

Photojournalism of the Civil Rights Movement:
A View of the Cold War's Home Front



Photographs from the Mother Jones Civil Rights Portfolio of the Comer Collection

Artists:

Berenice Abbott
Dawoud Bey
Andreas Feininger
Benedict J. Fernandez
Leonard Freed
Ernst Haas
Matt Herron
Earlie Hudnall, Jr.
Arthur Leipzig
Mary Ellen Mark
Duane Michaels
Charles Moore
Inge Morath
Gordon Parks
Flip Schulke
Dan Weiner

curated by Matt Hinckley

February 9 – March 26, 2010

Cecil and Ida Green Center

The University of Texas at Dallas

Reception and gallery talk by Matt Hinckley

Tuesday, February 9, 2 p.m.

Cecil and Ida Green Center

Panel discussion on “Collecting Photography”

Thursday, February 25, 7:30 p.m.

Jonsson Performance Hall

Front cover image:

Gordon Parks, *Ella Watson, American Gothic, Washington, DC*, 1942, gelatin silver, 13.2” x 9.7” on 14” x 11” paper

Back cover image:

Hudnall, Earlie Jr., *Three Drummers*, 1996, 10.1” x 13” on 11” x 14” paper, gelatin silver, selenium toned

The Mother Jones Civil Rights portfolio provides a framework to trace the narrative of the mid-Twentieth Century Civil Rights Movement in the United States. These photographs chronicle some of the most important moments in the struggle of African Americans to claim the constitutional liberties that custom, tradition and law had denied them since the abolition of slavery in 1865. We now know the Civil Rights Movement helped fundamentally change the sociopolitical economy of the nation to the point that the U.S. elected a person of color to the Presidency. At the same time, though, the story is more ambiguous and complex. Additional photographs from the Comer Collection from before and after the 1950s and 1960s help set the Civil Rights Movement within the larger historical context.

Berenice Abbott's *El Station, 6th & 9th Ave. Lines* (1936), captures the gritty pessimism of the widespread unemployment of the Great Depression and the global rise of fascism. The condition of African Americans, who largely had been poor since Emancipation, seemed of less concern since all ethnic groups were suffering. The large turnstile in the foreground delivers a message that those who do not have – and cannot afford – tickets, are not welcome. All three human subjects seem to regard the camera, photographer and viewer with suspicion if not contempt, as they warm themselves next to the stovepipe heater. This photo makes even public transportation seem to be the territory of the “haves,” as their facial expressions seem to say that the “have-nots” are not welcome. Shadowy figures lurk beyond the doors on the outdoor platform. **Andreas Feininger's** *Jewish Shop, Lower East Side, Manhattan* (1940), depicts urban working class life. At this point, increased war production has brought some economic growth to New York, and ethnic working class families are beginning to enjoy the ability to purchase textiles and food, both sold at the same store. Of course, even with the postwar boom, economic uncertainty remained, as evidenced in **Arthur Leipzig's** *Ideal Laundry, Brooklyn* (1946). Unsupervised yet curious children peer out of the business window, as their parents or guardians likely tended to their business, one of the few opportunities available to Asian immigrants. The gritty character of both Feininger's and Leipzig's images show that while not to the same degree, both Asians and Jews, like many other ethnic groups, faced the same lack of opportunity African Americans faced.

All three of these images contrast sharply with the optimism of the 1950s and early 1960s, shown best in **Dan Weiner**, *New Year's Eve, Times Square* (1951); **Inge Morath**, *Encounter on Times Square, New York* (1957); and

Ernst Haas, *Times Square, NY* (1962). After nearly two decades filled with depression and war, Americans are happy again. Weiner captures a young couple's private moment in a most public space, as they celebrate the New Year. The soft focus suggests this could be one of thousands of couples, simultaneously implying the anonymity and unanimity of a common experience. Morath captures a spontaneous moment of pure fun, as the llama seems to smile for the camera. When considered logically, the very act of transporting a llama in one's car through Times Square is ridiculous, almost like a fraternity prank, and the viewer cannot help but smile back. In the 1930s, even the wealthy wore scowls; in the 50s, even the animals smile. In addition, the Shubert Theater sign appears behind the llama's head, further reinforcing the idea of entertainment. Finally, even though it is black and white, and shot on a rainy evening, Haas' multiple exposure seems to explode with the vibrant lights of the hustle and bustle of Times Square. People on foot and in cars and cabs venture out despite the rain to eat, drink and be entertained. Yet, beneath the optimism, prosperity and seeming happiness of the era, Haas' image also references the burning social and political question of the era as it documents that *West Side Story* is playing in the theater. Based on the Tony Award-winning musical of the same name (which itself was based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), *West Side Story* won ten Academy Awards, in part because it broke new ground in its serious treatment of social and ethnic inequality.

