

Memory Objects

LESLIE HEWITT TRAINS HER LENS ON PHOTOGRAPHY'S CHARGED HISTORY

BY SARA CHRISTOPH

PORTRAIT BY KRISTINE LARSEN

“WE SHOULD EXPECT more from the indexical nature of the photographic medium,” Leslie Hewitt says emphatically as she pins a large, arresting photograph to a wall in her West Harlem studio. The work is from “Riffs on Real Time,” a series of compositions the artist began in 2002, in which a single amateur snapshot, borrowed from photo albums of acquaintances, is rephotographed against a relic from midcentury America. In this example, a faded picture of jovial adults in pearls and mod eyeglasses is set atop a photo spread from *Life* magazine, showing a college lecture hall—presumably newly desegregated—sparsely populated with black students. Both are “charged memory objects,” Hewitt explains, their embedded ideologies sparked when photographed together, as they are here, against the intimate backdrop of an auburn-wood floor. “I am interested in what happens to the image when it is dislocated from its original context. Where do these images rest in individual consciousness? How do they rest in the collective imagination?”

The questions posed by Hewitt’s artistic practice, which moves freely from still photography to sculpture and installation, cut any tie between linear narrative and photography to the quick. “I want to make the act of viewing less passive, to engage and question, to challenge and deconstruct our desire for a whole,” she explains. “My engagement with the photograph is one of antagonism and obsession.”

This obsession comes across in her exacting aesthetic; in both two and three dimensions, culturally coded objects (*Ebony* magazine, Carolina-blue striped wallpaper, a ripe mandarin orange) pivot, hang, or are unraveled with



Leslie Hewitt,
photographed in
New York, 2016.



Installation view of *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012, by Leslie Hewitt and Bradford Young, at Norway's Loffen International Art Festival in 2013.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Installation view of "Collective Stance" at the Power Plant in Toronto, 2016.

Untitled (Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again), 2012.

