

ART, ACTIVISM, POLICY, POWER: *WHAT IF EMMETT TILL LIVED?*



Stephen Marc (American, b. 1954), 87th and Constance from Changing Chicago, n.d.

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PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Art, Activism, Policy, Power is a program that connects MoCP exhibitions and collections with high school students, helping them explore how artists use research-based creative practices to effect change in their communities. This session is presented in conjunction with the 2026 MoCP exhibition [*If Emmett Till Lived: Freedom on American Ground*](#), guest curated by scholar and historian Dr. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis in collaboration with Reverend Wheeler Parker Jr., Emmett Till's cousin and best friend.

The exhibition presents a speculative future of what Till could have experienced if he were not murdered in an act of horrendous racial violence in 1955 at the age of fourteen while visiting family members in Mississippi. Instead of seeing images of Till, the exhibition presents photographs throughout the MoCP permanent collection by over 100 photographers. The images portray moments in daily life across decades, such as barbecues, people preparing for prom, and beach landscapes.

Through a series of workshops, students in this program will learn about Emmett Till's life in Chicago, visiting his home learning about his neighborhood of Woodlawn and what it was like in 1955. Students will then visit the exhibition and consider the question *What If Emmett Till Lived?* while closely examining photographs on view and considering the role of photography in civic narrative. Finally, working with exhibiting artist Stephen Marc, students will create photographs that depict moments from one day in *their* life, documenting their own experiences as teens to extend the dialogue of what Till might have experienced at their age.



Students from Prosser Career Academy at the Emmett Till home with Professor Ellen Grimes

Before You Begin

Due to the difficult nature of this subject matter for young people, we encourage educators to prepare their students prior to beginning the workshops. The Chicago History Museum (CHM) long-term exhibition, [*Injustice: The Trial for the Murder of Emmett Till*](#), is an excellent opportunity for students to learn a comprehensive overview of this history. Admission to the museum is free for Columbia College Chicago students and K-12 students in Illinois.

Excellent digital resources are the [Emmett Till Memory Project](#) (ETMP) and the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) (EJI). ETMP is an interactive project that offers historical context and invites visitors to engage with the places, people, and events connected to Emmett Till's story. EJI works to deepen public understanding of America's history of racial injustice through research, education, and memorial projects.

Outline of Activities

FIELD TRIP ONE: TILL HOME NEIGHBORHOOD WALK

Students will first visit Emmett Till's Woodlawn neighborhood to learn about his life in Chicago through a guided walk that establishes what the South Side of Chicago was like in 1955 as a larger discussion on the Great Migration and Chicago's legalized racist housing policies in the mid-20th century. These walks will be led by Ellen Grimes, Professor of Architecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Till House Project Director at Blacks in Green, an environmental justice organization rooted in the traditions of African American land stewardship.



Emmet Till House and future museum, Located at 6427 S St Lawrence Ave. in Chicago, IL

Outline of Activities

FIELD TRIP TWO: MoCP EXHIBITION TOUR & MEETING STEPHEN MARC

Students will then visit the exhibition, *If Emmett Till Lived: Freedom on American Ground*, at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, where they will experience the exhibition of over 150 photographs selected by Dr. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Associate Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University in collaboration with Till's cousin and best friend, Reverend Wheeler Parker Jr. At the museum, they will meet with exhibiting artist, Stephen Marc, who will introduce the creative aspects of the project and share insights on his work in documentary and street photography in Chicago and beyond for the past 40+ years.

