Print Viewing Guide: Photography as Social Practice

This print viewing set introduces students to photographers who use their practice to elevate awareness of social, economic, and cultural issues and to inspire positive social change. In this photographic approach, the process of collaboration is often as important as the physical artwork and the relationships between subject, audience, and community are paramount. This selection of work looks to historical and contemporary artworks to encourage students to discuss perceptions of social issues and how photography can either represent or misrepresent these topics, while also navigating the artists' formal choices.

Lewis Hine, *Ellis Island, Italian Immigrants*, 1905

The MoCP is supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Board, the Museum Council, individuals, and private and corporate foundations. The 2020-2021 exhibition season is generously sponsored by the Philip and Edith Leonian Foundation, the Efroymson Family Fund, and the Illinois Arts Council. This project is partially supported by a CityArts Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events. This guide was created with contributions by Columbia College Chicago students Sam Collins, Sylvie Harris, Rebecka Kann, Emilie Plunkett, and Frenchie Scott.

Social Documentary Photography During the Turn of the 20th Century:

Social documentary photography has its origins at the end of the 19th century. Notable photographers Henry Mayhew, Jacob Riis, and Lewis Hine began to use the camera as an instrument of expression to speak out against social injustices. Their work expanded the established genre of **documentary photography** that records what the world looked like, by adapting the field to depict a social and/or environmental focus. They made photographs to draw attention to ongoing issues of their times, especially telling the stories of underprivileged or disadvantaged populations.

Lewis Hine (American, 1874-1940)

Lewis Hine spent the majority of his life photographing American social issues of immigration, child labor conditions, and the plight of the human workforce during industrial modernization. Hine was a sociology professor who saw the potential that photography had as an educational medium. His photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island treated the new, often degraded, citizens with respect, photographing his subjects in more formal poses instead of as huddled masses that appeared in the media. In the words of photographer Louis Stettner, "Hine portrayed [the immigrants] for us and for history as solemn and dignified carriers of sophisticated, rich and varied cultures from the Old World."

In 1908, the National Child Labor Committee hired Lewis Hine to document child labor in American factories and farms. His work helped pass a law against child labor, known as the Keating-Owen Act of 1916—a testament to his keen ability to engender empathy through images.

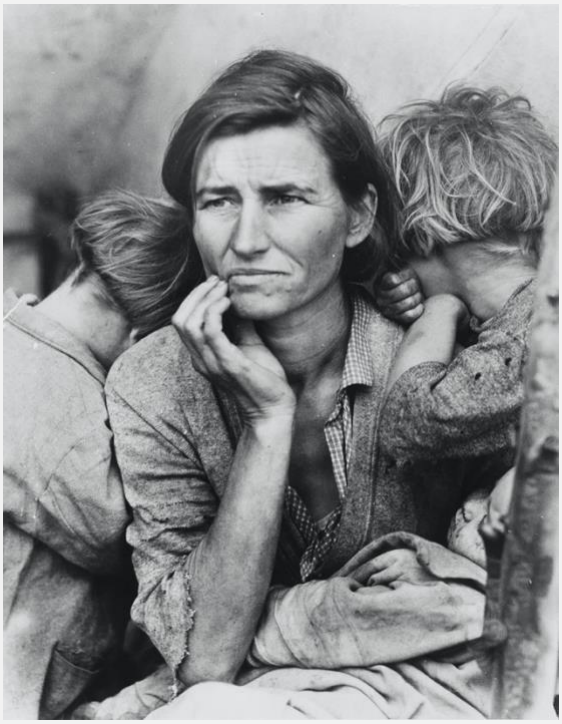
Lewis Hine, *Ellis Island,* 1905

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- What do we learn about the subject from this portrait?
- What do you notice about the subject's posture, facial expression, and gaze?
- What observations can you make about the subject's clothing? How might the details of her clothing influence your reading of this image?
- Do you think a portrait alone can encourage people to think differently about a controversial topic? If so, how?

