

Museum of Contemporary Photography

★ WHAT DOES ★  
**DEMOCRACY**  
★ LOOK LIKE? ★

OCTOBER 1—DECEMBER 23, 2020

## **IN THE MONTHS LEADING UP TO THE 2020 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION,**

the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) invited seven faculty members from Columbia College Chicago to answer this question with works from the museum's permanent collection of over 16,000 objects. Some of their responses highlight the components of a healthy democracy, such as fair access to voting, the importance of a free press, and the ability to experience unencumbered joy, while others emphasize its pitfalls, such as when people choose not to vote, or the increasingly manipulative role that social media and corporate technology can play in our elections. Additionally, each curator pondered the power of images and the photographic archive to represent our humanity and to document shared histories. Grappling with the limitations of our democratic state, while exploring the unmet expectations of a supposedly free society, this timely exhibition probes the problems we continue to face as well as the possibilities of a truly democratic future.



## GUEST CURATORS

### **Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin**

Associate Professor of Journalism

### **Melanie Chambliss, PhD**

Assistant Professor, Humanities,  
History, and Social Sciences

### **Joshua A. Fisher, PhD**

Assistant Professor of Immersive Media,  
Interactive Arts and Media

### **Joan Giroux**

Professor and Associate Chair,  
Art and Art History

### **Ames Hawkins, PhD**

Professor of English and Creative Writing

### **Raquel L. Monroe, PhD**

Director, Academic Diversity, Equity,  
and Inclusion & Associate Professor of Dance

### **Onur Öztürk, PhD**

Assistant Professor of Art History,  
Art and Art History

Photojournalism—and a free press—have long been essential to democracy. Before widespread access to cameras, the images taken by professional photographers and photojournalists were essential for helping us see what was happening in our communities, our country, and the world. They showed us who was hurting and who was helping, what was being destroyed and what was being created, what was worth celebrating and what needed to change. They let us see distant places and unfamiliar people with our own eyes.

In a healthy democracy, we need to be aware of violence, corruption, environmental degradation, and infringements of our civil liberties, and photojournalists have long helped us see all of these dangers. They've also increased our awareness of poverty and perseverance, dignity and normalcy. By creating images that demonstrate our common humanity, they show us that people of all kinds—no matter their race, gender, geography or economic circumstances—experience love and loss, demonstrate kindness and callousness, and go through good times and hard times and everything in between.

I initially explored the MoCP's collection in search of work by people who called themselves photojournalists. But other photographs also caught my eye: candid work by photographers who, while not identifying as photojournalists, adhere to the ethical principles of the National Press Photographers Association, which include "the faithful and comprehensive depiction of the subject at hand" and "the responsibility to document society and to preserve its history through images." Their work, too, seeks to capture the world as they found it, without manipulation or staging, and treats vulnerable subjects with respect and dignity. These photographers also contribute to our understanding of the world around us and to the compassion we need as a functioning democracy.

Today we are inundated by photographs, many of them powerful and important, taken by people who aren't journalists or photographers by training or trade but still contribute to the stories that inform us. News organizations often harness those contributions, ensuring accuracy and providing context, to supplement the images they assign to or acquire from professional photojournalists. Without these contributions, news organizations would present a far less complete picture of what's happening around us.

As I write this curator's statement, our cities are convulsed by protests over the murder of George Floyd by a police officer

in Minnesota—a crime documented by people on the street with cell phone cameras. Those videos not only led to the arrest of the four officers who murdered, or aided and abetted the murder, they also provided further evidence of our national crisis of police violence against Black Americans. The video evidence also allowed journalists to explore that problem more deeply, supplementing the cell phone documentation with security camera footage, 911 transcripts, official documents, and data to tell a larger story about pervasive and persistent police misconduct. Those cell phone videos helped journalists do their jobs.

