

RE-IMAGINING THE POLITICAL & THE AESTHETIC:

Transdisciplinary exhibition design through the lens of Emmett Till and the civic view

How might the perceived opposition between the political and the aesthetic realm be transcended within an exhibition context? What professional roles would need to be redefined? What strategies could be crafted to negotiate new relationships between form and content? How might this re-negotiation change our understanding of past and current political realities and our response to them?

Through the lenses of Ariella Azoulay's essay "Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political" as well as Martin A. Berger's "Seeing through race: Civil Rights Photography"; I will examine the themes above. I will do so in an imagined case study of an exhibition design displaying the iconic photograph of Emmett Till – 14-year old African American boy who was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling at a white woman – a photograph that has been credited as "the beginning of the civil rights movement" (Berger, 125).



Atlanta Black Star

In Azoulay's essay, we are introduced to the concept of the civic view, or the civic imagination, as a call for, and an invitation to, a way of seeing photographic works that includes the plurality of the context of the photograph. It is described as "an effort to link the photographs to the situation in which they were taken" (241) and a way of moving beyond what the author perceives as the common opposition between the "aesthetic" and the "political". Azoulay describes in her essay a tendency within contemporary art discourse, to condemn artistic works as either "too political" or "too aesthetic", expressing "the affinity of the speaker towards one of these two opposing poles" (234).

I strongly sympathize with Azoulay's questioning of this distinction, as I, like her, believe in the value of lifting the aesthetics of all politics, and the political potential of all aesthetics. I also sympathize with her desire for the viewer to truly connect with the photographed subjects, as part of a larger context of spacial/political/relational dynamics. By not quite leaving the purely intellectual realm, the essay however leaves many unanswered questions as to what the idea of the civic view could potentially mean in practice. As a Transdisciplinary Designer, this bridge between theory and practice is of great interest of me. What might be strategies that could potentially translate "the civic view" from an intellectual concept to a living breathing reality of political/aesthetic encounters and action?

By using the image of Emmett Till – clearly politically charged and with far-reaching political implications – I aim to bring about a more substantial discussion around the potentialities of the idea of the civic view. In doing so, I will take into account the multiple gazes connected to it as well as the agency of Emmett's mother and the specific contexts in which it was presented. The space in which I

situate this imaginary exhibition is a cross-disciplinary platform spanning art and political and social thought and action.

ESTABLISHING DESIGN PRINCIPLES

I will begin this essay by developing a set of design principles, informed and inspired by the idea of the civic view, to guide the set-up of the exhibition. The principles all aim at facilitating the transcendence of the aesthetic and the political, form and content. They are meant to function as more general guidelines, where the tactics coming up next focus on the particular case study of the Emmett Till photograph.

Develop a cross-disciplinary working group lead by a Transdisciplinary Designer to plan the exhibition

In her essay, Azoulay eloquently explains in what ways the traditional role of the art critic (or possibly art curator) hinders the possibility of an exhibited work to function as a catalyst for the civic view to emerge. With the civic view always involving the recognition of relational dynamics including the photographer, the photographed, the context in which the photo was taken, the observer looking at the photograph, as well as, I'm assuming, the context in which that photograph is exhibited, the "experts relate to the images as though it is out in the world carrying traits that have been molded into it once and for all" (250). Or differently put: "expressing the being-together of humans, their political existence, are not visible when the photograph becomes the object of a political judgment of taste and the gaze viewing the photograph seeks its object in the act of the individual

photographer" (248). Furthermore, the critic "denies her own contribution in creating the image as political or aesthetic and her own power to reduce or extend conditions that would facilitate linking the image to other statements" (250). These professional judgments – with its claims of expertise, objectivity and universality – are described almost as a violation of the political potentialities of the photograph, where "the intervention of such authority directly damages not only the gaze of several individuals but also the open principle of this space itself, that must remain shared, unpossessable, not enslaved to a specific group, regime or realm" (257).

So, if the traditions and ways of seeing and classifying aesthetic works in traditional art discourse do not fulfill the potentialities of the civic view, what kind of knowledge or expertise could facilitate this? I would like to argue that this is the perfect entry point for the emerging field of Transdisciplinary Design.