Gordon Parks *Ella Watson, American Gothic* (1942), a parody of Grant Wood's 1930 painting, taken for the Farm Security Administration photography project, captures the conditions of menial servitude in which

so many African Americans were trapped. Segregation, lack of access to education, and racism prevented most African Americans from ascending to white-collar jobs, or even good-paying, unionized manufacturing jobs. Only the WWII labor shortage coerced factories to hire black men and white women to fill jobs. Nevertheless, black females still found themselves limited to custodial and domestic service jobs that the broom and mop represent. Parks' brilliant composition also questions fundamental American ideological assumptions. The U.S. flag dominates the frame, simultaneously iconic and ironic. The soft focus on the flag, which is in the background and at an undetermined distance, suggests an "American dream" that is fuzzy and out of reach to most African Americans and especially black women. In addition, the absence of a male figure in the photo – compared to Wood's original *American Gothic* that had both a man and a woman – suggests the absence of the male in the black family. Perhaps he is working another job elsewhere, or serving in the military. Or perhaps he is simply absent. The point is that in contrast to Wood's painting, where a male and female were depicted in a traditional, idyllic, rural "cult of domesticity," Parks' seems to argue that black women must simultaneously be the household breadwinner – the traditional male role – and fulfill the traditional female role. Ella Watson's impatient facial expression, no-frills hairstyle, simple dress and bony frame hint at a life of hard work, sacrifice, and perhaps malnourishment. Even her dress appears to be missing two buttons, which she seems to keep closed with safety pins. She either does not have time to sew on the missing buttons, or cannot afford to buy new buttons. In either case, she seems both money- and time-poor.

Dan Weiner documented *Martin Luther King, Jr.* in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956. Although King was only 27 years old, he already had achieved notoriety the previous year during the Montgomery bus boycott. Despite his young age, this photo shows how his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement had begun to age him prematurely. Deep in thought, King stares at an unseen point beyond the frame of the camera, as if contemplating the gravity of the responsibility he has assumed and the daunting challenge of his quest for equality. The tight cropping and lack of depth of field give us no indication of the background (other than what apparently is a lamp to the right and behind King), and the papers in the

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foreground could be periodicals or a book, but offer no clue as to what he might have been reading. The fact that much of his face is in partial shadow, compared to the highlights on his left temple, forebode the dark chapter of his assassination in 1968.

Leonard Freed of the Magnum agency shot the image of the young boy "playing tough" in the Harlem community of New York City in 1963. Published in *Black in White America* in 1968, the unnamed child in *Harlem* shows us, by his flexed muscles, "Black Power" fist and facial scowl, his desire to appear like a tough adult man. Yet, his toughness contradicts the malnourishment evident in his ribs being seen through his skin, and the fact that although he wants to wear a "tough" facial expression, his

mouth and eyes suggest he might be fighting the urge to cry. Singling out this one boy, with another child's arm slightly out of focus in the foreground, personalizes Northern black child poverty at a time when many Northerners quietly comforted themselves with the delusion that racism was confined to the Old Confederacy.

Matt Herron, director of Take Stock Photos, admits to having an agenda in accepting news photography assignments. According to his Take Stock Photos web bio, Herron assumed an active role in attempting to desegregate the South, having been arrested in May 1963 for attempting to integrate a Maryland amusement park. In 1964, Herron organized a group

opposed to desegregation and black civil rights – the Ku Klux Klan, hostile law enforcement officials, angry “Bubbas” – could pounce upon these peaceful protesters.