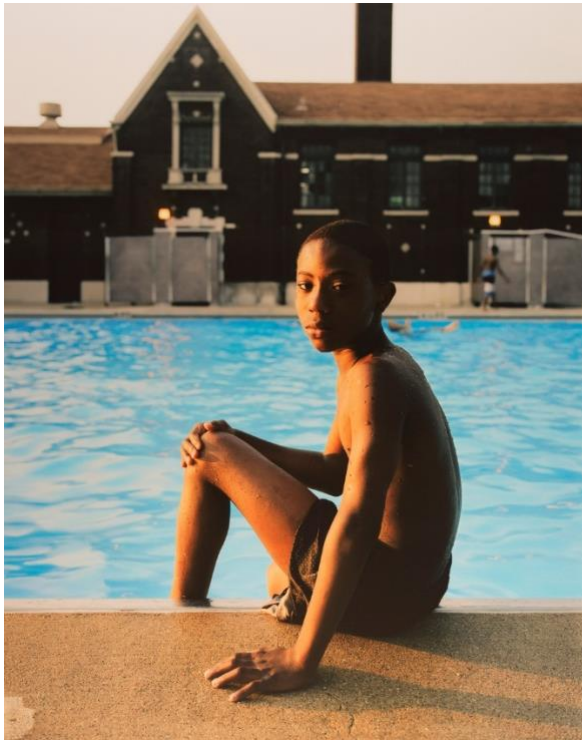


Students from Prosser Career Academy in a print viewing at MoCP

Outline of Activities

WORKSHOP: PHOTO COMPOSITION STRATEGIES WITH STEPHEN MARC

At the participating schools, Stephen Marc will lead students through engaging strategies for photographing moments of their daily lives. He will share tips for crafting strong compositions, utilizing light and shadow, and approaching people you may not know to photograph them. Participants will each receive a disposable camera, and a set of guiding prompts with intervals throughout a day in which they should photograph a day in their lives.



Paul D'Amato, *Boy By Pool, Chicago*, 2005, in MoCP exhibition *What If Emmett Till Lived*



Student from South Shore College Prep in a 2024 Art, Activism, Policy, Power studio portraiture workshop

Introductory Questions for Discussion

- This learning series is based on the intersection of art and activism. How might making photographs of your daily life be an act of social good?
- Why are photographs important to you? What power do you think photographs have in telling stories?

About the Teaching Artist: Stephen Marc



Stephen Marc photographs his daily surroundings and has made a significant amount of work recording everyday life in Chicago and throughout the United States. Marc's images are made in the tradition of street photography, capturing ordinary moments—such as adults strolling along busy avenues and children playing in their neighborhoods. He composed each image with attention to careful framing, use of light and shadow, and the expressive gestures of his subjects.

In the mid-1990s, Marc diverged from the documentary style he was known for and began his project *Soul Searching* (1994-2001), for which he created photomontages combining self-portraits and family, found, and other images with references to black history. In 2000, Marc began documenting Underground Railroad sites and creating montages, combining those images with historic documents and photographs, as well as images of contemporary life.

Born in Rantoul, Illinois and raised in Chicago, Stephen Marc completed his BA from Pomona College, Claremont (1976) and an MFA from the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia (1978). His work is included in the collections of the

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; the California Museum of Photography, Riverside; the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC. After teaching for 27 years at Columbia College Chicago, he moved to Arizona in 1998 where he served as a professor at the Herberger Institute for Art and Design at Arizona State University, Tempe for 26 years before retiring in 2024.

Questions for Discussion

- Stephen Marc has photographed daily life through street photography for 40+ years. What role do photographs of everyday experiences have in preserving history? How might a photograph of an ordinary moment become historically significant over time?
- In what ways can documentary photography serve as a tool for social change?
- What stories from your own family or community would you want future generations to know about?

About the Teaching Artist: Stephen Marc



Clockwise from top: Stephen Marc, 71st and Jeffery, from *Changing Chicago*, c. 1987; *Between 61st and 62nd and Rhodes* ("Fresh" Block Party Talent Show), from *Changing Chicago*, 1988; *Untitled*, from *Changing Chicago*, 1988.

Emmett Till's Story



Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, photographed between 1953 and 1955. (Photo sourced by the National Museum of African American History and Culture)

In August 1955, Emmett Till traveled from Chicago to Mississippi to visit his family for the summer. While at Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market purchasing candy, Till was witnessed whistling at a white woman, shopkeeper Carolyn Bryant. Several nights later, Roy Bryant (Carolyn Bryant's husband) and his brother-in-law, John William (J.W.) Milam, kidnapped Till from his uncle Moses Wright's home. He was then taken to a barn where he was brutally tortured and murdered. His body, weighted down by a large 75-pound cotton-gin fan and barbed wire, was thrown into the Tallahatchie River and found days later. He was 14 years old at the time of his death.

Bryant and Milam were acquitted that summer by an all-white jury and would later confess to murdering Till without remorse.

What Does It Mean to Be an Art Activist?



Mrs. Mamie Bradley Till-Mobley, mother of lynch victim Emmett Till, getting the first look at the brutally battered body of her son, August 1955. David Jackson—EBONY Collection.

