

GO DOWN MOSES

EDUCATION GUIDE

July 18 – September 29



Melissa Ann Pinney, *Canella School of Hair Design*, from *Changing Chicago*, 1987. Gift of Jack A. Jaffe, Focus/Infinity Fund.

This guide serves as an educational supplement to the exhibition *Go Down Moses* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. To schedule a free docent-led tour, please visit: <http://www.mocp.org/education>

The MoCP is supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Board, the Museum Council, individuals, and private and corporate foundations. The 2018–2019 exhibition season is generously sponsored by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Illinois Arts Council Agency, the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE), and the Efromson Family Fund.

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INTRODUCTION

The exhibition *Go Down Moses* is guest curated by Teju Cole. An acclaimed writer, photographer, and critic, Cole is the former photography critic of the *New York Times Magazine* and is currently the Gore Vidal Professor of the Practice of Creative Writing at Harvard University. This is his first major curatorial project. *Go Down Moses* presents a reinterpretation of the MoCP's permanent collection that can be understood as a **visual tone poem of contemporary America, exploring elemental themes of movement, chaos, freedom, and hope**. In doing so, Cole uses the photographic archive to interweave the past and present, suggesting an aesthetic approach to understanding the current psyche. Cole writes:

“

Questions of liberation tend to interleave the present and the past. What is happening now is instinctively assessed with the help of what happened before, and both despair and hope are tutored by memory. The old Negro spiritual “Go Down Moses,” beloved by Harriet Tubman and generations since, sought to link the black American freedom quest with the story of ancient Israel’s struggle to be free of Pharaoh’s bondage.

Humanity is on the move. The ground beneath our feet is shifting, the skies cannot be relied upon, and even our own bodies bear the marks of the strain. Everyone is longing to be free, and everyone is curious about whether hope is still possible. The photographic archive contains evidence that thus it ever was, that we have always lived in this urgency.

Through an intuitive sequence of photographs, in images soft and loud, this exhibition proposes a redefinition: that hope has nothing to do with mood or objective facts, but is rather a form of hospitality offered by those who are tired to those who are exhausted.

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CLOCKWISE:
Gordon Parks, *Washington, D.C. Young boy standing in the doorway of his home on Seaton Road in the northwest section. His leg was cut off by a streetcar while he was playing in the street*, 1942. Gift of the Michael Dahlquist Memorial Collection.
Dorothea Lange, *Unknown title*, n.d. Gift of Katharine Taylor Loesch.
Dorothea Lange, *Unknown title*, n.d. Gift of Katharine Taylor Loesch.
Thomas Frederick Arndt, *Shea Kids Playing, Hazelton, North Dakota*, from the *Farm Families* project, 1985. Gift of Jack A. Jaffe, Focus/Infinity Fund.

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A VISUAL TONE POEM

A **tone poem**, also known as a symphonic poem, is an orchestral piece of music that is used to illustrate or emote a written poem or story, or even a painting, photograph, or drawing. The term was first used by Hungarian composer Franz Liszt to describe his orchestral music and soon grew in popularity in the late 19th Century. It is now used to describe the interpretation of a non-musical source into music.

Moving through this exhibition—and looking at photography at large— can be like walking through a musical composition. Just as variations in sounds and silence creates musical rhythm, the arrangement of positive and negative space can create visual rhythm. In the same way that musical sounds are created tonality with variable pitches, photography utilizes variables in brightness and richness of color to create tonality.

This exhibition makes many references to music, beginning with the title *Go Down Moses*, referencing an African American spiritual that speaks on Moses's demand that the Pharaoh free his people from slavery (“*let my people go*”). The intensity of the imagery increases as you move through the museum, starting with serene roads and ultimately climaxing with images that evoke chaos.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- What kind of music comes to mind when looking at this exhibition?
Why do you say that?
- Consider the images that are doubled in the exhibition.
How might this illustrate rhythm?
- How does the sequencing by the curator affect how you move through the exhibition?
- How do you interpret the title of the exhibition, *Go Down Moses*, with the images you see in the exhibition?