But while images and videos taken on our phones have expanded our ability to see what is happening, the current hostility toward the profession of journalism obscures our access to the whole story, and diminishes the power of the press to shed light on inequity and hold the powerful to account. During the protests, police fired rubber bullets and tear gas canisters directly at journalists and photographers as well as peaceful protesters. Members of the news media were assaulted and arrested, in direct violation of the First Amendment and the public's right to know what is happening. This anti-journalism climate is promoted by politicians and others who brand the news-gathering profession "enemies of the people" and their work "fake news," endangering individual reporters and photographers, the public's right to accurate information, the power of the press to work as the "fourth estate" and hold power to account, and the strength of our democracy.

In this context, it's instructive to look back at photographs in the Museum of Contemporary Photography's collection from the twentieth century—photographs taken during a time when fewer people had cameras, more people trusted the news media, and our democracy did not appear to be under threat. These photographs played an important role in raising awareness about what life was like for some Americans at the time, and in many instances, they contributed to changes in everything from public attitudes to government programs and legislation.

These photographs also provide a caution: ultimately, what democracy looks like is intimately intertwined with what democracy allows us to look at. An unfettered press—reporters and photographers—allows us to see what is and envision what could be.





**Antonio Perez** (American, b 1963)  
*A Group of Young Men Volunteer Their  
Time to Clean Up the Gang Graffiti From  
Buildings and Churches, April 16, 1988*  
Gelatin silver print  
16 x 20 inches



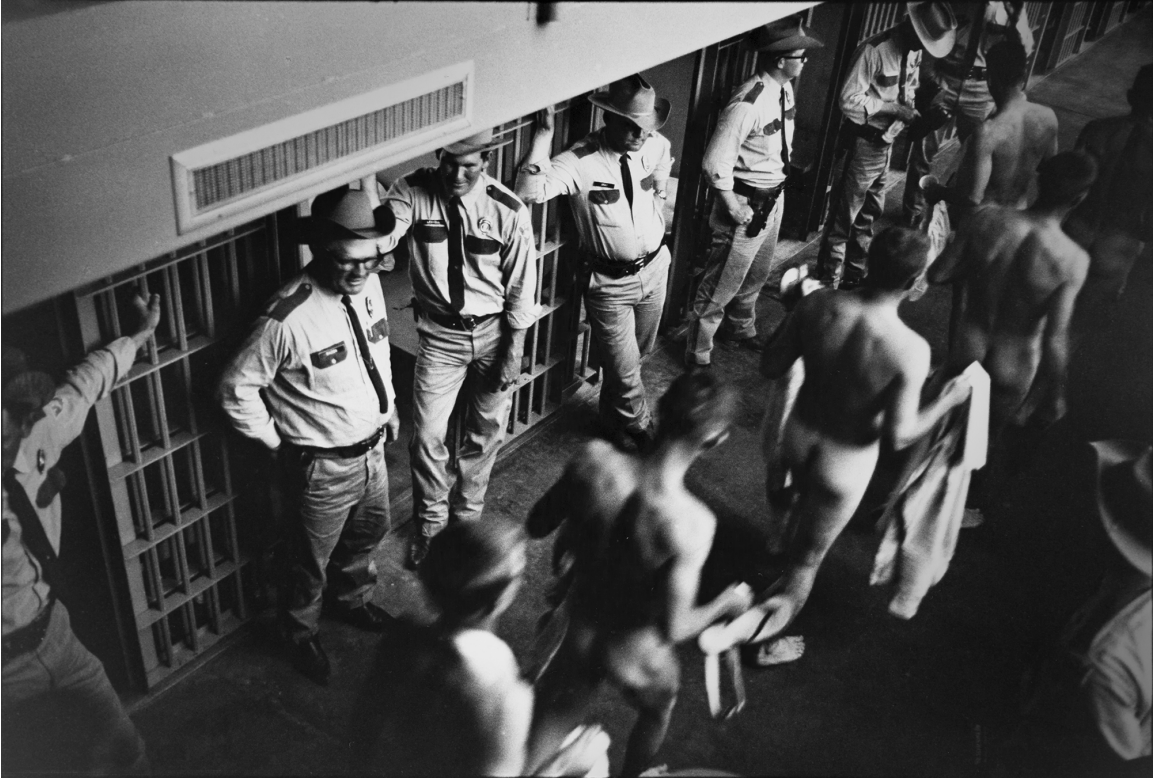
**Gordon Parks** (American, 1912–2006)