Activism can take many forms—from marching in protests and boycotts, to withdrawing time and money from organizations that do not align with your values, to simply learning more and raising awareness about the systems of oppression that shape our world, both historically and today. Artmaking, too, can serve as a form of activism. It may be quiet or loud, depending on how the work is created, shared, or displayed. Photography significantly influences the stories and perspectives that shape how we understand the world around us, and many photographers use photography as a tool to bring attention to critical social issues.

Emmett Till's story is deeply connected to this aspect of photography. In 1955 following Till's death, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, directed *Jet* magazine photographer David L. Jackson to photograph her son's mutilated body. The image circulated nationally and, while graphic in content, played a crucial role in exposing the racial violence that was pervasive in America.

This history rippled out and still resonates today. In July 2020, activist, educator, leader of the Movement, and US Congressman John Lewis wrote an opinion piece, published by *The New York Times* soon after his death, titled "Together, You Can Redeem the Souls of Our Nation" in which he profoundly stated: **"Emmett Till was my George Floyd. He was my**

Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor.” A photograph in the exhibition captures Lewis (pictured below, second to left), during a Civil Rights protest against segregated swimming pools in Illinois. Lewis dedicated his life to advancing social justice and ending racial discrimination.



Danny Lyon, *John Lewis in Cairo*, 1962; Featured in *If Emmett Till Lived* exhibition at MoCP.

The photographer of this photograph, Danny Lyon (American, b. 1942), has long taken a photographer-as-participant approach to his work, shaping his documentary career through direct involvement with the communities he photographs. His first book, *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (1964), evolved from his experience as a staff photographer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the Civil Rights Movement. SNCC was a leading force in the Movement, organizing nonviolent direct-action campaigns, training activists in nonviolent resistance, and leading voter registration drives in the South.

Questions for Discussion

- Is there a photograph you've encountered that changed your views on a societal issue? If so, what about this photograph that stands out to you, and why?
- Consider what Lewis said about Till in parallel to the Black Lives Matter movement decades later. Have any photographs shaped your understanding of this movement or its meaning? Where did you see the images that impacted you? What about them stood out to you?

How Has Emmett Till's Story Impacted Yours?

Mamie Till-Mobley's personal tragedy over the loss of her only child turned into a powerful act of insisting people to bear witness to this brutal act of racism. The widespread circulation of these photographs helped to galvanize support of the Civil Rights Movement.

Mamie Till-Mobley had the prophetic wisdom to understand that witnessing was central for American democracy. Her motto was "Let the world see what they did to my boy." In keeping with this conviction, she made the decision to hold an open-casket funeral after her son's disfigured body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River near Graball Landing in Glendora, Mississippi. Over a span of four days, more than 100,000 people filed past Emmett Till's casket in Chicago; the publication of his mutilated body in the black press—*Jet*, *Ebony*, and the *Chicago Defender*—stirred black communities nationally. No other outlets were willing to run the images. That act of public witness is widely credited as a flashpoint for the modern Civil Rights Movement—invoked by figures from Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King Jr. to John Lewis to Muhammad Ali and then echoing forward through the March on Washington, held on the eighth anniversary of Till's death in 1963.



Crowd outside of Robert's Temple Church of God, located at 4021 S. State Street, during the funeral of Emmett Till, Chicago, Illinois, September 2, 1955. Chicago History Museum collection.

The exhibition *If Emmett Till Lived: Freedom on American Ground* is guest curated by Dr. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis in collaboration with Reverend Wheeler Parker Jr. Emmett Till's cousin, best friend and last surviving witness to his kidnapping. Lewis asks the public to envision the full life Till might have lived and to consider what the loss of that life, and our witnessing of the photographs documenting the racial violence of his death and the death of others like Till, requires of us. This invitation is evoked through images by 118 photographers drawn from the MoCP's permanent collection.

Through the exhibition, viewers will be able to imagine and meditate on the roughly 70 years that Till was denied. Included are photographs of railroad lines that might have taken Till not only from Chicago to Mississippi but on journeys from coast to coast, daily encounters he might have had on neighborhood streets and playgrounds, and moments from the Civil Rights Movements he might have witnessed and joined. Also represented are meals shared, marriage and fatherhood celebrated, and events that might have brought Emmett Till joy and wonder, whether from Michael Jordan leading the Chicago Bulls to six championships or Barack Obama winning the White House.



Mamie Till-Mobley addresses the crowd at a dedication ceremony for a stretch of 71st street that was honorarily named Emmett Till Road, July 26, 1991. Chicago History Museum exhibition and collection.