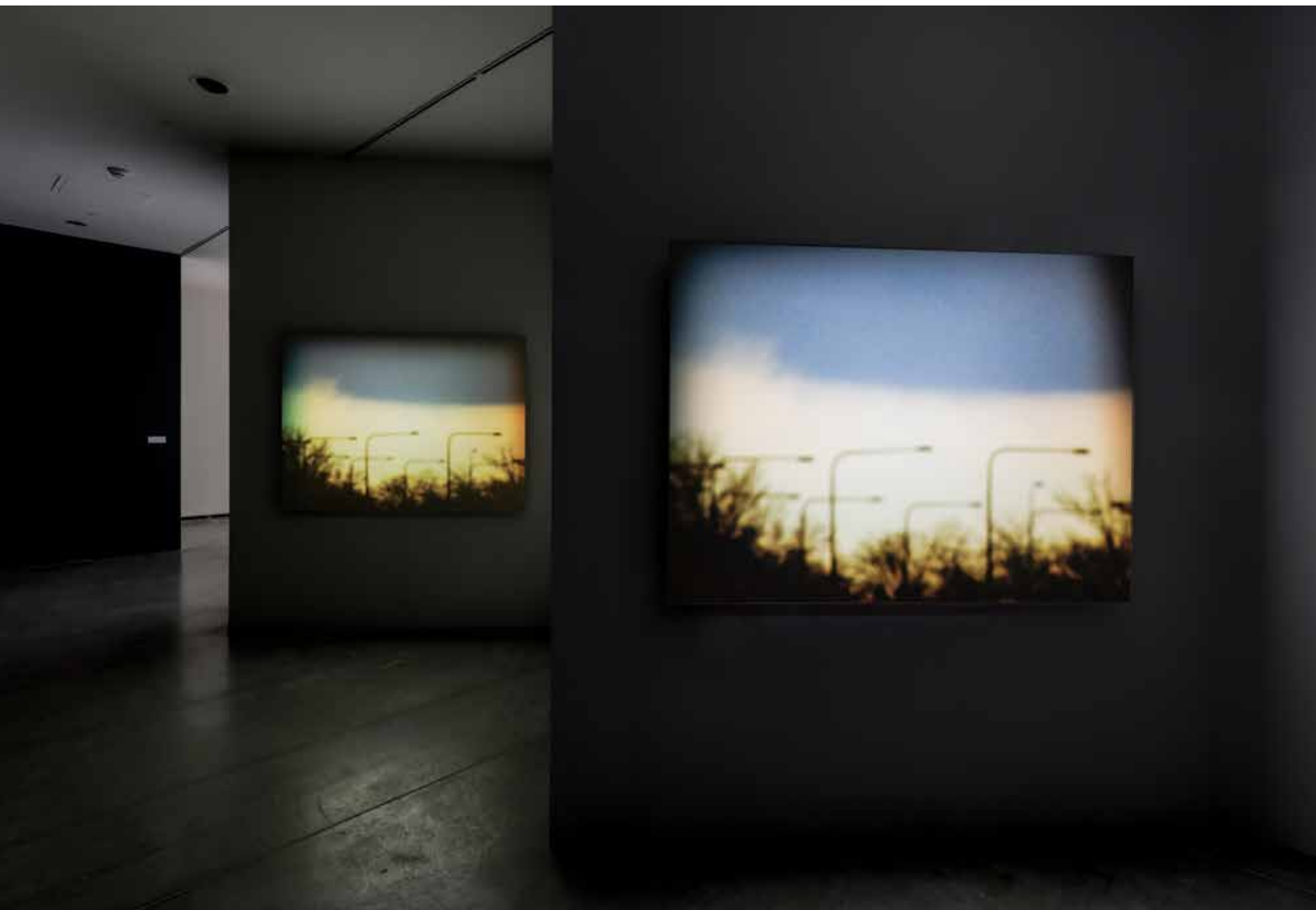
algebraic precision. It also emerges in the artist's careful, fluent prose and commitment to rigorous intellectual discourse. She cites artist and writer Coco Fusco as a mentor, and speaks of pulling material from sources as diverse as novelist James Baldwin and Frankfurt School film theorist Siegfried Kracauer.

Raised in Queens, New York, the artist will make her hometown solo institutional debut with "Collective Stance" at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, opening May 1. The exhibition, which originated at the Power Plant in Toronto, features serial bodies of work in sculpture, photography, and film: dimensional planes of sheet metal, coated in unblemished white, that cinematically fold into space; hand-pulled lithographs of photographic details distilled and reprinted to the brink of abstraction; and, serving as a cornerstone, *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012, a series of fifty-seven 35 mm filmic diptychs projected onto two perpendicular walls.

The latter is a collaborative project with cinematographer Bradford Young, a partnership that began in preparation for Hewitt's 2010 exhibition at the Kitchen in New York. The pair's first collaboration, *Untitled (Level)*, 2010, was an ode to Claude Brown's 1965 autobiographical novel of a childhood in Harlem, *Manchild in the Promised Land*. The same year, Hewitt received an invitation from curator Michelle White at the Menil Collection

in Houston; the museum had been gifted the Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil archive of 230 civil rights era photographs, and White wished to activate the archival images within contemporary consciousness. When faced with such cultural heft—the archive includes iconic photographs like those of Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking on the National Mall (by Dan Budnik), the shakedowns and chain gangs in a rural Texas prison (Danny Lyon), and the torrent of a fire hose knocking indistinguishable bodies to the pavement in Birmingham (Charles Moore)—Hewitt hesitated. Each image overflowed with pain and violence. How to pinpoint the many perspectives that remained to be seen, nearly half a century later?