*Drinking Fountains, Mobile, Alabama, 1956; printed 2015*

Inkjet print

12 x 17½ inches

Museum purchase



**Danny Lyon** (American, b 1942)

*Building shakedown*, from *Conversations with the Dead*, 1967–1969, printed c. 1980

Gelatin silver print

11 x 14 inches

Gift of Jeanne L. and Richard S. Press



## Melanie Chambliss, PhD

Assistant Professor, Humanities,  
History, and Social Sciences

### *E PLURIBUS UNUM*

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the Fifteenth Amendment's ratification and the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment's, which respectively gave African American men and then all women the legal right to vote. Despite these two additions to the United States Constitution, many African Americans were still denied the franchise until the mid-1960s. As a Black woman, I can't ignore the accomplishments and failures of these two amendments, so the main inspiration behind my portion of this exhibit was representing all the people who couldn't vote throughout U.S. history.

Especially in light of the most recent Black Lives Matter protests, I wanted to challenge the idea of change over time. From left to right, the images move from singular figures in full color that are sparsely placed in different sections to more tightly packed images of people in groups. However, as we move towards these more inclusive images, the color starts to fade as a way of complicating history as a progress narrative. On the right side, there are also still spaces where photographs are missing to represent voices that have been lost due to injustices like felon disenfranchisement or voter suppression. These images could even be read right to left when you think of the impact of corporate spending on elections. Whichever way you choose to interpret this section, its images, absences, and narratives—when taken together—represent our democracy in all its disparate parts—*E pluribus unum* (out of many, one). This display was curated with the purpose of reminding everyone about the significance of this history—and the importance of taking the time to vote!



**Margarida Correia** (Portuguese, b 1966)

*Dona Ana*, from the *29 x 29 Portfolio* by the graduates of the MFA Photography, Video and Related Media Program at the School of Visual Arts, 2010

Inkjet Print

13½ x 11 inches

Gift of John MacMahon



**Jordan Freeauf**

*Art Quake*, 1992

Gelatin silver print

12 x 8 inches

Michael Dahlquist Memorial Collection

## Joshua A. Fisher, PhD

Assistant Professor of Immersive Media,  
Interactive Arts and Media

# YOUR VOICE || OUR VOICE

Corporate technology's role in reshaping our democracy has been palpable. Search engine optimization, procedurally generated news, filter bubbles, and algorithmic politics championed by Silicon Valley have co-opted the voices of the people. Your speech has become data that does not belong to you. Your speech has been monetized and hollowed out. Your speech drives advertising revenue as quickly as it forces us apart.

*Your Voice || Our Voice* is a collection of photography and augmented reality to highlight the toxic relationship between democracy and corporate technology. One side of this gallery shows halcyon photos of Greg Stimac's *Mowing the Lawn Portfolio* (2006). Stimac depicts Americans mowing their lawns as bemused and somewhat bored by the banality of their task. The other side shows photos of struggle, violence, and social justice from a range of photographers: Darryl Cowherd, Shelby Lee Adams, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo. This dichotomy in our democracy is observable even as our technologies have divorced our perception from this reality. In the center of the room is an iPad to encourage visitors to speak to a side of the room, while spoken words are co-opted and hollowed out by an algorithm displayed on a monitor. Once the system corrupts the speech, an avatar of the speaker is created with augmented reality—invisible to the naked eye but seen through an iPad. The duality—technology's invisibility and its perceptible impact—can be experienced by the speaker as they hear their stolen, corrupted speech through their estranged avatar. Throughout this gallery's course, the space will fill up with avatars in time. How democracy turns out, what the avatars are saying, you can only partially control.

