★ WHAT DOES ★ DEMOCRACY ★ LOOK LIKE? ★

OCTOBER 1–DECEMBER 23, 2020

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *What Does Democracy Look Like?* It includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may download this guide, along with other curricular resources, from the museum's website here. Prior to visiting the MoCP, you must reserve a free timed ticket. Reserve your ticket here.

MoCP Museum of Contemporary Photography | **Columbia** COLLEGE CHICAGO

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Moyra Davey, *Copperhead #81* (detail) , 1990

WHAT DOES DEMOCRACY LOOK LIKE?

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

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

Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin
Associate Professor of Journalism

What is a Curator?

From the Latin work *cura*, meaning "to care for," the definition of a curator is a person who cares for museum collections. Museum curators additionally make objects accessible through interpreting the objects through scholarly research and creating exhibitions or other modes of display for public access.

The term "curator" is now more broadly applied outside of museums, and you may see titles such as "lifestyle curator" given to a person who promotes luxury goods and "curated" selections of goods advertised as more specialized. In the context of this guide, a curator applies to the person who researched the MoCP's collection and selected, arranged, and contextualized the works you see today. Though each image has its own history, the curators of this exhibition are thinking about how each photograph interacts with the image next to it, and what these associations mean in telling a bigger story.

As you move from room to room, consider not just one photograph at a time, but how the works are hung on the wall. Is there color on the wall behind the image? If so, how does that color change the way you interact with the image? Are the artworks hung in a straight line or more loosely? Is there a lot of space between images or are they hung closely together? How much information is in the wall text near the images? What does the wall text say? All of these decisions were made by the curator and help inform the ways you interpret or engage with the artwork.

What is Democracy?

The MoCP asked each guest curator the same question: What does democracy look like? But what is democracy, exactly? Use this space to write the first words that come to mind when you think of democracy, or have your students say words that come to mind.

Many have heard the term "for the people, by the people" used to describe democracy. The textbook definition of democracy is: "government by the people; *especially*: rule of the majority." This essentially means that citizens in a democracy are responsible for electing who represents them as a majority through voting. The opposite of a democracy is a monarchy (*mono* meaning "one"), as in one king or dictator governing the population.

Democracy can look differently to different people. In this guide, we will look into a bit of the history of democracy in the United States and some of the constitutional amendments that shaped our understanding of US democracy today. For a more in depth analysis on these histories, we highly recommend listening to Season Four of the podcast Scene on Radio.
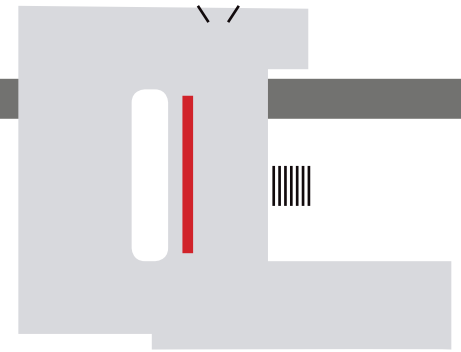
Lewis Hine, *Ellis Island, Italian Immigrants*, 1905

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Knowing the base meaning of democracy, do you feel the current leaders of the US government represent the majority of the nation? What are some moments where you have seen democracy thriving or failing? Explain.

Museum Entrance

Many curators emphasize the role of voting in their exhibitions. In this gallery, we see rows of images hung on painted stripes to resemble a flag.

Curator Melanie Chambliss PhD, Assistant Professor, Humanities, History, and Social Sciences states:

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 US 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** (see page 8). 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!

DEEPER READING:
Key Voting Changes to the Constitution: The 15th, 19th, and 24th Amendments

The 15th amendment, adopted into the constitution in 1870, states that male citizens in the United States cannot be refused the right to vote on the basis of "race, color or previous condition of servitude." Although this amendment legally granted all men the right to vote, discriminatory laws that required literacy tests or poll taxes in order to vote emerged over the next two decades and intentionally suppressed Black voters (while consequently excluding poor white ones). These policies prohibited anyone without a proper education or financial means to participate in elections and thus skewed all elected officials to represent only a privileged portion of the population.

In 1920, after years of protest, **the 19th amendment** was enacted, legally giving women the right to vote. Though initially proposed to Congress in 1878, this idea did not gain traction until the US entered World War I in 1917. By then, suffragettes began openly criticizing the hypocrisy of being denied their voting rights while the country fought overseas for democracy. However, even after the 19th amendment was ratified, Black citizens in the South were still largely kept from voting until Lyndon B. Johnson signed the **Voting Rights Act** in 1965, a crowning achievement for activists in the Civil Rights Movement. This act provided the federal oversight needed to drastically decrease voter discrimination—finally allowing Black citizens to be able to freely vote.