Flip Schulke's photograph of Coretta Scott King, attending the funeral service of her slain husband in Atlanta in 1968, depicts another horrific chapter in the Civil Rights Movement. Coretta Scott King had invited Schulke to photograph the funeral service, and this image appeared on the cover of *Life* and was named portrait of the year. Despite what must have been unbearable grief and shock, King shows an expression that combines sadness with a sense of relief and even the hint of a smile – perhaps as she considers her husband has “gone to a better place” – and as she acknowledges the mourners who joined in the celebration of his life and work. Even with the black veil and dress, King's face is well lit, a stark contrast to the dark wood of the pew in which she sits and the dark walls of the church in the background. Besides King's own face, the only other illuminated elements in the photo are the windows and the other woman's face, perhaps suggesting the natural light of the human spirit and of heaven are bright enough to expose even the darkest room. According to the obituary story on Schulke published in the *Washington Post*, Schulke previously had said, “Outside of my immediate family, his (Martin Luther King's) was the greatest friendship I have ever known or experienced.” The two first met in 1958 when Schulke earned an assignment to photograph King's speech to a black Baptist church in Miami (Holley).

Benedict J. Fernandez, who also had documented Martin Luther King, Jr., depicted protest activities in New York City as a street photographer. His *Memorial to Martin Luther King,*

Jr., taken just one day after King was assassinated, shows three young black men wearing King buttons on their overcoats in a tribute to the slain civil rights leader. While it would have been understandable for these men to express anger and outrage, their quiet and peaceful demonstration embodies the spirit of King's nonviolence-based approach to protesting for social change. According to Fernandez's own web site, his “powerful photographs of the last year of Dr. King's life invite us to walk the streets with the photographer, sit in the family home of Dr. King.... The central message for the photographer was to document, with great visual strength, the impact of Dr. King on this country.” The many buttons displaying King's face suggest the millions of African Americans who King's leadership touched, and the number of buttons visible on the three jackets, about 40, approximates the years of King's short life.

Charles Moore's *Birmingham, 1963*, provides us with perhaps the most damning evidence of the virulent racism endemic to the South: young protesters being attacked with powerful fire hoses. Birmingham was the epicenter of the Civil Rights Movement in 1963. The city of 350,000, of which 40% was Black, had been the center of industry for the Confederacy during the Civil War. A century later, it remained highly segregated and its municipal government was notoriously racist. In fact, dozens of bombings in Black neighborhoods led many to nickname the city “Bombingham.” Police Chief Bull Connor, who simultaneously was challenging a mayoral election he lost, on April 7 initiated violence when he had officers use police dogs to intimidate and attack peaceable civil rights protesters. This order brought national and international attention to the city, and the situation deteriorated

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of eight photographers to document the rapid change in Mississippi (Take Stock Photos). His photo, *The March from Selma* (1965) suggests through its composition that hundreds – if not thousands – of additional marchers continue in line beyond the right edge of the frame. Understanding his own biases helps us understand his interest in featuring the U.S. flag, to argue it was patriotic to demand equality and civil rights. Herron also deliberately frames his photograph to include young and old, black and white, male and female, to demonstrate the wide diversity of individuals who participated in the March from Selma. The airplane flying parallel to the path of the march ominously suggests that powerful forces are watching its movement, and that at any time forces

over the next month. Martin Luther King was arrested and held in solitary confinement a few days later, bringing even more media attention. On May 2, many Birmingham students, some still in elementary school, marched for their own civil rights; nearly 1,000 children were arrested. The next day, more students marched. Connor ordered the students to turn back. When they did not, Connor ordered the fire department to spray fire hoses on the student protesters. The firemen used equipment that connected two hoses into a single nozzle, forcing water through at over 100 pounds per square inch. The same force that could tear bark off trees certainly could tear clothing and flesh and caused many of the marchers to tumble to the ground. Subsequent marchers changed course to avoid the water jets, but police rushed forward with dogs to confine the marchers into a smaller space (Goldberg 203-204).

By extension, this episode – and photographic evidence thereof – provided an extremely useful tool of propaganda for Communist nations to ridicule and discredit U.S. claims of the superiority of democratic capitalism. It should not surprise us, then, that President Kennedy earnestly began to embrace and pursue the cause of civil rights in 1963, after the Birmingham riots (Kasher 98). According to legal historian Mary Dudziak, numerous documents show that this episode in particular embarrassed and enraged President Kennedy because it demonstrated the sheer hypocrisy of the U.S. to call for emerging nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America to be free to choose liberal democracy, while the U.S. denied it to a significant percentage of its own citizens. Other politicians at this time also recognized the power of Moore's photographs from Birmingham and cited them as important in the passage of the Civil

Rights Act of 1964. Of the photographic record of the Birmingham atrocities, King himself said, "The brutality... was caught, as a fugitive from a penitentiary is often caught, in gigantic circling spotlights. It was imprisoned in a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world" (King 30). Moore's ability to freeze the image of the white spray from the hose, juxtaposed with the students' dark clothes and acts of resistance, created one of the most iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, Moore's physical proximity to the violence means he also may have been in danger, further suggesting his willingness to risk his own safety to document these events.

