

LISA OPPENHEIM

OPEN SOURCE



LISA OPPENHEIM

Gaping holes, scratched surfaces, open sources

For several years, Lisa Oppenheim has investigated the ways in which photographs are archived, historicized, and recalled. She uncovers, downloads, handles, references and re-presents existing images to question the materiality and meaning of photographs and how images publicly circulate. The three projects in the exhibition *Open Source* draw upon various image repositories, including an early 20th century Chicago newspaper, the archives of the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA), and online photo sharing sites.

For the project *Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans*, the artist accessed Walker Evans' Depression-era negatives, now part of the Farm Security Administration photographic archive in the Library of Congress. From 1935 to 1943, the FSA hired artists to photograph the effects of the Great Depression and publicize government-sponsored initiatives that changed land use and purported to improve the living and working conditions of impoverished migrant farmers, sharecroppers, and tenants. The photographs that Evans, and fellow photographers, made were largely responsible for a visual and social consciousness of the economic conditions of that time. The FSA artists sent out on assignment would ship their film back to Washington D.C. for processing. The editing of images, led by Roy Stryker, often involved "killing" negatives that he deemed unfit to print by punching holes through them. This gesture, as evidenced by the language assigned to it, is a violent one; it is also particularly poignant as the holes often cut through the bodies of the already-vulnerable people who were documented.

Working with these "undesirable" and largely unseen negatives, Oppenheim pairs a copy of a killed Evans print with a contemporary color photograph that contains only the circle of information that she imagines might have been extracted. Her work sets up a visual dialogue between the 1930s and the present day. This is a gesture and set of concerns that seems strikingly relevant, as current economic conditions are repeatedly compared to those of the Great Depression.

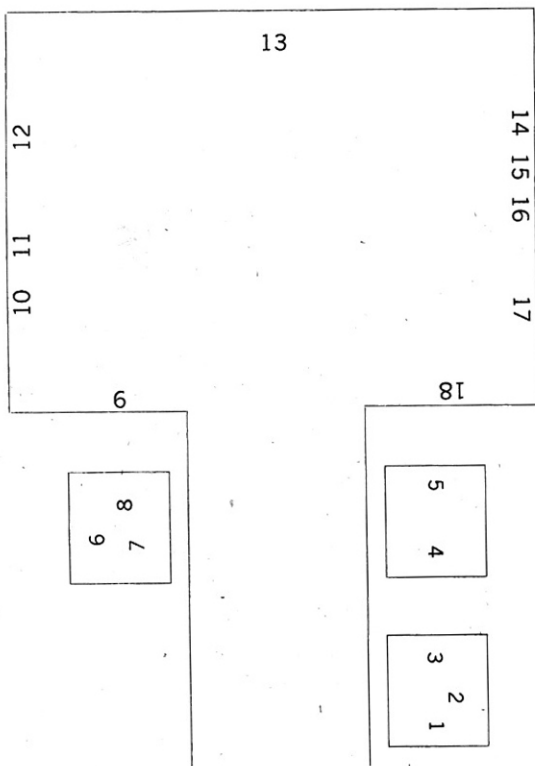
For this project, Oppenheim concentrated on the photographs that Evans made in Hale County, Alabama, during the time that he and writer James Agee collaborated on the photo essay *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The intact Evans images from this time period later appeared in the exhibition and catalogue *First and Last*, which Sherrie Levine famously re-photographed for her series *After Walker Evans* (1979). Oppenheim situates herself alongside Levine with this project, re-contextualizing history, appropriating visual culture, and pointing to how meaning shifts as materials pass through the hands of multiple editors and authors.

In the series *Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News 1902-1933*, the artist finds glass negatives from this early 20th-century newspaper that have been damaged over time. Printing only the negatives that contain flaws, cracks, and gaps, she pairs the resulting images with their original newspaper captions. A new gap is formed between the specificity of the language in the caption and the abstracted visual information hovering above it. On one hand, we are told precisely what we are looking at, and on the other, the curious patterns and forms encourage open-ended, imaginative interpretations. Even when we read the caption, more questions than answers are presented because of our historical distance from the original event. Who are these individuals? Why was this particular action or event press worthy? How have our expectations of journalism and photojournalism changed since then?

This disconnect between what we're told that we're looking at and what we imagine is also an operation at play in *The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else*. For this project, the artist gathered pictures of sunsets that soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan posted to online photo sites such as Flickr. Oppenheim printed out these photos at snapshot scale and photographed herself holding them up in front of the sun setting in New York. We experience the final work as a 35mm slideshow that cycles through the various sunsets-within-a-sunset. The gesture references Kenneth Josephson and his *Images within Images* series from the late 1970s, in which he would similarly hold photos up in front of related spaces or objects to create a perceptual or visual pun and emphasize the surface of the photograph. As Oppenheim's slideshow progresses, we start to discern subtle clues of a desert landscape, and when we know that war surrounds the sunsets that we are looking at, they take on a very different charge.

The snapshot-sized sunsets contain the sort of cliché imagery that we might find on postcards—suggesting that these pictures are an attempt by the soldiers to communicate that everything is okay to loved ones at home. The slideshow format harkens back to family vacation slideshows or educational contexts. The notions of vacation, tourism, and idyllic landscapes smack up against what I can only imagine to be the violence of war and all that is happening in these landscapes that we can't see. Part of the power of these seemingly innocuous images and the straightforward presentation is that the very lack of specific visual information triggers memories of other iconic photos from these wars (i.e.: Abu Ghraib) that remain in our visual repository even when we aren't physically looking at them. This piece, like the others in the exhibition, is not only about what we are looking at, but all of the events, narratives, histories, bodies, and spaces that lie beyond the photographic frame.

Kristine Thompson
Assistant Curator, UCR/CMP



All *Damaged* works: Archival black & white photograph on newsprint

1. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Morgan), 2003-06
2. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Swimming), 2003-06
3. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Podium), 2003-06
4. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Ida Weiss II), 2003-06
5. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Ida Weiss I), 2003-06
6. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Insane), 2003-06
7. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Downing), 2003-06
8. Damaged: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933 (Governor), 2003-06

All *Killed Negatives* works: Hand-printed black & white and color photographs

9. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Field), 2007
10. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Small Flat), 2009
11. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Girl and Boy), 2009
12. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Fireplace), 2007
13. The Sun is Always Setting Somewhere Else, 35mm slide projection, 2006
14. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Oshkosh), 2007
15. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Girl), 2007
16. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Church), 2007
17. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Small Foot), 2009
18. Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans (Boy and Babe), 2007