Social Documentary Photography and the Farm Security Administration

Social documentary began to take further form in the United States during the Great Depression (1929-1941). In 1935 the US government created the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an organization to help those most affected by the depression. The FSA provided emergency loans to farmers and helped relocate them to better land. It was one of the most ambitious and controversial components of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program. To help convince Americans that the program was essential for moving the nation out of the depression, the FSA hired writers and seventeen photographers, including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Jack Delano, Gordon Parks, and Arthur Rothstein, to record difficult conditions in rural America in images. These photographs were used to show Americans the suffering of others in the country and to rally public support for allocating government relief funds to farmers.



Nipomo, California, March 1936.

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895-1965)

Dorothea Lange approached documentary photography as a deeply personal practice. She believed in photography's ability to reveal social conditions, educate the public, and prompt action. Lange thought of herself as an observer directly recording reality, although she also sought to portray moments with emotional resonance and to transform specific circumstances into transcendental and symbolic images.

Lange's titles were often long and included some of the many notes she often took about the scenes she photographed. The full title for this images reads: *Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven children without food. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tires in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute.*

Lange took seven photographs of this mother and her children, but this **frame** became the most famous. In time, it became known simply as *Migrant Mother.* Shortly after this photograph was taken it was printed in a newspaper with the title "Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squaller." [squaller is another spelling of squalor] As a result of this image, the government rushed 20,000 pounds of food to the camp where the family was staying. It is now one of the most famous images of the Great Depression, and one of the best-known American photographs ever made.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- What is the mood or feeling of *Migrant Mother*? How is that communicated?
- What do we know for certain about the people in *Migrant Mother*? What assumptions might we have made?
- Do you feel any personal connections to this work? Explain.
- What can photography do well in creating a record or document? What are its limitations?
- In what ways can documentary photographs be "truthful?" How could a documentary photograph be misleading?
- What are some of the rights and responsibilities of those who tell the stories of others through photographs or words?
- The image below is another frame of *Migrant Mother* with the same title. With more environmental details, do you read the story similarly or differently from the iconic image? Why do you think that Dorothea Lange and Roy Stryker, who led the FSA, chose the tightly framed image of the woman and not one of the other five images to reproduce and distribute?

Social Documentary Photography and the Civil Rights Movement

"The world seldom believes the horror stories of history until they are documented." - Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance and poverty.[1]"

-Gordon Parks

Moving into the mid-20th century, social documentary photographers in the United States turned their cameras to rally support for the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil rights movement spanned from 1954–1968 and saw protesters in a pitched national battle for equal rights for Black Americans and to ensure future generations would share in the basic rights that white Americans enjoyed. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders relied on the power of photographs to persuade and motivate people to action. For many white Americans outside the South, it was easy to be unaware—or to outright ignore—brutal segregation practices during the Jim Crow era. But images of the everyday inequalities as well as the barbaric violence inflicted against children and peaceful protesters forced all Americans to notice—and to choose sides.

In 1948 **Gordon Parks** (American, 1912-2006) became the first Black staff photographer for *Life* magazine (Parks was also the only Black photographer of the FSA). He covered a wide range of subjects for *Life* for over two decades and most famously photographed segregation in the South in 1956 while on assignment for the magazine. For this story, Parks lived with a shareholder's family for two weeks, documenting what he saw within homes and on streets. The image here was photographed from inside of a car (a detail you can noticed in the lower left-hand corner) because it was unsafe for Parks to openly photograph in the streets of Birmingham with Klansmen following him. His images culminated into a photo essay, "The Restraints: Open and Hidden," which was included in the September 24, 1956 issue of *Life*. Many of the images were not published and deemed lost, only recently discovered in 2012 in a storage container. They were printed posthumously by the Gordon Parks Foundation.

Gordon Parks, *Drinking Fountains, Mobile, Alabama,* 1956;

[1] Sandefur, S. (n.d.). *Photographer Gordon Parks' Work Was Weapon Against 'Racism, Intolerance And Poverty'*. KMUW. https://www.kmuw.org/post/photographer-gordon-parks-work-was-weapon-against-racism-intolerance-and-poverty.

Danny Lyon (American, b. 1942)

John Lewis in Cairo, 1962; printed 2010

Danny Lyon was the first staff photographer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the only nation-wide Civil Rights group formed and led by young people.

This image features John Lewis, a key player in our nation's voting rights movement. A civil rights leader and chairman of the SNCC from 1963 to 1966, Lewis led the famous voting rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 with Martin Luther King, Jr. These marches led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act.