Dorothea Lange, *Toquerville*, 1953. Gift of Katharine Taylor Loesch.

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EXPERIENCING PUNCTUM

In his acclaimed book, *Camera Lucida* (1979), Roland Barthes introduces the words *Studium* and *Punctum* to describe how we look at photographs. *Studium* is a Latin word meaning “study”, “zeal”, or “dedication.” Barthes uses this word to explain the characteristic of any photograph that sparks a general interest in the photograph and gives information about the time, place, or event pictured. *Punctum*, on the other hand, is a Latin term that means to “sting, prick, or cut.” It describes how a photograph can, “rise from the scene, shoot out ... like an arrow, and pierce” the viewer.¹ The experience of *punctum* is often found in small and unintentional details of the photograph and is dependent on the viewer’s life experiences.

Barthes illustrates *punctum* by describing in very great detail a photograph of his mother as a child he calls *Winter Garden*. This photograph affected Barthes so profoundly because he felt it embodied her kind and gentle nature at a very young and innocent age and was able to pierce him in a way that the other images did not. Barthes’ experience with *punctum* in the *Winter Garden* photograph was so powerful that it evoked the understanding and anticipation of his own mortality in a way he could not otherwise articulate.

Teju Cole used the concept of *punctum* as a curatorial guide as he navigated through 15,000 images in the MoCP’s collection, responding to each photograph individually and considering its ability to pierce the senses. One of the images selected for this exhibition, *Toquerville* (1953) by Dorothea Lange depicts a figure with long hair pulled back in a bun. The small details of hair clips protruding from her hair in peculiar angles might spark a distant memory of a family member for a viewer, similarly to how Barthes experienced the *punctum* in the *Winter Garden* photograph.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- Select one photograph to discuss. What is the *studium* of the image, as Barthes describes it? What do you believe to be true from this image?
- Is there a photograph in the exhibition that gives you the experience of *punctum*? What details in the image cause you to feel this way?

1. Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.



CLOCKWISE:

David Plowden, *Section Road, Pierce County, Nebraska*, 2008, printed 2013. Gift of the artist.

David Plowden, *Section Road, Scott County, Iowa*, 1986. Gift of the artist.

Lynne Brown, *Mapping*, from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago 1995 Graduate and Faculty Portfolio, 1996.
Gift of Audrey Mandelbaum on behalf of the 1995 residents of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MFA in
Photography Program.

Dorothea Lange, *Highway to the West "They Keep the Road Hot a Goin' and a Comin'." US 54 in Southern New Mexico*, 1938.
Gift of Katharine Taylor Loesch.

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A VISUAL REMIX

In his article, “A Visual Remix” for *The New York Times Magazine* (April 16, 2015), Teju Cole considers the overwhelming number of photographs created each year (the estimated number of photographs made in 2015 alone was one trillion). He also ponders the commonalities of what people often consider photographable (“families, meals, landscapes, cars, toes, cats, toothpaste tubes, skies, traffic lights, atrocities, doorknobs, waterfalls”).² He states: “It has become hard to stand still, wrapped in the glory of a single image, as the original viewers of old paintings used to do. The flood of images has increased our access to wonders and at the same time lessening our sense of wonder.”³

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- Do you agree with Cole that it is “hard to stand still” while looking at photographs? Why or why not?
- “Remix” is another word commonly used in music. How could the process of curating be similar to mixing or sampling music? What story, mood, or rhythm evolves with pairing individual images with others?
- When several photographs are arranged together to form a sequence, a new synergy or story can be created. Consider, for example, the multiple images of roads featured on the museum’s first floor interspersed with fragmented images of bodies. What parallels or connections do you think the curator is making between these two types of images? How might each image function differently if exhibited on the wall alone?

2. Cole, Teju. “A Visual Remix.” *The New York Times*. April 16, 2015. Accessed June 06, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/a-visual-remix.html>.