Hewitt and Young embarked on a process of slow redaction, drawing upon and striking out large swaths of photographs from this archive. In our conversation, Hewitt points to a broadsheet she wrote to accompany an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2014. In the text, she explains how interacting with the archive became a formal process: "Cutting away excess information like surgeons with scalpels in hand, we moved through to the core of each image, finding a space for our distinct subjectivities," she writes. "After laying it out bare, breaking down each image to an elemental state, we had to build, collage, and layer—again. It is sculptural:

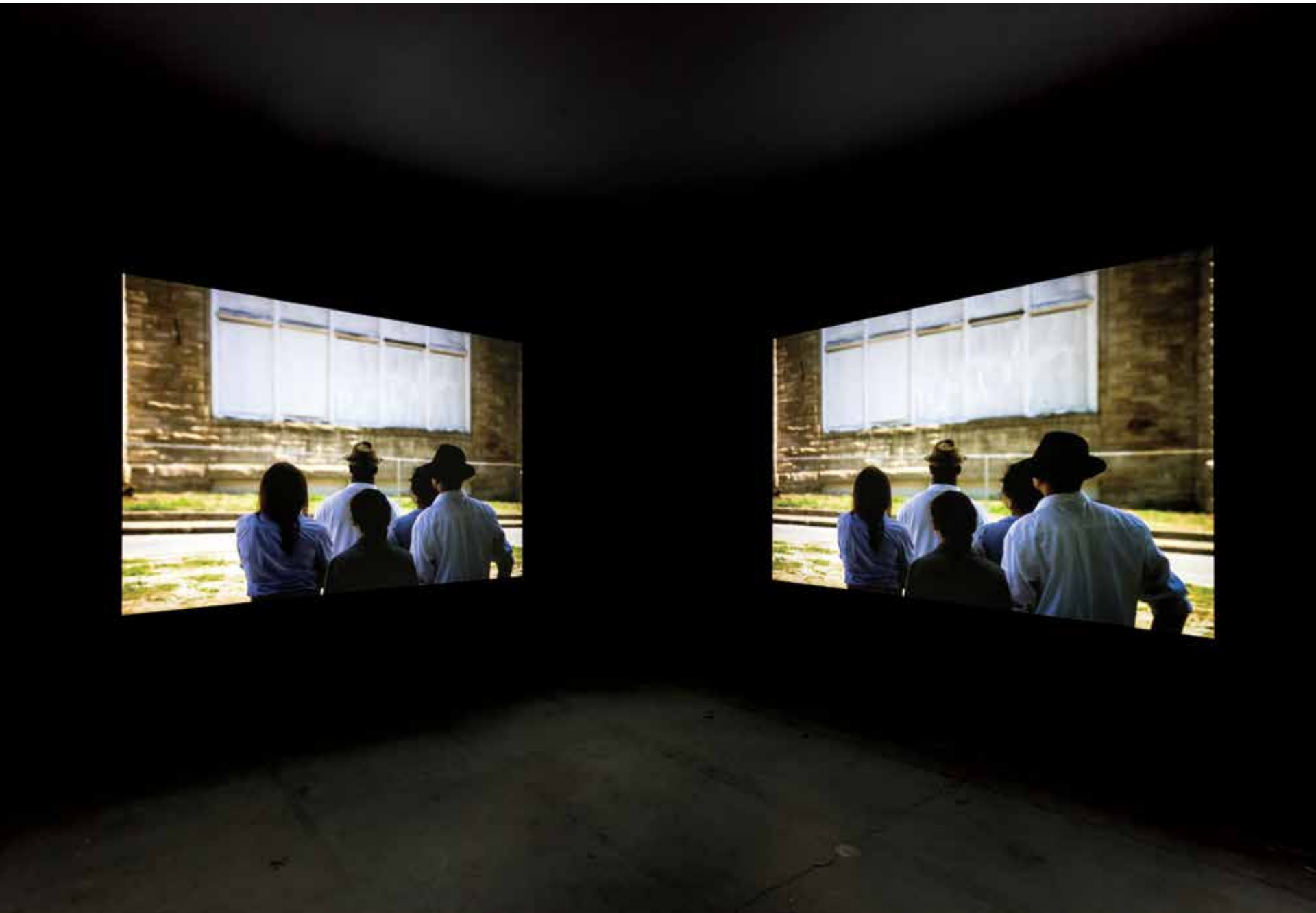


building an image, constructing and capturing *mediated* time.”