This photograph by Danny Lyon of John Lewis kneeling in peaceful protest was used to recruit more people to join SNCC. Social activist Julian Bond described Lyon's pictures as **"[helping] to make the movement move."**

Lyon's images captured many other important leaders and demonstrations performed by the SNCC, providing a crucial archive of the movement to inspire activists of the future.

Left to right: *Ella Baker, who called the 1960 meeting of student activists in Raleigh, North Carolina, that created SNCC*, 1963; printed 2010; *Sheriff Jim Clark arrests two demonstrators who displayed placards on the steps in front of a Federal building in Selma,* 1963; printed 2010

Gordon Parks (American, 1912-2006)

From left to right: *Drinking Fountains, Mobile, Alabama*, 1956; *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama*, 1956; *Willie Causey and Family, Shady Grove, Alabama*, 1956

Initially working as a fashion freelance photographer, Gordon Parks joined the photography project of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1942 as the only African American to photograph for the FSA. During his time working for the project, he photographed Washington, DC, home of the FSA headquarters, portraying the city under the rules of segregation—while being under the rule himself. He returned to fashion as a freelance photographer for *Vogue* magazine in 1944, where his work appeared regularly for several years, and in 1948 he became a staff photographer and writer for *Life* magazine. The magazine sent its only African American photographer to Birmingham, Alabama, and the surrounding area, to document the region wrought with racism. Parks lived with a shareholder's family for two weeks, constantly being tormented by Klansmen and white supremacists and fearing his life, as well as his subject's lives. The photo essay, "The Restraints: Open and Hidden," was included in the September 24, 1956 issue of *Life*. Many of the images were not published and deemed lost, only recently discovered in 2012 in a storage container. They were printed posthumously by the Gordon Parks Foundation.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- How can photographs help shape our understanding of historical and current events?
- Consider the images by Gordon Parks and Danny Lyon side-by-side. How might Lyon's privileged position as a white photographer photographing in the Jim Crow South shape how his images are composed, compared to Parks' position as a Black photographer?
- How might you see the political realities of the time in the images? What details in the images might show the artist's voice or perspective of the situation?
- Consider the distance of the photographer from each subject. Why do you think they chose to photograph from this **vantage point**?

Social Concerned Photography and LGTBQ Activism:

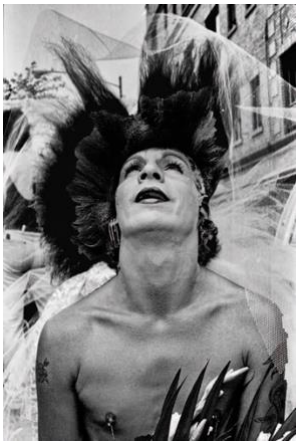
Photography has played an important role in the fight for equal rights for LGBTQIA communities. Beginning in the late 1960s, a marked uptick in public expressions that craft alternative narratives to mainstream visualizations coalesced around activist communities. Artists including Eleanor Antin, Joan E. Biren (JEB), Nan Goldin, Gran Fury, Peter Hujar, Zoe Leonard, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Catherine Opie created artworks, as well as billboards, leaflets, and postcards that forcefully inserted new visualizations of identity, sexuality, and human rights into public discourse. Set against a body of imagery found in visual culture that overwhelmingly reinforced prevailing social norms, the works made by these artists aggressively countered ideologies enshrined in the existing visual record. A new generation of photographers continue to carve out new ways of envisioning gender, identity, relationships, and selfhood, bringing further nuance to the groundwork laid by their predecessors.

Using a medium that is resolutely still, they paradoxically find strategies to explore the idea that identity and often gender itself do not exist as biologically fixed realities, but are rather adaptable expressions negotiated over time and along a spectrum of possibilities. Combating narrow-minded presentations, their works engage critically with the power of photography to render the intricacies of identity, as they challenge the ways audiences—both individuals and groups—imagine individuality and intimacy.

Lorenzo Triburgo, *Rowboat on the Beach (Tash)*, from the *Transportraits* series, 2011

Kurt Weston (American, b. 1957) created images of the 1980s LGBTQIA underground culture to explore sexuality, community, pride, power, and resistance to the socio-political systems in which marginalized communities fall victim to. These photographs are an archive of a generation lost to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and shed light on the individuals who paved the way so other queer people could live authentically.