Dawoud Bey, *Third Street Basketball Court, NYC*, 1986

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

★ Reflect on this image by Dawoud Bey, titled *Third Street Basketball Court, NYC*, 1986. Eye contact is fairly common in portraiture. What is the impact of having the sole subject turned away from the camera, so their identity is obscured?

★ Are there clues in the image that suggest when and where this portrait might have been made?

★ How might this image add to the story Chambliss is telling in her exhibition?

Museum Entrance
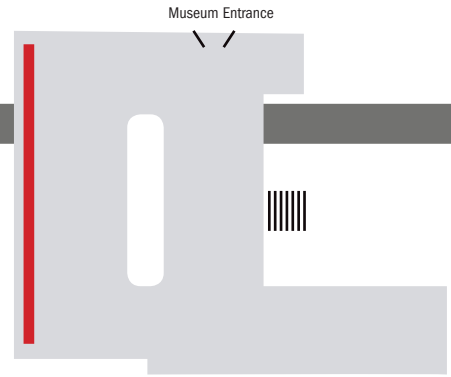
In this gallery, we similarly see photographs hung in a way that illustrates voting patterns through the past ten elections. Curator Ames Hawkins, PhD, Professor of English and Creative Writing, is interested in the wide gap in the center, representing all the people in each election who do not vote, either by choice or other barriers, such as voter suppression or disenfranchisement.

She states on her installation titled *Red, Void, and Blue*:

Selected from the MoCP's permanent collection are fifty images, half RED and half BLUE—colors popularly associated with the Republican and Democratic political parties. Using works that resist narrative, this portion of the exhibition invites the viewer to reconsider the beliefs, values, and mythologies associated with our country's 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 vote.

Troy Williams, *Red*, 2001

Alex Fradkin, *#304, Blue Room, Public Housing*, Chicago, IL, 1999
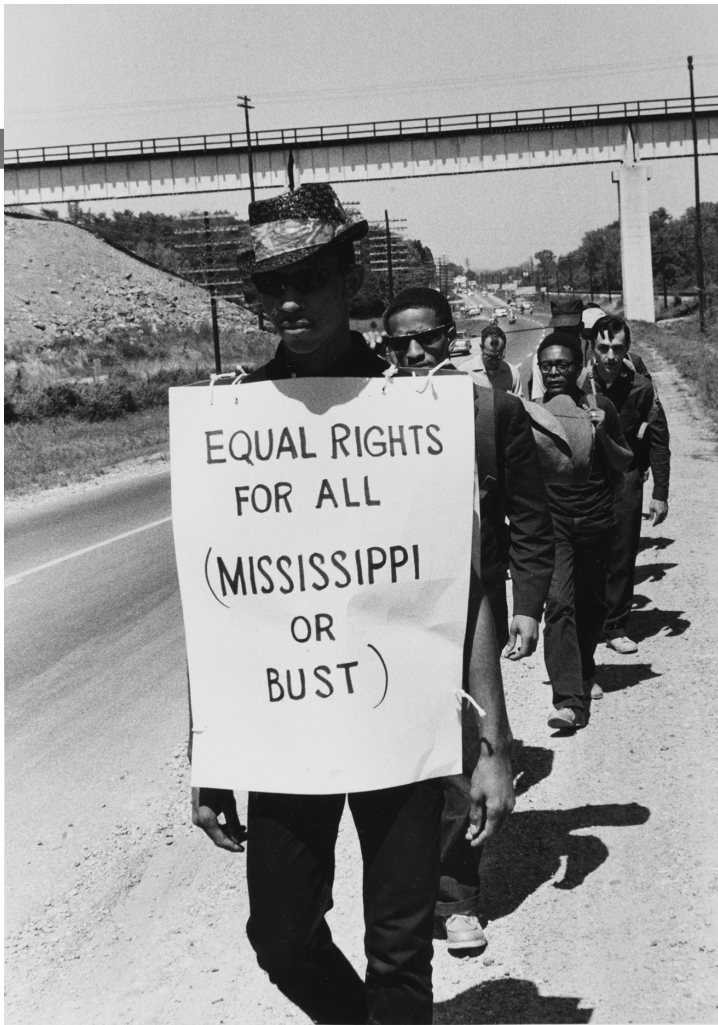
DEEPER READING:
Felon Disenfranchisement

Many curators in this exhibition are calling attention to efforts to suppress or disenfranchise voters. In the 2016 election, approximately 6.1 million US citizens were not able to vote because of a prior or current felony conviction, disproportionately affecting people of color and resulting in one in thirteen Black citizens without the ability to vote.[1] Florida accounts for 27% of this number and nearly 1.5 million people were unable to vote in the last presidential election. Some measures have taken place since then to ensure more voter access, such as the 2018 amendment to the Florida state constitution that would allow convicted felons with completed parole or probation periods to vote. This measure would have enabled 1.4 million more people to vote in the state, only to be partially undone with a subsequent law requiring felons to pay full payment of legal fees before being allowed to register to vote—much like the poll taxes blocking voting in the 19th century.[2]

This is just one of the many ways people are kept from voting right now in the United States. For more information, please visit The Sentencing Project.

