James Allen. His

exhibiting them in public museums has changed the photographs meaning from one of a private collection that might have served only as voyeuristic images with no purpose but to decorate the home of a "picker", to photographs of historical importance displayed to educate and make the public aware of the extent to which lynching took place. The exhibition of the photographs allow them to become Rosler's definition of a "real documentary", which is the "financially unloved but growing body of documentary works committed to the exposure of specific abuses caused by people's jobs... by racism, sexism, and class oppression," rather than objects with "the aestheticization of meaning and the denial of content, the denial of the existence of the political dimension" (Rosler, 325; 320). Rosler states that this aestheticization is a consequence of their isolation in museums as the photographs obtain a high value and status. On the contrary, the latter definition resulted from the original intentions and functions of the photographs, not from their isolation in museums, which only give the photographs all that Rosler claims is denied in them. The lynching photographs were once "financially unloved", being passed around so frequently and in abundance as postcards. Recently, however, perhaps because of their antiquity, their prices have been rising, some as high as \$750 (Moehringer, 18). There are two possible outcomes in this instance of extremity. Either the photograph is displayed to expose the abuses of history, or to be glorified with pride for the actions of the past. For such a high price, who would buy the photo-postcard other than to use it as a revolutionary tool or in reverence? Allen states, "In America everything is for sale, even a national

shame" (Allen, 2). Allen has purchased and displayed this "national shame" in order to bring it to the surface.

The photographs' meaning as documentary is also defined by being placed in a museum atmosphere. If they were placed in a home, such as a lynching attendee's for example, there would be a greater denial of meaning, content, and political dimension, and reduce the photographs to souvenirs as they were once considered. The value of these photographs increase as they are pushed to be exhibited in other museums to expose a history and educate the public. This contradicts Rosler's description of documentary, showing that lynching photographs have attained a high value and status yet remains full of documentary meaning and content. It is a great change of meaning, a more meaningful one at that, compared to the photographs' original intent. Their meaning is to expose the horror of lynching, an abuse caused by all that Rosler has mentioned: a lower classes success through jobs, a dogmatic outlook on a different race and sex, and one group of people dominating another. Rosler's notion of art museums denying meaning, however, does not apply to the lynching photographs, but rather, museums define the meaning of the now documentary photography, and allow more meaning to be exposed. Neither the financial status of a photograph nor the photographer's original intention make a difference in what is considered documentary, but it is the purpose of the photograph at the time of its use that determines this.

The museum is used, in this case, to carry out the goal of educating, acknowledging, and making the public aware of the events in the past. Documentary photography, which is used for this very purpose has taken a new form in

Rosler's mind. Rosler views *new* documentaries as an attempt to protect the sensibility of the minority depicted in the photograph. This, Rosler claims, "manages to institute a new genre of victimhood—the victimization by *someone else's* camera of a helpless persons" (319). The lynching photographs hold onto the moment in which the person was victimized. To see this, as a new victimization by the camera, is to demote an important function of history, which Berger states, in Ways of Seeing, is "not for living in" but a "well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act" (11). History is to be looked at so that past mistakes do not happen again. To perceive another sense of victimhood in the image, alone, is to regress back to using the past for living in. Allen has used these photographs to change dialogue in issues of race and politics. This is not possible without overcoming a new victimization because this preserves a separation of the people, in a social and political aspect. Critic, Mary Thomas, argues that the political dimension should be denied or at least not the main focus when visualizing the images. Thomas believes that "mentally categorizing such events as a black problem or even specifically a racial issue is to not only miss the point," but also "risks splitting the audience experience into one of us vs. them, casting the African American as victim and the contemporary white as hapless inheritor of his own racial stigma" (6). Those fixated on the problem of race will carry over the separation of victim and perpetrator into their feelings about the event. Thomas's idea of splitting audience experience is an extension of Rosler's fear that a new victimization may arise from such acknowledgements. The mental categorizing of a racial and political issue may

bring this experience about but, the photographs blatantly show these issues and they must not be denied, simply acknowledged—the victimization did exist at one time but a sense of new victimization only furthers the audience split. The museums play a major role in how the past is perceived. The experience of “us vs. them” is an instinctive view from visualizing the history of lynching and the races depicted (a majority of which were hangings of African Americans by a crowd of Caucasians), but what the exhibition has done is change the us vs. them racially to us of the present vs. them of the past.