Question for Discussion

- Emmett Till was denied the opportunity to grow into adulthood and experience the everyday moments that many of us take for granted. Reflecting on your life, relationships, interests, and routines, what do you wish Emmett Till could have experienced?

Respond: Photograph a Day in Your Life



Carlos Javier Ortiz (American, b. 1975), *Block Party, Auburn Gresham, Chicago*, 2009

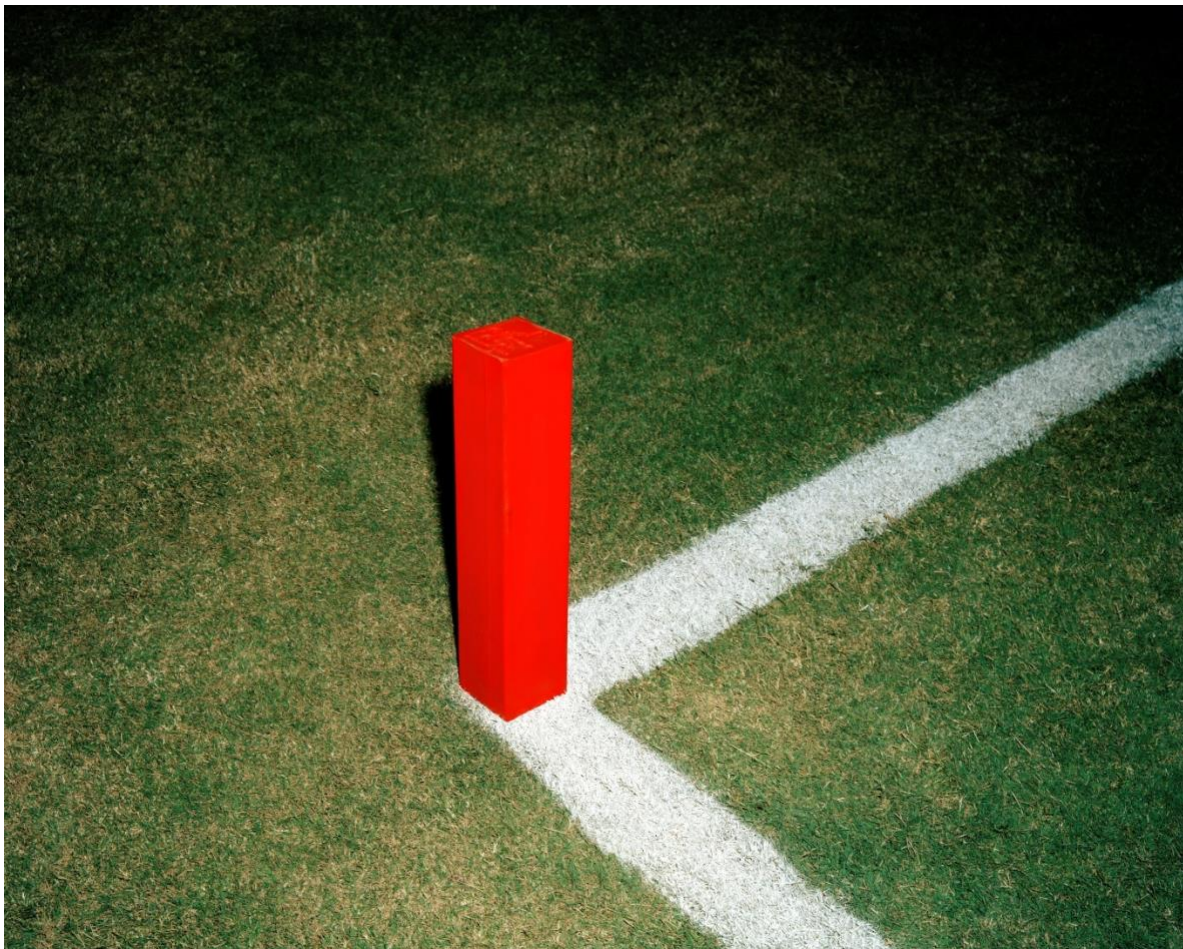
Students in this program will create timed photographs documenting an ordinary day in their lives. Over the course of one day, take photographs at the various times listed below, documenting moments that help tell the story of your daily experiences.

