



# 1979:1 – 2012:21

## Jan Tichy Works with the MoCP Collection

October 12 — December 23, 2012

Jan Tichy, Still of video installation *Changing Chicago*, 2012

**“An active archive is like a toolshed,  
a dormant archive is like an abandoned toolshed.”**

**— Allan Sekula**

Nearly 11,000 works of art fill the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago. In 2011, in an effort to map this considerable and eclectic landscape, the museum commissioned artist Jan Tichy to delve into the collection with an eye toward making it more accessible—and to produce an exhibition.

Over the course of this endeavor, Tichy probed the collection’s characteristics, highlights, and parameters, as well as its elusiveness. Noting its seeming indefinability, he began to ask questions and identify boundaries that facilitated a democratic, open-ended investigation. Signposts began to emerge. The largest photograph in the collection, for example, is a camera obscura image of Shanghai by Shi

Guorui that measures 51 by 153 inches. The smallest work is by Walker Evans and measures just 1 by 1 ¼ inches, an image of light reflecting off a metal grate, while the oldest, an image from 1864 by George N. Barnard of a battlefield in Atlanta. The second oldest work (1867, printed 1913) is an arresting portrait of the great scientist and mathematician Sir John Herschel by Julia Margaret Cameron, on extended loan from the Baum Family. The newest work is a grid of colorful images of Las Vegas made in 2012 by artist team Mebane and Hyers. And it turns out the collection begins with an unsolved mystery. The first object acquired by the museum, in 1979—accession number 1979:1—is a quirky image by Larry Williams called *Rural Saturday Night*, made in 1973, of a fist hitting a person's face. No paperwork records its provenance, and we have yet to uncover any information about the artist.

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Robert Frank, *Political Rally, Chicago*, 1956

Fast-forward more than three decades and some 10,000 additional works, and arrive at accession number 2012:21, a work by Columbia College graduate Zacharias Abubeker that the museum acquired in September 2012. Tichy himself donated Abubeker's photograph to the MoCP as part of his exploration of what it means to build and shape a collection; not only does it come from Tichy's personal collection, it is also the only work of art Tichy has ever purchased. Together with the Larry Williams photograph, Abubeker's image provides one of the bookends in the exhibition's title, *1979:1–2012:21: Jan Tichy Works with the MoCP Collection*.

Abubeker's photograph depicts an Axum-era Ethiopian obelisk that was pillaged by the Italians after their occupation of Ethiopia in the late 1930s. It remained installed in Rome for sixty years until it was finally returned to Ethiopia in 2005. Abubeker took his image of the obelisk in Rome from the internet and screen-printed it with pigment made from soil he collected on a trip to Ethiopia, his father's home country. The artist's use of the earth combined with an image appropriated from afar reflects his personal journey to understand his simultaneously deep and detached relationship to his father's birthplace. Furthermore, the presence of the soil poetically stakes claim to both the obelisk and the country of Ethiopia, as it forms a poignant reflection on ownership, colonialism, and the rights to land.



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The story of the displaced obelisk and Abubeker’s description of it reminds us that artworks, whether obelisks or photographs, are material referents of culture—objects that exist in time and whose meanings are subject to changes in location, contextualization, and interpretation. The photograph, like the obelisk itself, will circulate and exist in a complex world of changing relationships, viewing circumstances, social constructions, and rituals of display. In his essay *Resonance and Wonder*, literary critic and theorist Stephen Greenblatt discusses the shifting conditions of the reception of artworks, and outlines two types of effects that art might have on the viewer, “resonance” and “wonder.” He defines resonance as “the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which—as metaphor, or more simply, as metonymy—it may be taken by a viewer to stand” (1). Greenblatt describes wonder as a more ineffable feeling, as “the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention”

(2). Museums cultivate atmospheres that encourage both resonance and wonder, with the former being easier to predict. Resonance can be promoted by explaining and contextualizing objects in wall labels, discussions, and publications, a way to make up for the displacement that has occurred between the conditions of an object’s creation and its current state of display.

By selecting objects for this exhibition based on seemingly arbitrary, democratic criteria—first, last, largest, smallest, brightest, darkest—as well as on his own personal preferences and those of the museum staff, and by then combining those images with new works of art made in response to them, Jan Tichy has developed an exhibition that pulls wonder to the forefront. The act of looking triggers a desire for resonance, as Tichy considers the elusive nature of a collection as a whole by allowing us to freely make connections between individual objects. He also reminds us of the pleasure of simply looking, thinking, and imagining without seeking immediate, didactic answers.

This democratic spirit prevailed throughout Tichy’s work with the museum this past year. Although trained as a still photographer, Tichy is best known for his dynamic use of projected light and video in installations that incorporate objects and architecture into site-specific works. He is also recognized for his ability to form large-scale community-based artworks, such as his 2011 Cabrini Green project that illuminated the

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(1) Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 43, no. 4 (January 1990): 19.