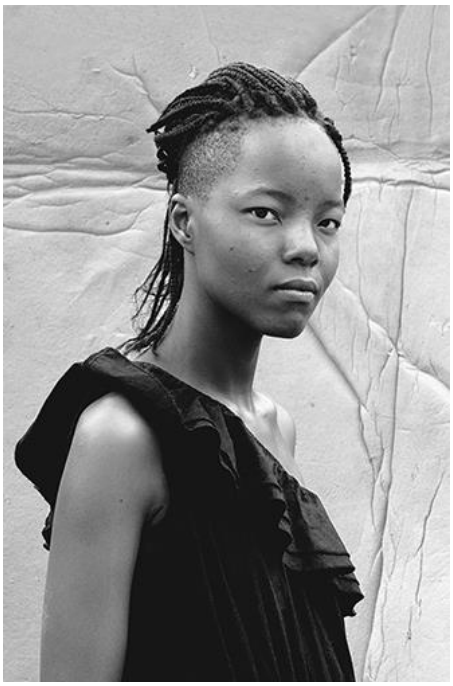
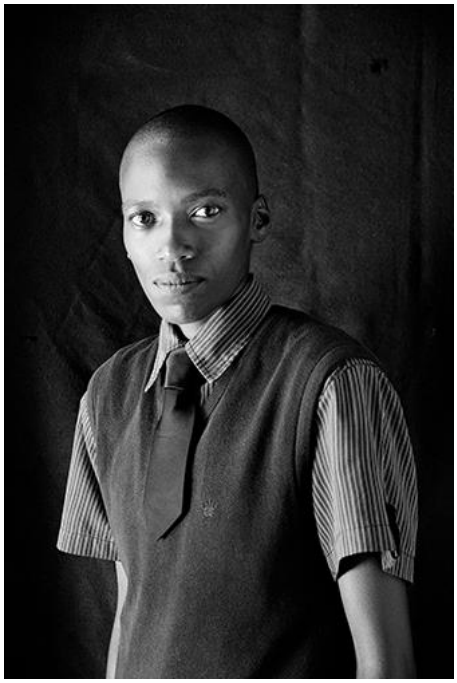




Left to right: Kurt Weston, *Night Clubbing,* 1983; *When the Storm Ends*, 1986; *White Wedding,* 1983; all printed 2018

At the same time, **Robert Mapplethorpe** (American, 1946-1989) was creating images that dealt not only with the exploration of sexuality as self-image in the late twentieth century but also the contradictions inherent in the classical depiction of the human form. Though infamous in the 1980s for his nude studies that seemed to straddle the fine line between art and pornography, Robert Mapplethorpe also spent a significant portion of his career creating self-portraits and traditional floral still-life arrangements. Yet Mapplethorpe is remembered by many for being at the center of the 1989 National Endowment for the Arts controversy over the funding and exhibition of art that challenged the accepted social mores of the time. The controversy centered on seven of Mapplethorpe's photos in an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati funded by the NEA that were deemed obscene by a grand jury. Two of the images were portraits of children and five depicted men engaged in explicit sexual behavior. The trial resulted in Mapplethorpe's favor, protecting artists representing queer identity for future generations under the First Amendment freedom of speech protections.

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait #385*, 1980

Left to right: *Tumi Nkopane, Kwathema, Spring, Johannesburg*, 2010; *Nhlanha, Esther, Mofokeng, Thokoza, Johannesburg*, 2010

I am producing this photographic document to encourage individuals in my community to be brave enough to occupy public spaces, brave enough to create without fear of being vilified, brave enough to teach people about our history and to rethink what history is all about; to reclaim it for ourselves, to encourage people to use artistic tools such as cameras as weapons to fight back.[2]

-Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972) is a photographer and visual activist whose ongoing series of large-format black and white photographs *Faces and Phases* aims to redress the invisibility of lesbian and queer identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Muholi counters conventional perceptions of lesbian and transgender communities—which suffer from an epidemic of continuous assaults and "corrective" rapes—by creating portraits of individual members that convey their dignity and empowerment. To date, she has made more than 240 portraits, ensuring black queer visibility and assembling an archive of an often invisible and marginalized population for posterity.