Transdisciplinary Designers are trained in systems thinking, relational dynamics, creating and lifting aesthetic interventions within larger social and political contexts. They are trained to facilitate platforms for multidimensional experience and communication, co-creating a particular on-going outcome along with a group of participants. The search for an "objective truth" is discarded in favor of exploring the creative potential of any material or social circumstance, recognizing the creative role – and with that the accountability – also of the "observer"; the interpreter, the facilitator, the one who designs the frames for a particular experience. In putting together a particular team for this imaginary exhibit, I would appoint a collaborative group consisting of a Transdisciplinary Designer with special expertise within art and social movements, a historian in civil rights, an exhibition designer and a pedagogue. The working process would

be designed by the Transdisciplinary Designer to take into account the various perspectives of the “specialized knowledge” at every step of the way, with the aim of creating a fruitful dynamic between content and form.

***Explore ways to engage the viewer with
the wider political content and contexts through form***

Azoulay stresses in her essay that a photograph is not the product of the photographer alone, but “the act of many and a trace of a space of human relations whose existence cannot be reduced to a mere status of raw material or just objects of an artistic image” (252). The civic view insists on “gazing not only at the photographed person but at all those who took part in the act of photography”; and “not giving up on the urgency of restoring and re-establishing as many links as possible between the photograph and the situation in which it was taken” (252). She further claims that “political action always exists between at least two persons, in the space between them and among the many” (254), and that “at any moment the space between them (the photographer and the photographed), and later on the space between them and those who will stand viewing their picture, might become political space where people gaze at each other, speak and act away from disciplinary or governmental constraints” (252).

For this civic view to emerge, and for the spectators to be truly engaged with the context of the photograph, we need to first recognize the difficulty for a photograph to communicate or inspire this seeing by itself. Images are usually read as carriers of signifiers or symbols that the spectator immediately associates according to certain preconceived categories and meanings. The “stickiness” of

this encounter usually way overshadows the effect that a written description of the context might produce, meaning that to inspire a truly civic view we need to work also with form to communicate the various layers, dimensions and perspectives that surround the particular photograph. Ariella writes that: “in order for the civil view to take place, each and every individual must permanently renew the situation necessary for its existence – the open and unrestricted participation of others” (252). If this definition of others includes only the various perspectives surrounding the photograph playing out in the spectator’s head, or if it involves actual encounters with other spectators, is left unspecified. In my interpretation however, I see this “civic view in practice” as both an internal encounter with these various dimensions of the photograph, but also the possibility for actual encounters or collective experiences with other people in the space where the photograph is presented.

***Lift aesthetic elements and artistic strategies outside
of traditional art discourse***

Azoulay states that “aesthetics is a necessary dimension of any image” and “the existence of an image in the aesthetic plane is not a matter of choice and it cannot be obliterated” (250). This fact, in my interpretation, applies also to other sensory stimuli that go beyond our cognitive intellectual understanding of the world. By adopting a transdisciplinary perspective, one can recognize and highlight aesthetic elements and their political implications even as they exist outside of traditional art discourse. Through this seeing, various aesthetic components of the context of the photograph can be included in the exhibit, adding to its multidimensionality and contextualization through further visual means. This

seeing also allows us to discover artistic or aesthetic strategies employed by agents not traditionally seen as artists, such as many of the strategies employed by civil rights activists. As an example, I can mention Martin Luther King's careful dramaturgical staging of his political protests, where the "costumes" of the protestors, the way they carried themselves, the timing etc, was carefully planned to set the stage for a dramaturgy of stripped off (white) violence in the face of (black) innocence and dignity. By highlighting these strategies, we increase our understanding of how the aesthetic and political planes relate.

IMAGINING EXHIBITION TACTICS

Exploring contexts, aesthetic strategies and multiple gazes connected to an imaginary exhibit with the Emmett Till photograph at its center.