1. Hill, H., & Porter, N. (2020, August 18). Felony Disenfranchisement. Retrieved August 21, 2020, from http://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/felony-disenfranchisement/

2. Totenberg, N. (2020, July 17). Supreme Court Deals Major Blow To Felons' Right To Vote In Florida. Retrieved August 21, 2020, from https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/892105780/supreme-court-deals-major-blow-to-ex-felons-right-to-vote-in-florida

Bruce Davidson, *Selma, Alabama Marches*, 1965

Voter Suppression

In 2013, the Supreme Court invalidated key sections of the **1965 Voting Rights Act**, which required the federal government to approve changes to states' voting practices. Between 1965 and 2013, this mandated federal oversight was the reason for the Voting Rights Act's massive success and strengthened voting rights for all Americans. In the aftermath of this 2013 ruling, several states have passed new measures that disproportionately impact historically marginalized communities. These changes include an increase in voter ID laws, requiring forms of identification in order to vote. Though this change might seem small, currently 18% of citizens over the age of 65, 16% of Latino voters, 25% of voting age African Americans, and 15% of voting age Americans who earn less than $35,000 do not have the necessary forms of ID to vote. The change also decreased the hours and locations of polling places or DMVs, and some states have begun purging voter rolls of supposedly inactive registrants despite a decent margin for error in detecting these absent voters. Historian Carol Anderson has argued that the combination of these changes between 2013 and 2016 and their targeting of minority communities might help to explain some of the decrease in Democratic voters in the 2016 presidential election rather than a widespread disinterest in a certain candidate.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AND DISCUSSION

★ Consider the way the images are installed and the blank space in the center of the wall representing the absence of registered voters in every election. How does the installation of this work bring to life the statistics it represents?

★ How well does the US democracy represents its population if many people are not voting in each election?

★ After considering how many people are *unable* to vote, discuss some of the reasons why people might choose not to vote. What are some structures today that keep people from voting, even if they are registered and would like to vote?

In this gallery, we see images chosen by Curator Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin, Associate Professor of Journalism, featuring documentary images made by artists whose practices ascribe to the ethical principles set out by the <u>National Press Photographers Association</u>.

Bloyd-Peshkin states:

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.

Bloyd-Peshkin continues:

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. That video not only led to the arrest of the four officers who murdered, or aided and abetted the murder, of Floyd; it provided further evidence of our national crisis of police violence against Black Americans. It also allowed journalists to explore that problem more deeply, supplementing the cell phone video 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.

In Gallery Activity

Notice the voter registration table in this gallery, as part of a larger on-campus initiative led by guest curator Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin. If your students are not of voting age, take some time to discuss the process of voting and how they can register when they are older. If your students are of voting age, encourage them to ask questions at the voter registration table and find out if they are registered to vote.

For more information on how to register to vote in your state, please visit <u>866ourvote.org</u>.

Bruce Davidson, *Untitled*, 1963

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

★ How does this image by Bruce Davidson compare or contrast with images you see today of the Black Lives Matter protests?

★ Considering that many police killings are now documented by cell phone cameras, what do you think the role of photography is in a healthy democracy?

★ The official slogan adopted by the newspaper *The Washington Post* in 2017 is "Democracy Dies in Darkness." What do you think this means? Why might a newspaper need to print this at the top of every issue? What would democracy look like without a free press?

Brian Ulrich, *Circuit City*, 2008

Paul D'Amato, *Isela, Chicago*, 1993

THE INFLUENCE OF CORPORATE TECHNOLOGY ON DEMOCRACY

In this gallery we see a new media installation by curator Joshua A. Fisher, PhD, Assistant Professor of Immersive Media, Interactive Arts and Media. Fisher is interested in highlighting the relationship between corporate technology and democracy. He placed an iPad in the center of the room for visitors to speak into with their thoughts on the photographs on display. An algorithm then twists the words into corrupted speech, spoken by avatars in the space only visible through the iPad.