Susan Sontag argues that photographs furnish evidence of events about which we have heard, but may doubt (Sontag 5). This clearly was the case with the Civil Rights Movement. The mainstream media had covered the movement for years going back to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision and the desegregation of lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina, and many Americans knew about segregation, but the photos from Birmingham were for many Americans their first exposure to the depth of the violent racism gripping the South. The mainstream media had not previously published photos of such anti-Black violence actually occurring in the United States for such a wide audience. Nevertheless, if we continue with Sontag's analysis, we must consider the opposite side of the consciousness question. Specifically, Sontag argues that the significance of a photograph always follows the naming of the event; a consciousness of the event must precede the photographic evidence if the photos are to have meaning to the viewer (Sontag 19). If Americans had no awareness whatsoever of Jim Crow

and segregation and racism, photos from Birmingham and other hotspots of the Civil Rights movement would be meaningless to them.

Moore built his career on documenting the Civil Rights movement, leveraging his status as a native Southerner and photographer for a local newspaper to gain access to take photos that other photographers could not get. In September 1958 Moore found himself unintentionally thrust into the center of the Civil Rights movement when, while working as a photographer for the Montgomery (Alabama) *Advertiser* newspaper, he photographed Dr. Martin Luther King arguing with two police officers. Associated Press picked up the shots, and *Life* magazine published one photo

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of the officers arresting Dr. King. *Life* then signed Moore, who had joined the New York-based Black Star agency, to a contract to travel the South to document the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, the millions of Americans who read *Life* saw through Moore's lens events such as the 1958-1960 effort to desegregate Montgomery, Alabama; the violent reaction to James Meredith's attempts to enroll as the first black student at the University of Mississippi in 1962; the 1963 Freedom March from Tennessee to Mississippi; voter registration drives in Mississippi in 1963 and 1964; Ku Klux Klan activities in North Carolina in 1965; and the march from Montgomery to Selma in 1965 (Kodak).

Clearly, Moore deliberately put himself into positions where he could

photograph important moments in the Civil Rights Movement. Although he attempted to project the appearance of objectivity, Moore had a strong bias. Similarly, it seems clear that Parks, Freed, Herron, Schulke and Fernandez similarly sought to question, attack and even tear down existing structures of power. It is true that all these photographers gained notoriety and income because they documented conditions that actually occurred, and therefore had an "interest" in these conditions existing at the time they photographed them. Nevertheless, it is more important to recognize the photographers' own artistic choices in these and other photographs that show their obvious disdain for and disapproval of the status quo. Yet in

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their desire to document and therefore hope to end injustice, the Civil Rights Portfolio photographers express their idealism – a belief in a world rid of racism – and therefore optimism that their work could help realize that ideal.

By the end of the 1960s, the optimism had given way to a new pessimism. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy (1963), Robert Kennedy (1968) and Martin Luther King (1968); America's inability to win the Vietnam War; and the failure of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society to end poverty; led Americans to begin to doubt themselves, their country, and the very idea of American Exceptionalism. **Duane Michaels'** *New York* (rain) (1969) demonstrates this well. Michaels uses soft focus to

suggest both anonymity and unanimity of the common experience of sadness or anger. The younger man in the foreground looks down physically and downcast emotionally, as he slowly crosses the street. He is not running to avoid the rain, but just going through the motions of life. The older man also looks down and appears depressed, hunched over as if beaten by the ambivalent reality of the late 1960s. The younger man and older man, while headed from right to left in the frame, also seem to have turned away from one another, mirroring the split of the Democratic Party as well as the widespread youth motto, "Don't trust anyone over 30."