**Danny Lyon** (American, b 1942)

*John Lewis in Cairo*, 1962

Gelatin silver print

8 x 13 inches

Gift of Peter Chatzky

**Greg Stimac** (American, b 1976)

*Concord, Vermont*, from the

*Mowing the Lawn portfolio*, 2006

Inkjet print

12 x 16 inches

Museum purchase





## Joan Giroux

Professor and Associate Chair,  
Art and Art History

things meaning consensus assembly protests actions  
gatherings objects symbols icons choice chances  
deliberative connections impossibilities unseen middle percentage  
the things they do dictatorship education the fourth estate  
chasms boundaries prevailing rules movement curation  
extraordinary 15,838 curation impression people places  
representation bodies 578 fragmented the times  
speech trust people autocracy revolt inaction  
citizenship progressive redemption penal restriction  
lethargy perfection trauma blemish  
limitation choice purpose press trauma inseparable  
fifth risks peace governance unified separate  
incarceration nonviolence consensus punditocracy constitutional  
deliberation 28 federalism social limitlessness  
people abstract illiberal doctrinaire conservative  
shattered imperfect rogue union  
change immeasurable respect intention participatory rights education  
responsibilities people law oligarchic  $3.31 \times 10^8$   
statutory liberties rule election voting people insurrection resistance  
freedom slow tyranny autonomy field fair ballot  
dogma venal unruly accountability broken extremes  
demoralized permissive violence gerrymander  
sabotage unruliness manifest decarceration boundlessness just  
limits pundits cartographies impenetrable equality authoritarian  
rights emergent oppositional judicial legislative

### The act of curation is an act of representation.

John Lewis reminds us that democracy is an act. Curation is an act of seeing, feeling, and discerning. This curation is founded upon an act of showing what might, and might not be, seen and represented.

In a May 1, 2020 *New York Times* opinion piece, “Where Are the Photos of People Dying of Covid?,” art historian Sarah Elizabeth Lewis describes the power of seeing in how Mathew Brady’s images made the human costs of war visible far from Civil War battle lines. Reading that piece, and recalling my own childhood encounters with images of the Vietnam War, underscored why I had chosen to curate through the act of looking—at each of 15,838 objects in the MoCP collection.

From these 15,838 visual encounters, I initially chose 578 images of people, places, and objects that for me resonated with associations of the messiness, potentials, and gaps in democracy’s strivings.

**Fully represented is 0.18% of 15,838, on a ground of 99.82%.**



**Richard Barnes** (American, b 1953)  
*Sacramento (Cabin in Warehouse)*, 1998  
Digital chromogenic development print  
40 x 50 inches  
Museum purchase with funds provided by  
Andreas Waldburg-Wolfegg





**Lewis Hine** (American, 1874–1940)  
*At the Russian Boarding House, 1908*  
 Gelatin silver print  
 5 x 7 inches  
 Museum purchase

**Dan Younger** (American, b 1945)  
*Desk Detail, Office, from the Objects In My  
 Father's Basement series, 1988*  
 Gelatin silver print  
 14 x 18 inches  
 Gift of the artist