3. Ibid.



Danny Lyon, Clifford Vaughn, another SNCC photographer, is arrested by the National Guard, 1964. Gift of Peter Chatzky.

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOOK AT THIS?⁴

Danny Lyon's photograph *Clifford Vaughn, another SNCC photographer is arrested by the National Guard* (1964) depicts a group of people wearing uniforms, gas masks, and armed with rifles arresting a man in front of a group of people. While looking at this image, the viewer might gain a general understanding of a conflict decades after it occurred. The title and date provide clues that the photograph was taken during the civil rights moment and the authoritarian figures are members of the National Guard. However, understanding the full event depicted in this image is more complicated. Why is this man being arrested? What happened just before or after this image was taken? What is being said? Whose feet are shown laying on the ground near the bottom of the image?

Suffering, conflict, death, and destruction are themes present in this exhibition. Since photography is tethered to reality (in that the camera documents moments), images become messengers through time and space. Photographs of human rights violations and suffering makes injustice visible and have the potential to create awareness or call the viewer to action. However, images of conflict also raise questions about the ethics of photography. In his article "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When it Still Is.)", Cole states: "...in looking at these images — images of war, of starvation, of capsized boats and exhausted caravans — we must go beyond the usual frames of pity and abjection. Every picture of suffering should elicit a question stronger than 'Why is this happening?' The question should be 'Why have I allowed this to happen?'"⁵

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- What other ethical concerns can you think of in photographing conflict, violence, or human suffering? Explain.
- How do you feel after looking at the images of conflict in this exhibition? How might these images of violence connect to the curator's larger theme of hope?

4. Cole, Teju. "What Does It Mean to Look at This?" *The New York Times*. May 24, 2018. Accessed June 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/magazine/what-does-it-mean-to-look-at-this.html>.

5. Cole, Teju. "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When It Still Is.)" *The New York Times*. February 06, 2019. Accessed May 30, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html>.



Roy DeCarava, *Man in Window*, 1978. Museum purchase.

GRACE NOTE

The final photograph presented in this exhibition is *Man in Window* (1978) by Roy DeCarava. Teju Cole refers to it as the “grace note” of the exhibition. Contrary to the other works presented, the image is presented alone on a wall painted entirely black.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- What do you think this image is about? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What is unique about the tones in this image?
- Why might the artist choose to print the photograph in this way?
- Why do you think the curator chose to separate it from all others? Why might this image be the last work seen?
- Consider the statement in the exhibition’s introduction:
“Through an intuitive sequence of photographs, in images soft and loud, this exhibition proposes a redefinition: that hope has nothing to do with mood or objective facts, but is rather a form of hospitality offered by those who are tired to those who are exhausted.”
Where in this exhibition did you see hope or hospitality presented? Where did you see “soft” and “loud?”
- Why might Teju Cole consider this image to be a “grace note”?

ACTIVITY

1. Select one photograph in the exhibition that sparks interest to you. Spend five minutes closely looking at it and writing down only what you observe. Take your time noticing the evidence (studium) presented in the image. What do you see? Provide as many details as possible.
2. Next, spend five minutes considering all the senses this image might evoke. What do you hear, smell, taste, or feel from looking at this photograph?
3. Now, spend five minutes noticing and recording your emotional reactions to this image (punctum). What happens when you slow down to look closer at the image? Are there any experiences from your personal history that might cause this reaction?
4. Using the observations from the looking exercises above, write a short story or poem about this image.

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SUGGESTED READING

- Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books, 2014.
- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, 1980.
- Teju Cole, “What Does it Mean to Look at This?,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 24, 2018.
- Teju Cole, “When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When it Still Is.),” *New York Times Magazine*, February 6, 2019.
- Teju Cole, “A Visual Remix.” *The New York Times*. April 16, 2015. Accessed June 06, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/a-visual-remix.html>.
- Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003.
- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Dell Publishing, 1977.

ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS GUIDE

Visual Arts Standards

VA:Re7.2.K-12 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K-12 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K-12 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11.K-12 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.