(2) *Ibid.*, 20.

interior of the last remaining high-rise building in the city's infamous public housing project during its demolition. These fundamental aspects of his practice inspired us to invite him to work with the collection. After initial conversations between Tichy and members of the MoCP staff, the project quickly adopted a primary goal of increasing the accessibility and visibility of the collection both online and in the museum's physical location. Tichy started by inviting a group of graduate students in photography to work with him, recruited from institutions across Chicago including Columbia College Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago. The students and Tichy worked throughout the

year to improve the museum's online collection interface with tagging applications and are in the process of updating its website design.

Tichy also conceived a new use of the museum's windows on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Harrison Street, now deemed the Cornerstone Galleries. He invited six international curators and five of the students who worked with him to organize digital exhibitions of works from the collection to appear on large monitors in the windows. These dynamic exhibitions increase the visibility of the MoCP as they symbolically bring the museum's holdings out of the vault, through its walls, and onto the street, accessible to all who pass by as well as in a digital exhibition gallery on the museum's website. They also, in

Larry Williams, *Rural Saturday Night*, 1973



a more general sense, simply bring more attention to the museum and college. Tichy will update the Cornerstone Gallery several times this year with exhibitions organized by various groups, including museum educators, arts administrators, and artists.

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### ***What is the difference between a physical archive and a digital one?***

The museum's online database, and now its Cornerstone Gallery and online exhibitions, bring a particular question into focus—what is the difference between a physical archive and a digital one? The works on view in the window galleries and online are of course digital representations of real collection works. Throughout the exhibition, Tichy finds possibility in the tension between the physical object and its digital copy by freely manipulating and animating digital files in order to illuminate certain aspects of the original photographs. Andy Warhol's Polaroid portraits of posing people, for example, are animated until the frame speed per second has the effect of a flip-book, bringing them to life in a cinematic fashion and revealing their likely movements during their actual photo shoots with Warhol.

Tichy also explores the relationship of photography to time by using stills to make video works. One video, *Collection*

(2012), displays all 10,897 collection pieces in a seven-and-a-half-minute rapid-fire sequence, from lightest to darkest, creating a parade of images that our eyes and minds cannot fully process but certainly intrigue and inspire. In viewing the video, we do retain some individual images, based on criteria unknown to us, generated



Jeff Gates, *In Our Path #4 (Aerial Photograph)*, from the "20/20" portfolio, 1983, printed 1985

by our perceptual and cognitive processes and, perhaps, our innate aesthetic preferences. The overall luminosity of the digital collection not only lights up the physical space of the museum, it also reveals the lightest and darkest prints in the collection. (The darkest image, by Roy DeCarava, shows a man sitting in a window; the lightest one, by Harry Callahan, depicts his wife's legs and posterior.) By affecting our ability to "see" the images both in the video and on the walls, *Collection* demonstrates that the very act of looking is a durational experience regardless of whether we are looking at a "still" or "moving" image.





Diane Arbus, *Two Girls in Matching Bathing Suits, Coney Island, N. Y. 1967*

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In the museum's upstairs galleries, Tichy works with two of the largest "collections" within the collection. The museum holds 497 photographs by Dorothea Lange, 410 of which were gifts from her stepdaughter, Katharine Taylor Loesch, who lives in Chicago. As a family member, Loesch had access to peripheral sections of Lange's archive,

including multiple sets of work prints from the same negative that divulge valuable information about the artist's working process such as her trials and experiments with cropping and printing. And in the museum's print study room, Tichy shows work by all thirty-three artists who participated in *Changing Chicago*, an ambitious

documentary project commissioned by Jack Jaffe in the mid-1980s with the goal of portraying daily life in the city. Appropriate to a room that facilitates long, lingering gazes and careful study, the gallery is packed full of photographs, which are in turn interspersed with videos Tichy made around Chicago that pay homage to the original documentary project. The videos reflect both Tichy's experience of living in the city for five years and the influence of the museum's home city on the collection as a whole.

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Finally, Tichy's installation on the main level reminds us of the magic we have long associated with photography. The East Gallery is darkened,

alluding to the chamber where photographers create their illusions—the place where light meets film, digital sensors, or paper—while the West Gallery is illuminated, featuring works from the collection and thus attesting to the camera's output. Together the two galleries become a metaphor for photography, for its inherent tensions of dark and light, representation and abstraction. Like both the Cornerstone Gallery, with changing presentations on a busy city street, and the museum's new website, with tagging and digital exhibitions, the exhibition 1979:1–2012:21 invites us to make unexpected connections, to consider individual photographs as well as the nature of the collection as archive in both its physical and digital forms—and to experience the wonder of the art object.

— Karen Irvine,  
Curator and Associate Director

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