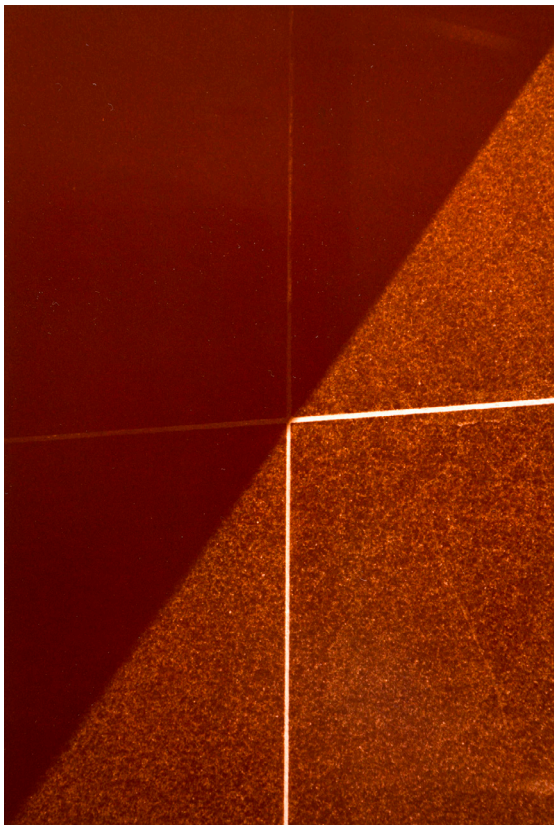
## RED, VOID, AND BLUE

*Red, Void, and Blue* is a conceptual data visualization of the popular vote from the last ten presidential elections in the United States. Selected from the MoCP's permanent collection are fifty images, half of them RED and half of them BLUE, colors popularly associated with the Republican and Democratic political parties. Using works that resist narrative, this assembly of images invites the viewer to reconsider the beliefs, values, and mythologies associated with the United States two-party system. By drawing our attention away from the center of the wall, the color-saturated images frame that which we cannot see: a void of eligible voters who, for one reason or another, did not or could not vote.

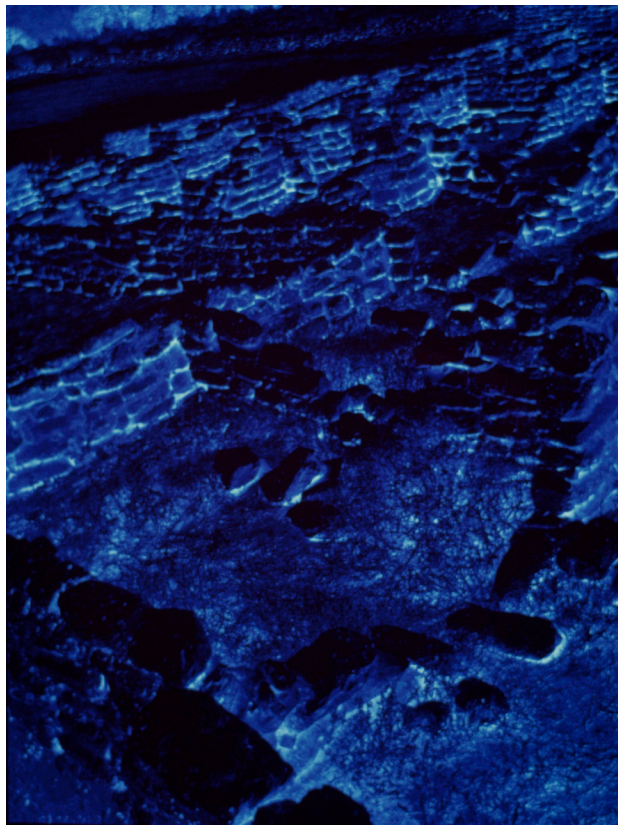
We might, upon first glance, ask: What if everyone who was eligible to vote did so? How might that change the outcome of an election?

Although the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution granted post-slavery enfranchisement to Black male voters in 1870, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in voting, voting rights in the United States have never been equitably acknowledged or universally protected via federal law. State-sponsored white supremacist tactics such as the poll tax and literacy tests commonly associated with Jim Crow Laws of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have evolved into twenty-first-century voter-suppression strategies. Lawmakers have created complicated rules governing absentee ballots and discriminatory practices regarding acceptable forms of identification, disingenuously framing them as measures to prevent (nonexistent) voter fraud. The result: disproportionate disenfranchisement of urban Black voters in current battleground states.