Military impotence and energy dependency joined with economic stagflation and rising unemployment during the 1970s and 1980s to deepen the sense of pessimistic ambiguity in the U.S. **Dawoud Bey**, *Five Children*, *Syracuse NY* (1985); **Mary Ellen Mark**, *Vashira and Tashira - Twins*, *Suffolk, NY* (1993); and **Earlie Hudnall, Jr.**, *Three Drummers* (1996); all demonstrate this sentiment. It is statistically more likely that Vashira and Tashira's parents were unwed, and the separation and faceless anonymity of the adults in the photograph suggests this might be the case here. At the same time, though, the presence of two adults does seem to suggest a nuclear family. Also, consider that among all ten children in the three images, only one is actually smiling. The rest seem either to disregard the camera or view it with suspicion. Bey's *Five Children* confront the camera with a sense of conviction, recalling the stern and impatient facial expression worn by Parks' *Ella Watson*. Despite their apparent working class status, suggested by the peeling paint on the wooden porch of a seemingly older home, the children seem to have a strong sense of family. The two older girls appear to be caring

for younger siblings, suggesting that children in working class families often must assume some domestic responsibilities that prosperity allows suburban and urban upper and middle class children to avoid. The fact that *Three Drummers* make toy drums from discarded buckets and broomsticks, and wear torn jeans, references the statistical reality that African Americans in the U.S. remain more likely to be poor. Yet, despite the poverty, Hudnall also suggests dignity, nobility and ingenuity. Indeed, Bey, Mark and Hudnall all recall the similar characteristics of many Farm Security Administration photos of the rural poor in the 1930s, even as neoliberal economic policies like outsourcing, free trade and welfare reform actually undid many strands of the social safety net that the 1930s New Deal and 1960s Great Society had woven.

Put in its historical perspective, the Civil Rights Movement itself has a mixed legacy. There is no doubt the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 increased African-Americans' political participation. The middle and upper classes are now more diverse as many African Americans have benefited from access to education and business opportunities. At the same time, rates of poverty, crime, homelessness, teen pregnancy, delinquency, drug abuse and incarceration remain higher among African-Americans. Moreover, many Anglos still harbor deep prejudices against African-Americans. Therefore, to understand the aims and the challenges of the Civil Rights Movement, it is appropriate to consider it within the optimistic, even charmingly naïve, era of the 1950s and early 1960s, sandwiched between two more pessimistic eras.

— Matt Hinckley

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Panel discussion on "Collecting Photography" Thursday, February 25, 7:30 p.m. Jonsson Performance Hall

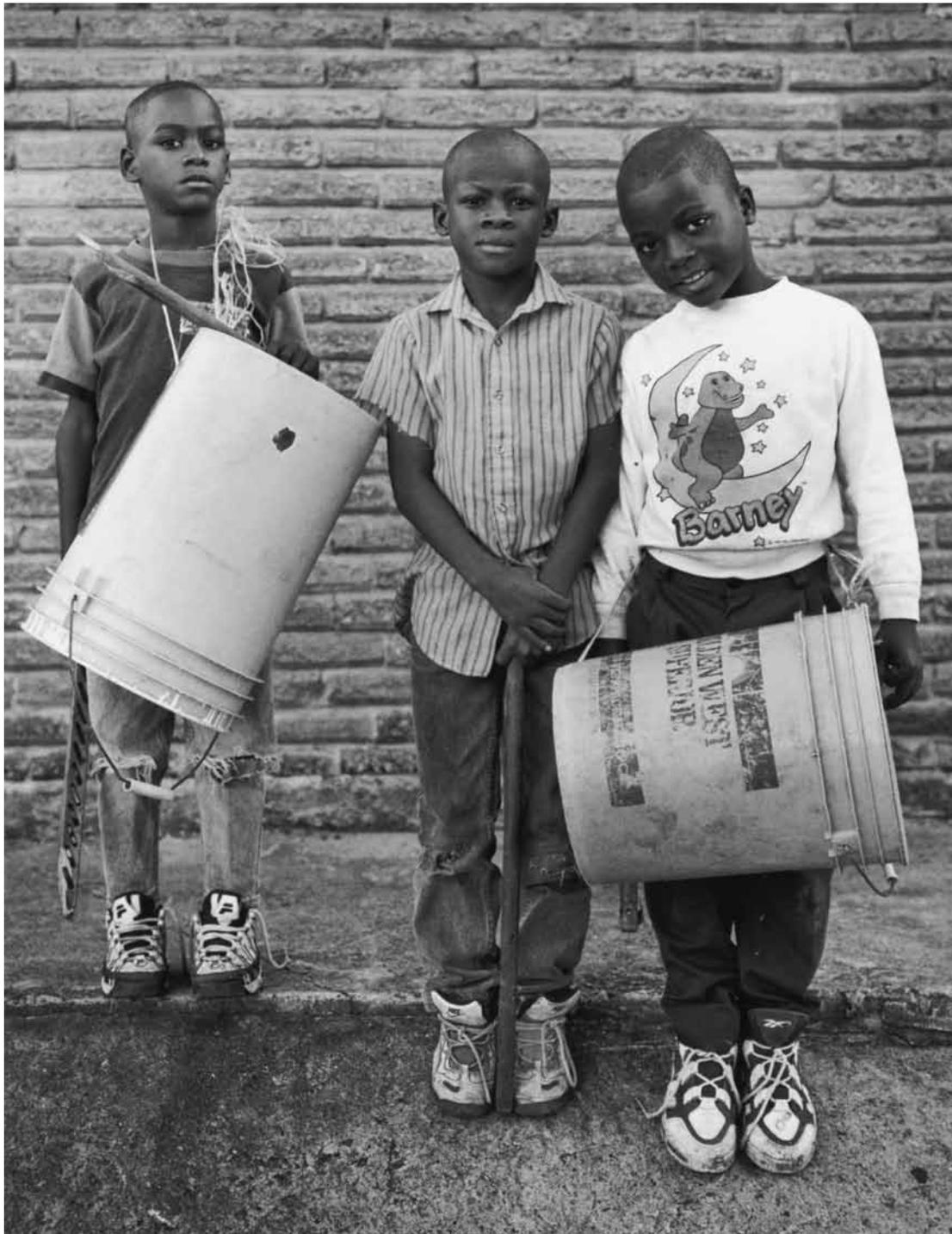
Participants include:

Lorraine Davis, lecturer, writer, and consultant, has been active in the field of photography for over two decades. In 1983 she became the Assistant Director of the Paul Strand Archive then, in 1987, moved to Switzerland where she was the Kuratorin at Galerie zur Stockeregg in Zurich until the end of 1990. For the following twelve years Ms. Davis built and curated the Pfeifer Collection, Zurich, the only Collection of Classical American Photography in Europe. She is currently revising and updating Lee Witkin's 1979 classic *The Photograph Collector's Guide*, a publication still used by galleries, museums, researchers and collectors. www.lorrainedavis.com

Burt Finger is the Gallery Director and co-owner of Photographs Do Not Bend (PDNB) Gallery in Dallas, Texas. He and his wife, Missy, opened this gallery in 1995. Before opening the gallery, he and his wife acted as private dealers in fine art and antiques. Prior to this, Mr. Finger has had many interests and careers. He was stationed a year in Vietnam (1969) as an officer in the Corps of Engineers. During his time in Vietnam he worked with the famous photojournalist, Larry Burrows. When Mr. Fingers returned to Dallas, he became a photojournalist. While he was a photographer in the 1970's, he studied art and was exhibited in various galleries in Texas including the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston. He also taught photography at North Texas State University (currently Univ. of North Texas). His current position as gallery director involves curatorial duties, research and sales. He also curates exhibitions outside the gallery for non-profit spaces.

Missy Finger is co-owner of PDNB Gallery. Her partnership at the gallery involves curating exhibitions, writing, sales, publicity and research. Before opening the gallery, she created a traveling exhibition of Farm Security Administration photographs from the Great Depression era and curated and co-curated many solo gallery exhibitions. She has served as Programming Chair for the Dallas Museum of Art Friends of Photography, Events Chair for the Dallas Art Dealers Assoc., and is a current member of the Friends of Modern and Contemporary Art at the DMA. Ms. Finger is a graduate of the University of Texas School of Business. www.pdnbgallery.com

Charissa N. Terranova is an Assistant Professor of Aesthetic Studies at The University of Texas at Dallas. Dr. Terranova lectures and teaches seminars on media theory and art and architectural theory and history. She has published several catalogue essays on museum exhibitions, in *The Journal of Transport History*, *Journal of Urban History*, *Senses and Society*, the Dutch architecture journal *Oase* and in the Canadian journal *Women & Environments International*. She also is a regular contributor to the Texas art magazine *Art Lies* and the website for art in Texas, Glasstire.com. From 2004 to 2006 she was the art critic for the *Dallas Observer* and she also has written criticism for the *Dallas Morning News*. Her criticism has also appeared in *Art News* and *Sculpture Magazine*. www.charissaterranova.com



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Gallery Hours: Mon. – Fri., 9 a.m. – 10 p.m.; Sat., 9 a.m. – 6 p.m.; Sun. closed.

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