Exhibit and reenact the specific aesthetic strategies employed by Emmett Till's mother

What were the aesthetic elements that made the photograph of Emmett Till so iconic, stirred such emotions and caused its widespread political implications? In the American South, mutilated black bodies by themselves were tragically not an unknown, considering the history of nineteenth and early 20th century lynchings that "brought together groups of people to kill victims in public – for public effect" (Berger, 135). The victim's body was commonly left hanging from a tree, a telephone pole, a bridge or laid on a courthouse lawn as a warning to other blacks. I would argue that the photograph of Emmett Till and the widespread political implication it has had cannot be understood without taking into account

the agency of Emmett Till's mother Mamie Bradley. Her voice, her public outcry for the world to "see what they did to my boy" very much defined how the photograph met its audience. Her staging of the photograph through a very specific aesthetic and spacial framework – a severely mutilated body dressed up in a suit in a funeral casket – also shaped the experience of the photograph as it was circulated in national and international media. Not only did this staging cause a lasting aesthetic effect by bringing the very private event of a funeral into the public sphere, but it also juxtaposed the very dignified event of a funeral with the brutality of the murder. As Mamie explained in a public appearance in October 1955: "as long as we cover these things up, they're going to keep happening... the more people that walk by Emmett and look at what happened to this 14 year-old boy, the more people will be interested in what happens to their children" (Berger, 153). Through a mother's unconditional love, translated into aesthetic and spacial frameworks, do we meet Emmett Till, the subject of the photograph, and through these means is his mutilated body humanized, dignified, the brutality of the murder fully exposed. As pointed out by Berger: "The decision of Mrs Mamie Bradley, mother of the slain child, to put the body on public view was more effective than the millions of words of copy written about the crime" (134).



Chicago Sun-Times



Chicago Sun-Times

Taking all of these aesthetic and spacial components into account, I would stage the photograph according to the agency of Mamie Bradley, displaying the casket (or a modelled version of it), possibly a wax doll of Emmett in it, the video of Mamie's voice, as well as some visual elements of the funeral setting and audio/music. I would further explore ways of reenacting the event as a sort of performance, inviting the spectators in to walk up to the casket in a ceremonial manner reminiscent of the actual event. Perhaps make use of an actor/funeral conductor leading the audience through this staged performance.

Design opportunities for conversations and interaction

An important element of the design of this imaginary exhibit in the spirit of the civic imagination, is to include opportunities for conversations, collective experiences and sense-making in relation to current issues. I would try to facilitate this through aesthetics means, such as the performance re-enacting the funeral, creating a private space for reflection sharing that creates a thread of responses

for others to take part of, collaborations with schools or organizations where the participants would be encouraged to stage their own aesthetic/political responses to current issues, inviting speakers to relate the topics to current issues...

Opportunities are manifold, and would be planned along with the team of pedagogical, historical and designerly expertise, in an effort to create a dynamic space balancing the sanctuary qualities of a contemporary art museum and the vivid environment of a community house.

Map and create visual and spacial links between multiple gazes

To deepen the spectators meeting with the larger context of the photograph, I would explore ways of mapping and visualizing the multiple gazes and relationships that formed the contextual landscape of the image. This kind of visual mapping – which is as much a way of thinking – functions as a way of understanding the context through a systemic lens – looking for connections, relationships between a multitude of gazes – and it also fosters a “stickiness” of the information that resembles that of the stickiness of images. In “Seeing through race” we learn that “the media depicted the civil rights struggle in distinctive ways for different readerships” (112). Berger looks at black as well as white media, which reveals distinct differences between the white south and the white north. Through these lenses, I would focus both on the images of the civil rights movement overall, and the specific Emmett Till case.

These kind of systemic mapping exercises facilitate sense-making much by focusing on the systems surrounding particular themes. One such theme that immediately stands out in “Seeing through race” is the theme of black agency. In

black media channels, images portraying black agency and public exercise of power in the face of white oppression were widely circulated, because of the “understanding that black agency was both the ultimate goal of the movement and the means by which it would be achieved” (Berger, 119).

Southern white media also distributed images that could be described as portraying black agency, but through the lens of blacks as a violent, strong and forceful threat to white security. The common narrative was that of blacks as perpetrator: “blacks received prominent coverage only in articles on crime, which consistently noted the race of the nonwhite perpetrators.” We further learn that “popular narratives associated with strong and forceful blacks served the psychological needs of whites – rallying them together in fear of an external threat (...)” (Berger, 155).