What resulted was *Untitled (Structures)*, a series of filmed vignettes shot over the course of two years in Memphis, Chicago, and the Arkansas Delta, each location the site of a climactic moment in the civil rights era. Individual frames span 15 to 24 seconds and center around single details isolated from the archival images—a black body bent, a crack in the white marble stairs—that are then “restaged” and filmed on the same consecrated grounds. Though the object in focus remains still, movement inescapably enters the frame: Eyes blink, window drapes flutter, a head scarf gently dances in the breeze. In one captivating frame the camera is tilted at the floor of a church; a crimson-red carpet, worn by heavy use, seems to pulsate against the cherrywood pews.

The settings depicted are deeply scarred by American history. This nuance is central to Hewitt’s methodology, for embedded within her meticulous visual language—her work has been described as embodying the tranquility of 17th-century Dutch still life—is an urgent subtext of struggle. The striking red carpet was filmed in the First Baptist Church of Memphis, which was built in the Reconstruction Era for a congregation of newly freed slaves and later became a vital rallying point for civil rights leaders. In another frame, sprightly, mottled weeds mark the





spot where the Memphis Sanitation Strike began in 1968; after weeks of garbage piling up on the streets and a march led by Dr. King, the police turned violent, killing a 16-year-old boy. *Untitled (Structures)* was completed in 2012, before numerous incidents of police brutality against black youth caught the attention of the national media. (After the project, Young went on to film the 2014 drama *Selma*.) Though Hewitt pushes back against the casting of her work as political, training a camera on these landscapes of abjection can surely be seen as a form of subtle defiance.

Hewitt does not seek to “correct” the historical account, nor to provide a single counter-narrative. For viewers of *Untitled (Structures)* today, the allusion to each vignette’s historical counterpoint is nearly impossible to detect. Hewitt’s final image is far removed from any signifiers of time or place; clothing, when included, deliberately avoids trends, and buildings are so decrepit as to be stand-ins for postcardlike ruins. “In photojournalism, the photograph’s function as document, as evidence and testament, is crucial,” Hewitt clarifies. “I wish to put pressure here, to push back against nostalgia, to contend with a more complex system of fragmentation and intertextuality.” The images in *Untitled (Structures)* are not pedagogical puzzle pieces to be illuminated and fit together; as in all her work, she insists upon myriad perspectives.

BOTH IMAGES: TONI HAFKENSCHIED AND LESLIE HEWITT



At SculptureCenter, the prismatic contours of Hewitt's sculptures will echo this provocation of multiplicity, which emerges as well in the diptych of photolithographs that accompany her sheet metal sculptures to form *Untitled (Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again)*, 2012. The lithographs will be installed at the far right corner of an expansive blank wall, the dense, texturized black ink of the prints gesturing to all that remains unseen in the surrounding white void.

Nearby, *Stills*, 2015, a more recent collaboration with Young, collages vignettes previously cut from *Untitled (Structures)* with the 1970s archival work of Haile Gerima, a leading member of the L.A. Rebellion group of filmmakers that sought to counter the hegemony of white Hollywood. Hewitt intends *Stills* to "expose a shared chain of artistic knowledge, the dimensionality of the images cutting across both time and space." In the installation, three simultaneous projections will stream from a single channel; the viewer will be physically unable to process all three screens at once. In addition to highlighting the give-and-take that occurs in the process of editing—and by extension, the recording of history—*Stills*, in keeping with Hewitt's practice of building from the peripheries of images, embodies a conceptual reflexivity that points beyond the artist, to the many bodies and positions we have yet to negotiate. MP

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ABOVE:
Installation view
of *Untitled*, 2012,
at the Power Plant
in Toronto, 2016.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:
Installation view
of *Untitled
(Structures)*, 2012,
in "Collective
Stance" at the
Power Plant
in 2016.

Installation view
of "Collective
Stance" at
the Power Plant.