Museum Entrance

Fisher states:

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 …

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.
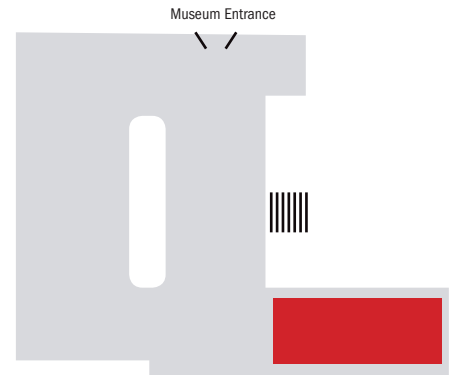
What do you mean by "corporate technology?" What are "procedurally generated news, filter bubbles, and algorithmic politics?"

Procedurally generated news or "automated journalism" is news that is written by artificial intelligence. Data is fed to an algorithm that then turns the data into written articles. In May 2020, Microsoft replaced all their journalists with this software.

Filter bubble is a term created by Internet activist Eli Pariser to describe what happens when personalized web searches produce customized content that isolates the user from opposing ideas, producing limited access to facts and creating echo chambers. Pariser argues that filter bubbles are very dangerous for democracies.

Algorithmic politics means the use of artificial intelligence by data collection for governing populations and maintaining social order. Some systems of algorithmic regulation are already in place, such as a mobile apps that tracks citizens to alert officials if they have been in contact with the coronavirus.

Greg Stimac, *Barstow, California*, from the *Mowing the Lawn* portfolio, 2006

Carlos Javier Ortiz, *A Teenager Held in Confinement, St. Charles, IL*, 2009

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AND DISCUSSION

What mood or emotions do you feel the images in this gallery convey? What in the images makes you feel that way?

Why do you think Fisher chose to keep the avatars invisible instead of projected onto the walls?

Fisher gives search engine optimization and procedurally generated news as few examples of "corporate technology." What other examples can you think of? How might you use or depend upon these technologies in your daily lives? Do these technologies infringe upon your personal freedoms or sense of democracy? How?

After seeing works in the last gallery about journalism and the role of a free press, does it matter to you if your journalism is created by a robot rather than a human being? Why or why not?

Curator Onur Öztürk, PhD, Assistant Professor of Art History, Art and Art History, created this design of a tree as a metaphor for democracy as the basis of his exhibition, *The Art of the Δῆμοι*. Öztürk provides lines of text by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, which roughly translates to:

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

Öztürk states:

The equation elections=democracy is simply accurate. In fact, many governments with authoritarian tendencies around the world right now are using elections to legitimize their undemocratic agendas while ignoring the needs and demands of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. As literally a system of demos—in Ancient Greek, δῆμος, meaning "people" and δῆμοι, or "plural"—democracies clearly need elections, but elections alone cannot ensure a true democracy since they inherently reflect the voice and ideas of a powerful majority.

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 depend on each other. This sense of interdependency 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 justice. With its accessibility, availability, and visual impact, photography celebrates the ordinary and intertwined needs of all our lives.
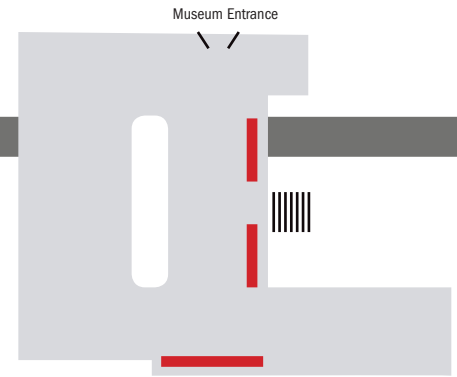
DEEPER READING:
The Tree as a Metaphor for Democracy

Öztürk states that a tree is a metaphor for democracies in many cultures. John F. Kennedy often told a story using the tree as a metaphor in many of his speeches. Below is an excerpt from a speech he gave at the University of California at Berkeley in 1962:

In its light we must think and act not only for the moment but for our time. I am reminded of the story of the great French Marshal Lyautey, who once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow-growing and would not reach maturity for a hundred years. The Marshal replied, "In that case, there is no time to lose, plant it this afternoon."

Today a world of knowledge--a world of cooperation--a just and lasting peace--may be years away. But we have no time to lose. Let us plant our trees this afternoon.

Another example of someone using the tree as a metaphor for democracy is when biologist and environmentalist Wangari Maathai gave a speech upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, defining the tree as "a symbol for peace and conflict resolution" in Kenya and in Africa at large. She stated:

Using trees as a symbol of peace is in keeping with a widespread African tradition. For example, the elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the thigi tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation.

Listen to the full speech here.

Discuss with students other ways that might trees represent democracies.