---

[2] Financial Times. (2018, January 5). *Zanele Muholi: 'I'm a visual activist'*. Subscribe to read | Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/896c582e-f013-11e7-ac08-07c3086a2625.

Questions for looking:

- Can visual representation of marginalized communities be a form of activism? Why might it be important to see communities outside of your own?
- How is the time period of each artist featured in this overall set of images significant? Do artists have the capacity to impact activist movements?

Social Concerned Photography and the Fight for Gender Equality:

Laia Abril, *Marta Portrait* (diptych), from the *On Abortion* series, 2017

A journalist by training, Laia Abril investigates the history of birth control and the consequences of restricting women's access to safe and legal abortion in her project, *On Abortion: And the Repercussions of Lack of Access* (2018). Abril traveled the world to compile the stories and photographs that make up her extensive archive, meeting with doctors, historians, and women who have had life-threatening experiences while seeking to manage a pregnancy. The images are presented in an installation providing many stories chronicling the choices made by women who seek abortions next to photographs of historical methods of birth control. Abril also shows many dangerous methods of abortion that have been used over time. Every year, worldwide, about 42 million women with unintended pregnancies choose abortion, and nearly half of these procedures, 20 million, are considered unsafe. Some 68,000 women die of unsafe abortion annually, making it one of the leading causes of maternal mortality (13%). Of the women who survive unsafe abortion, 5

million will suffer long-term health complications.[3]

Barbara Kruger, *Don't Die for Love from Liz Claiborne: Women's Work*, 1992

Barbara Kruger, recognized for her boldly graphic combinations of text and images, has long produced work with political and feminist aims. Her artworks assimilate information from the mass media in a critique of gender roles and power structures. With the graphic punch of strong reds and blacks, direct language and aggressive design confront the viewer with provocative ideas and witty reversals.

Developed by Y-Core, Chicago, for Liz Claiborne Corporation, this image was part of *Women's Work,* a community-based arts program designed to draw attention to issues of concern to women and their families. With the goals of raising awareness about domestic violence and helping communities respond to the needs of its victims, *Women's Work* featured powerful and instructive images by Barbara Kruger, Susan Meiselas, Diane Tani, Carrie Mae Weems, and John Winet and Margaret Crane. *Don't Die for Love* was one of a number of pieces Kruger created for the project and was displayed on nearly 200 billboards and transit shelters throughout San Francisco, Oakland, Miami, and Boston (not to mention its presence on cups and bags).

Questions for Looking:

- Consider the image and text combinations in these works. What impact does the text have on the image, if any? Do you think photograph based in social practice need text components for audiences to understand the artist's intentions?

[3] Reviews in *Obstetrics and Gynecology*. 2009 Spring; 2(2): 122–126. "Unsafe Abortion: Unnecessary Maternal Mortality,"Lisa B Haddad, MD, MA, Clinical Fellow in Obstetrics* and Nawal M Nour, MD, MPH. Accessed 11.4.20.

Glossary of Terms:

Documentary photography: photographic method used to document aspects of reality. Whether engaging in storytelling, activism, or reportage, the artists take varied approaches to convey with the world that surrounds them.

Social justice: the belief that all people should have equal access to basic needs and services, including healthcare, jobs, safety, and housing.

Frame: In film photography, a single image on a roll of film

Vantage point: This refers to where the photographer stands in relation to his or her subject. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide:

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

VA:Re7.2.K–12 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K–12 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K–12 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11.K–12 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STANDARDS

SS.CV.1.9-12 Distinguish the rights, roles, powers, and responsibilities of individuals and institutions in the political system.

SS.CV.5.9-12 Analyze the impact of personal interest and diverse perspectives on the application of civic dispositions, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

SS.CV.6.9-12 Describe how political parties, the media, and public interest groups both influence and reflect social and political interests.

SS.CV.8.9-12 Analyze how individuals use and challenge laws to address a variety of public issues.

SS.H.3.9-12 Evaluate the methods utilized by people and institutions to promote change.

SS.H.7.9-12 Identify the role of individuals, groups, and institutions in people's struggle for safety, freedom, equality, and justice.

SS.H.8.9-12 Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically under-represented groups.

SS.H.11.9-12 Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.