The relationship of the northern white media, self-proclaimed liberals, to black agency was a more dubious one. In my interpretation of the text, it was defined by a tip-toeing around a white fear of black agency, where white sympathy for the black struggle for freedom depended heavily on maintaining an image of the innocence, well-mannerism and passivity of Black protestors. We learn that “in their efforts to promote “aesthetic and “sympathetic” portrayals of black protestors for readers, white reporters and editors either excluded or marginalized images that showed blacks exerting power”

A second theme that comes up strongly, and that directly relates to the image of Emmett Till, is that of child victims, especially as portrayed in the white media. We learn that “the idea of child victims both attracted and repelled white Americans;

generated immediate interest but also produced profound discomfort" (124). In northern media, "white papers reproduced the dogs and fire hoses on the front pages once children were involved" (112), which fit well into the "idealized" image of innocent and vulnerable black victims of southern white violence.

Moving on to the specific Emmett Till photograph and the "Black gaze" and embrace of this image, we can start by concluding that "Emmett's severely swollen and mutilated head was viewed by tens of thousands of mutineers during the five days Bradley allowed for viewing and by millions through circulating photographs taken by members of the black public and press" (127). The funeral itself as well as the circulating images "aroused an outpouring of anguish and activism from blacks, particularly from young people in their teens or twenties" (128). We learn that "so important was Till's death for galvanizing black activism that a number of observers and scholars have labeled the youth radicalized by the photographs the "Emmett Till generation" (128).

In white press however, southern as well as northern, "the corpse photographs that exerted a powerful effect on blacks were absent" (129). In the north, focus was put on the trial and "the novelty of placing southern whites on trial for the murder of a black boy" (135). Sympathy with the black struggle was again expressed through focusing on the innocence and well-mannerism of Emmett Till. We learn that "in such papers as the New York Times, Chicago Tribune and Washington Post, Till was consistently described as an unthreatening boy"; the articles thus not refuting the stereotype of the sexually aggressive black man himself.

In southern white media, “reporters showed a surprising degree of sympathy for Till in the first days after his corpse was found, but their tone changed dramatically when the NAACP, Bradley and northern newspapers became vocal in their criticism of Mississippi society” (137). These narratives – which put the murder of Emmett Till in the context of race and civil rights – quickly made any sympathy transform into the defensive portrayal of Emmett as a “husky negro lad”; “staring husky negro”; “northern negro rapist” (138).

So how can this information be clustered and made sense of in a way that assists the spectators in their contextual understanding of the Emmett Till photograph and its aesthetic and political dimensions? One possible direction would be to focus in on the theme of black agency (with the theme of “child victims” as a sub theme to this overarching theme). Create three spatial constructions each displaying imagery and information on the relation to black agency through the lenses of black, southern white and northern white media. Allow these visual and informational distinctions to inspire the spectators to themselves ponder links and connections, as well as their own relationship to the various gazes, by breaking down the “bounded rationality” of each perspective, and reveal the different portrayals of the civil rights movement as constructed narratives, serving a particular agenda.

Crystallizing and breaking the information down this way, also opens up for a different reading and sense-making of the Emmett Till photograph, as we can ponder how this image relates to these various views and agendas of black agency. On the one hand, the image portrays a child, a victim in its most clearly humiliated and violated sense. On the other hand, the agency of the mother –

which I have argued is clearly embedded in the aesthetic and spacial elements of the photograph and its wider context – stands in strong opposition to this victimization. This allows for one and the same image to not only transcend the perceived opposition between the aesthetic and the political, but the perceived opposition of the victimization and the agency of the black struggle in America. By allowing black life to be portrayed beyond the one dimensional oppositions of either victim (no agency) or hero/perpetrator (with strong agency), but as defeated beyond rescue *and* a forceful agent of change, did the image perhaps open up a space – aesthetically and politically charged – inside the American psyche where new thoughts, actions, sentiments were born...?