Keith Carter, *Garlic*, 1991

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

⭐ Consider some of the imagery Öztürk chose to display over the painted tree, including this photography by Keith Carter titled *Garlic*, 1991.

⭐ What do you think the photographer wanted to communicate about his subject? Why?

⭐ How might this piece visually tie into the curator's ideas above? Explain.

⭐ Do you see any repetition in what is depicted in the imagery in the other images on this wall? Describe. Why do you think the curator chose these repeating motifs?

The works in this gallery were curated by Raquel L. Monroe, PhD, Associate Professor of Dance.

Mezzanine

Monroe states:

> "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.
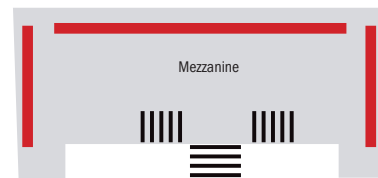
Marc Pokempner, *Dancing at a house party, Cabrini-Green*, from *Changing Chicago*, 1988

DEEPER READING:
The Combahee River Collective

The Combahee River Collective existed from 1974 to 1980 as a Black feminist lesbian organization working to address the needs of women of color overlooked in the mainstream feminist movement and civil rights movement. The collective, based in Boston, published a statement that is still influential today.

This collage diptych by Krista Franklin titled *She Taught Us How to Fight* (2016) pictures many artists, activists, and writers who were instrumental in shaping freedoms for women of color in the United States. Audre Lorde, one of the members of the Combahee River Collective is pictured in the right panel. Ask students to identify other historical figures in the collages and to discuss their contributions to democracy.

Krista Franklin, *She Taught Us How to Fight*, 2016

Alun Be, *Potentiality, Edification*, 2017

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

⭐ Closely look at this image by Alun Be titled *Potentiality, Edification*, 2017. What do you notice about the subject's clothing and their environment?

⭐ What do you notice about her body language and facial expression? How does she present herself to the camera?

⭐ Why might the curator have chosen this image as representation of joy? How is the freedom to joyfully occupy public and private spaces an important component of democracy?

The museum's top floor gallery encompasses an installation by Joan Giroux, Professor and Associate Chair, Art and Art History.

Giroux states:

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 judgement. 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, *Montana (Unabomber Cabin Site)*, 1998

James Newberry, *Untitled*, from *Changing Chicago*, 1987

Print Study Room

Museum Exit

Darryl Cowherd, *Stop White Police from Killing Us–St. Louis, Mo*, 1966-1967

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

Why is representation important—in a democracy and also in art?
What are the consequences of denying people visual representation?

Look closely at this image made in 1966–1967 by Darryl Cowherd, titled *Stop White Police from Killing Us—St. Louis, MO* and think back to the images you saw on the first floor about the importance of a free press. Is it important for museums to collect images like this? If so, why? If not, where do images like this belong?

Consider the words Giroux has listed in the wall text in a cloud (citizenship, progressive, redemption, etc.) What do theswe terms mean to you in the context of the notion of democracy? Why might Giroux include these words?

Danny Lyon, *John Lewis in Cairo*, 1962
This image is featured on the first floor as part of the gallery curated by
Joshua A. Fisher

DEEPER READING:
John Lewis and Voting Rights

John Lewis was a key player in our nation's voting history and his work is referenced by many curators in this exhibition. A civil rights leader and chairman of the activist organization the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963 to 1966, Lewis led the famous voting rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 with Martin Luther King, Jr. An image of these marches can be seen on page 9 of this guide, and on display on the museum's first floor. These marches led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act, detailed on page 6.

Lewis represented Georgia's fifth district in the United States House of Representatives from 1987 until his death in 2020. In his final op-ed titled *Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation*, published in the *New York Times* the day after his death, Lewis states:

> *The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.*

> *You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in your shoes, through decades and centuries before you. The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time.*

Classroom Activity:
After viewing the works on display, create your own response to the question "What Does Democracy Look Like?"

• What materials will you use to create your response?
• Will you include text? Will you use a lot of information, or just a little?
• Why?

Post your responses on social media with the hashtags #MoCP and #WhatDemocracyLooksLike for a chance to be featured by the MoCP.

On Democracy

PODCAST

[Scene on Radio, Season 4,
The Land That Never Has Been Yet](#)

On Voting

WEB RESOURCES

[Indivisible Illinois](#)

[Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights](#)

[ACLU Voter Suppression Guide](#)

FILM
[Selma](#)

BOOK
Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy*, 2018, New York: Bloomsburg Publishing

On Felon Disenfranchisement

BOOK

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindnes*s, 2010, New York: New Press

WEB RESOURCE

The Sentencing Project

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