Choose a Saturday or Sunday in your life to complete this activity. Before you begin your day, set a timer to go off at these times: **8am, 10am, 12pm, 2pm, 4pm, 6pm, 8pm**. When you hear the alarm, pause what you are doing and take stock of your surroundings. Using the disposable camera provided by MoCP or your own camera, photograph the details of your day. Here are some suggested moments to consider capturing:

- What is by your bedside?
- What helps you start your day?
- What forms of transportation do you use?
- What meals do you eat? Who do you share them with?
- What hobbies do you tend to?
- What are you wearing? What are you keeping in your pockets?
- Who are people that you love? Who are people that you notice today?
- What forms of entertainment are you enjoying?
- What is your favorite place?
- Where do you relax?

As you photograph, pay attention to the people, places, objects, activities, and details that are meaningful to you. Consider the routines, relationships, and experiences that shape your day. Together, your photographs will create a visual record of who you are and what your life looks like in this moment in time.

It is important to note that the goal of this activity is not to imagine a specific life for Emmett Till. The goal is to reflect on the countless moments that were taken from him while also paying attention to the richness of your own daily life. By observing and documenting our routines and surrounds, we reflect on what was lost and the quiet significance of what it means to live.



Hyers + Mebane, Photographs 7908, from the EMPIRE portfolio, 2006; In the exhibition *What If Emmett Till Lived*

RESPOND: EXHIBITING YOUR IMAGES

After the workshops, MoCP will process the film and make select prints of the students' images to be featured in an in-person exhibition at Columbia College Chicago as well as a permanent online exhibition at www.mocp.org.

Stephen Marc led an identical series of workshops at the Coleman Branch Public Library in Till's Woodlawn neighborhood for adults aged 65 and older. These participants created photographs that could envision what Till might have experienced had he been able to reach the age of 85 in 2026. Selections of their photographs will be on view with the students' work.



Participants at Coleman Library in a photographing perspective workshop with Stephen Marc, June 2026.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[“Can you be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video\(s\)](#)

[Emmett Till Interpretive Center](#)

[Blacks in Green – Till House Museum](#)

[Equal Justice Initiative](#)

[Injustice: The Trial for the Murder of Emmett Till at the Chicago History Museum](#)

[Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror](#)

[Original JET Magazine Volume 8 Issue 9 Covering Emmett Till's Story](#)

[The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi](#)

[The Murder of Emmett Till – From the PBS collection: Civil Rights – The African American Experience](#)

[Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation by John Lewis for New York Times Opinion](#)

[Chicago History Museum exhibition: Injustice: The Trial for the Murder of Emmett Till](#) (Note: admission is free for all K-12 and Columbia College Chicago students with a student ID)

In addition to the resources provided in this guide, we encourage you to visit your local public library and ask a librarian for help finding additional books, articles, and other resources to continue your learning.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Acquit: To officially declare in a court of law that a person is not guilty of a crime they were accused of committing.

Activism: The use of direct, vigorous action to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change.

Civil Rights Movement: A social movement in the United States from 1954 to 1968 which aimed to secure equal rights for African Americans and end legalized racial segregation

Democracy: A framework of governance built on the principle that power resides with the people.

Documentary Photography: A style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events, and is often used in reportage.

Racial Injustice: The unfair, biased, or harmful treatment of people based on their race, driven by individual prejudices as well as society-wide systems.

Social Justice: The fair and equitable treatment of all people in how a society divides its wealth, opportunities, and privileges.

Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC): A major civil rights organization led by young Black college students that organized grassroots protests and voter registration drives during the 1960s.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

Visual Arts Standards

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

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

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

VA:Cn11 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Media Arts Standards

MA:Re7.1 Anchor Standard 7 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Media artworks can be appreciated and interpreted through analyzing their components.

MA:Re8.1 Anchor Standard 8 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. Interpretation and appreciation require engagement with the content, form, and context of media artworks.

MA:Re9.1 Anchor Standard 9 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. Skillful evaluation and critique are critical components of experiencing, appreciating, and producing media artworks.

Social Sciences Standards

SS.9-12.IS.1 — Create actionable, student-driven (or student-informed) questions that lead to deeper social studies investigations.

SS.9-12.IS.2 — Develop culturally informed, student-driven supporting questions that contribute to inquiry and evaluate the purpose of supporting questions.

SS.9-12.IS.3 — Develop new essential and supporting questions by primary/secondary investigation, collaboration, and use of diverse sources.

SS.9-12.IS.5 — Gather and evaluate information from multiple primary and secondary sources that reflect the perspectives of multiple groups, including marginalized communities.