Considering this context, what if we shifted our usual American focus on the individual responsibility to vote, and concentrated instead on the white supremacist laws and structures of racist disenfranchisement? What might democracy in America look like if those who have been oppressed are now both seen and heard?



**Ralph Gibson** (American, b 1939)  
 Triptych from *The Second Apeiron Portfolio*, 1977  
 Chromogenic development print  
 8½ x 5¾ inches  
 Gift of Sam and Terry Evans



**Barbara Kasten** (American, b 1936)  
*The Ruins*, from the *Kiva Sequence*, 1990  
 Silver dye bleach print  
 39 x 39 inches  
 Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John V. Knaus



## Raquel L. Monroe, PhD

Director, Academic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion  
& Associate Professor of Dance

### BLACK FEMME JOY IN MOTION

*"If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."*

—Combahee River Collective, 1977

Democracy looks like Black femmes smiling, laughing, resting, playing, dancing, singing, running, jumping, skipping freely.

The photographs in this collection capture Black girls, women, and gender non-conforming femmes as they exercise their freedom to joyfully occupy public and private spaces.



**Kurt Weston** (American, b 1957)

*Dream Girl*, 1988; printed 2018

Inkjet print

21 x 16¼ inches

Gift of the artist



**Carlos Javier Ortiz** (Puerto Rican, b 1975)

*Girls Dancing, Englewood, Chicago, 2008*

Inkjet print

15½ x 23½ inches

Museum purchase



**Alun Be** (Senegalese, b 1981)

*Potentiality, Edification, 2017*

Inkjet print

27¼ x 39 inches

Gift of Mamadou-Abou and Catherine Sarr

## Onur Öztürk, PhD

Assistant Professor of Art History,  
Art and Art History

### THE ART OF THE Δῆμοι

The equation elections = democracy is simply inaccurate. In fact, many governments with authoritarian tendencies around the world have been using elections to legitimize their undemocratic agendas while ignoring the needs and demands of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. As literally a rule of *δημος/demos*—meaning “people” in Ancient Greek—the system clearly needs elections, but elections alone cannot ensure a true democracy since they inherently reflect the voice and ideas of a powerful majority.

The two lines of text, connecting the two walls of the installation, are written by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet and can be simply translated as:

To live like a tree alone and free  
and in a forest, like brothers and sisters . . .

The unprecedented circumstances of 2020 with overlapping crises of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide outcry against police brutality and systemic racism have made it increasingly clear that our lives, livelihoods, and freedoms are all interlinked to each other like the interlacing patterns of Islamic art. This sense of inter-dependency is probably why in many cultures a tree is considered a metaphor for democracy. To flourish, it needs constant care and support of its people, who can only be truly free with the tree’s existence. Thus, this installation is an homage to photography, and to the MoCP as a major venue for the medium, with an ongoing commitment to recognizing, documenting, and combating racial and social injustice. With its accessibility, availability, and visual impact, photography celebrates the ordinary and intertwined needs of all our lives.



**Louise Dahl-Wolfe** (American, 1895–1989)

*William Edmondson, c. 1967*

Gelatin silver print

14 x 11 inches

Gift of the artist



**James Iska** (American, b 1958)

*Oscar Flores, Maribez Sanchez, Luis Hernandez, and*

*Casino Crus Mugging for the Camera, 1988*

Gelatin silver print

12¼ x 18¾ inches

Gift of Jack A. Jaffe, Focus/Infinity Fund





**Adam Ekberg** (American, b 1975)

*Aberrations #7*, 2006

Inkjet print

20<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 26<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

Gift of the artist



**Stefan Chow and Hui-Yi Lin**

(Malaysian, b 1980 and Singaporean, b 1980)

*India #388*, from the *Poverty Line* project, 2011

Inkjet print

15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Gift of the artists

**MoCP** Museum of Contemporary Photography

**Columbia**  
COLLEGE CHICAGO

600 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, IL 60605 [mocp.org](http://mocp.org)

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