The reactions evoked through the exhibition are closely tied with the causes. Rosler’s view of a new victimization as a representation “that the poor are ashamed of having been *exposed* as poor, that the photos have been the source of festering shame,” is an accurate portrayal of museum critic, Carol Duncan’s, theory on what museums do; “Western representations of western culture hold implications for the way non-western cultures are seen.” (Rosler, 319; Duncan, 4). The way that white, suburban society is represented in the images of lynching, one can easily assume that victims were ashamed to have been in such a position. The exposé of the lynching photographs may have shifted an instinctive shame from the minority to the majority as many white viewers feel the need to be ashamed for what their ancestors have done. “Festering shame”, however, is not the museums’ intent; neither is the museums’ intent to fester a pity. The meaning of the exhibition is to bring to the realization that many different non-westerners, as well as a number of westerners, were victims of lynching. Museums expose the

shame imbedded into the event in its entirety. Rosler's *new victimization* cannot be seen through the lynching exhibition; but the change from memoir to documentary gives those in the images recognition by exposing their part in history.

For the purposes of impact, museums remove all aestheticism from the exhibition to reduce the voyeurism of the photographs. There are two types of museums, according to Duncan; "the educational museum is considered by its advocates to me more democratic and popular, while the aesthetic museum is seen as more elitist" (3). Duncan treats museums as places of ritual where social identity is distinguished and ideology is produced. The museums that the lynching photographs were exhibited in, however, whether educational or aesthetic in nature, were used in the educational aspect. The results are not based solely on the visualization of the photographs but are also an effect of their presentation in public museums. Keeping the lynching photographs away from being viewed as artistic images by avoiding customary exhibiting such as framing, projections, slides, blown up images and caption, as well as the museums' presentation as an educational show, create an expected reaction from the audience (Hulser). This supports Duncan's idea that art museums, "whatever their stated aims and potentials, must function within existing political and ideological limits" (2). By exceeding this boundary, the museum cannot succeed in educating and offering its values and beliefs. For example, if the museums saw "people as fundamentally unequal and regarding elites as natural occurrences..." as Rosler states leads to authorship and isolation and "differentiation of

elite understanding and its objects from common understanding", then the relation between image and ideology is disconnected (320). This can occur by aestheticizing the lynching photographs; a political and ideological boundary would then be crossed and the images would go against the current ideology. The category of the museums does not change this relationship, although values and beliefs are not necessarily offered but rather simply reinforced and made stronger through the exposé of images and the voicing of the people. Documentary, Rosler states, "carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful" (306). The message sent when the picture was taken was that the powerless group was not human enough to have the right to live and that this was a thought common to many. In today's case, the socially powerful can be society as a whole, blacks and whites of equality (at least more so than during the lynching days) that gets the message that lynching is wrong and unjustifiable. History itself has changed this view of oppression; the photographs only enhance it. The people, who see the immorality of lynching and view the oppressors as evildoers, already believe so. It is the current societal and political emphasis on equality that the museums build on to refrain from what Rosler sees as a disconnection of image and ideology.

As these images are viewed in public exhibitions, a knowledge is created about society that is expressed through the reactions of the viewers. The disgust and sadness that arises from the sight of lynching photographs displays society's moral outrage toward an event that occurred once too often. Rosler states that, "documentary photography has come to represent the social conscience of liberal

sensibility presented in visual imagery" (303). If these photographs were taken as documentary photographs, they would represent an oppressive sensibility of those celebrating lynching. The lynching photographs, used as documentary, represent the social conscience of the past and allows for expression of the social conscience today. Many lynching images show a background with crowds of people that illustrate their "social conscience". One such image is a photograph labeled "Three Negroes lynched at Duluth, Minnesota for rape. Oct, 1919 by M.P.S.". This photograph is of three men hung from a pole, surrounded by onlookers, including children, pushing their way to get into the picture. Every eye in the crowd is directed toward the camera as they all stand behind the bodies as if they were some sorts of artwork to be displayed and taken pride of. The joyful smiles of the audience make one wonder if they even have a conscience but that is exactly what the image is showing; a society's mind-set in the past as one of non-chalance and celebration towards lynching.

The reaction of those viewing the photograph in museums today is an exposure of the new "social conscience". This is one of morality and an ideology that rejects the attitudes of the past and sees the images of lynching and the overwhelming crowds with dismay. Thomas explains this exposure of new social conscience as a result of the exhibitions, through a "shift [in] the privilege of witness from the mindlessly violent who were in historic attendance to those attempting to make peace today" (6). The "privilege of witness" has simply shifted from one social conscience to another and the setup of the exhibitions allowed society to express the new ideology. Rosler questions this privilege when she asks, "At what

elevated vantage point must we stand to regard society as having 'frailties' and 'imperfections'? High enough to see it as...a commodity to be 'experienced'?" (321). Rosler, however, overlooks the sensibility of the "victims" in new documentary, whereas she views it not as "evidencing a 'sympathy' for the 'real world'..." but instead as a "rage masquerading as varyingly invested snoop sociology" (321). The way that Rosler perceives documentary makes it difficult for documentary to be of any use—sympathy is far closer to an attempt at peace than is rage. Her views diverge the shift Thomas sees, making the witness an aggression rather than a privilege. The privilege of witnessing these images should be appreciated and taken advantage of, as it is the ability to look at them in a new light because of their availability, not looked down upon.

The transformation of these photographs from private pictures in family albums and frames to replications in a coffee table book to public displays of original historical documents has resulted in multiplying meanings. Berger argues that, "the meaning of the original work no longer lies in what it uniquely says but in what it uniquely is" (21). This is the case with lynching photographs, where the original photograph **is** the history as well as tells a history. The use of these photographs in the past is the extreme opposite of how they are used in the recent exhibitions. These snapshots were put into family albums and passed around as postcards before being collected and bound into a book by Allen called "Without Sanctuary". Since these photographs are not abstract artistic images, their replication does not necessarily change meanings but removes their authenticity. The exhibition of the lynching

photographs in museums helped change their meaning and kept their authenticity by displaying original images with their brownish-yellowing color, and crinkled edges, and their sense of coming directly from the time of lynching. An ambiance of morbid barbarity is not as strong in a book as it is seeing the very original postcard. Seeing the authentic version gives a more real feeling, that this truly was a person's mind-set at one time and this is the ink that wrote this man's view on the event (one man even referred the lynching to a friendly "barbecue"). The fact that they are original photographs from a century ago and the way they are presented in a museum, with no additional visual effects, their overall effect is one that is more dramatic than if they were seen flipping through a book in a library or book store.

What the museum does is not only make one aware of the atrocities but makes this history a necessity. As Berger notes of paintings, "it is authentic and therefore it is beautiful" (21). With lynching photography, Berger's idea of authenticity makes the images important. The original state of the photographs gives a more realistic aura. They are so real that their significance is much greater than that of a mere photocopy. A real lynching photo-postcard's survival makes it even more important that it has remained throughout the years, through the mail, wrinkles and creases, and being tossed into drawers. It is not the photographs alone that create this enthusiasm for knowledge; the museum atmosphere contributes to the importance of this history. Being considered an educational facility, historical museums (such as The New York Historical Society) have an inherent emphasis on the need for a certain knowledge to be known. Berger states that

a replication of a painting diversifies its meaning by making the painting accessible to many homes and this becomes "their talking point" where the artwork's meaning from the institution is lent to the public's meaning and then multiplied through each home's own interpretation (20). The museums' motives in exhibiting the lynching photographs have the same effect. In encouraging public dialogue through public forums after the exhibit, the museums created their own talking point. Some view the meaning as an important history of America that should never be forgotten, others as a disgrace on the white population, of race relations, and some even extend the meaning even further to a contempt for right-wing ideology of a local government (The Message of the Lynching Exhibit, 39). The authenticity of the images make them more important and fascinating but their meanings are all fragmented due to their exposure and presentation as documentary photography.

The exhibitions of the lynching photographs have received a variety of reactions. Though audience has shifted from one mind-set to another, there is still controversy between "those attempting to make peace today" (Thomas, 6). What the images do is change the discourse of race in America. For example, some black audience members believe they are the true owners of the images and a white person should not be collecting them. Who is right or wrong in the issue of race relations is irrelevant, providing these issues are brought up in a society where conflict exists. The "true owner" matters not, as long as who ever does possess them puts them to a humanizing use. What ever it is that the museums create, whether knowledge, history, or ideology, it is with the help of the photographs that do they

do this. The photographs carry their message through the museums. The goal is not to abolish racism because it will always exist. As racism still persists in today's news, the exhibit's need to make the public aware is only more necessary. Whether Allen's goal to change the world is accomplished or if it even can be, the exhibits have raised dialogue among the people and that is the start of a revolutionary visual effect.

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