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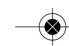

FRESH PERSPECTIVES *on the Permanent Collection from* DARTMOUTH'S STUDENTS

A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

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Elliott Erwitt, *Soldier/ New Jersey, 1951,* 1951, published in 1977, gelatin silver print. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hunter; PH.978.28.14

CHECKLIST

Margaret Bourke-White, American, 1904–1971
The American Way, 1937, print before 1971, ed. 6/200, gelatin silver print
Purchased through the Harry Shafer Fisher 1966 Memorial Fund; PH.972.65

Elliott Erwitt, American, born 1928
Soldier/ New Jersey, 1951, from the portfolio *Photographs: Elliott Erwitt,* ed. 9/100, 1951, publ. in 1977, gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hunter; PH.978.28.14

Elliott Erwitt, American, born 1928
Yale/ New Haven, 1955, from the portfolio *Photographs: Elliott Erwitt,* ed. 9/100, 1951, publ. in 1977, gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hunter; PH.978.28.1

W. Eugene Smith, American, 1918–1978
Nurse Midwife, 1951, gelatin silver print
Purchased through a gift from Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2008.63

Garry Winogrand, American, 1928–1984
New York City, 1969, number 5 of 15, from *Garry Winogrand, a Portfolio of 15 Silver Prints,* ed. 88/100, 1969, publ. 1978, gelatin silver print
Gift of Lynn Hecht Schafran; PH.979.9.5

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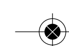
Elliott Erwitt, *Soldier/ New Jersey, 1951* (detail), 1951, published in 1977, gelatin silver print. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hunter; PH.978.28.14



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America: In Black and White?

Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes one photograph, or a group of them, can lure our sense of awareness.
—W. Eugene Smith

W. Eugene Smith, *Nurse Midwife,* 1951, gelatin silver print. Purchased through a gift from Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2008.63

Photographs have a particular power to raise questions because they are simultaneously objective and subjective: they represent an accurate record of an event produced by a machine and an artistic creation framed by an individual with a particular perspective (Orvell, 14). Taken before the onset of digital enhancement in photography, each of the images featured in this exhibition is a black-and-white depiction of an actual moment in mid-twentieth-century American society. Yet, as the title *America: In Black and White?* suggests, these photographs do not depict these moments in absolutes but instead draw attention to their nuances and complexities.

The individuals featured in these photographs are from varied sectors of American society, and the images address social issues ranging from education to the military to rural healthcare to First Amendment rights. Several of them address the ways in which racial issues pervade and complicate many aspects of American life, and in so doing they reveal the complex challenge of interpreting images. We should not see them (figuratively) in terms of black and white, as examples of issues that fall along obvious racial or socioeconomic or political faults, because the variety of opinions and attitudes that colors American society has no bounds. By no means does this grouping of photographs illustrate the full range of American social issues or all affected populations. This exhibition is intended to be suggestive rather than comprehensive, touching on the complexity of American society, provoking feelings of discomfort, and alluding to broader issues.

Black-and-white photography, as a medium, lends itself to political commentary because it heightens the narrative impact of an image by heightening visual contrast. The juxtaposition of black Americans waiting in a relief line and the idealized white family featured in the background of Margaret Bourke-White's iconic image *The American Way* (1937) dramatizes the social disparity among races in American society. Yet the subtle details of the picture complicate this initial impression by addressing issues beyond race. While many viewers at first glance assume that these black Americans are poor, in fact the people in this photograph are only temporarily in need of government assistance due to a flood. Indeed, the irony of the billboard's exclamation ("World's Highest Standard of Living") would have resonated with *all* Americans who were then suffering the overall deprivation of the Great Depression. The other photographs here likewise comment on a multitude of American social issues beyond the obvious first impression they might make, and each demands careful and nuanced consideration. Furthermore, the variety of photographic techniques employed by the artists featured in this exhibition creates an entirely new dialogue among them.

When asked why he was a photographer, W. Eugene Smith once responded, "Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes one photograph, or a group of them, can lure our sense of awareness" (Knauer, 80). A true social activist, Smith provoked this "sense of awareness" by sharing scenes of inequality and suffering with his large audience of *Life* magazine readers. Smith followed certified nurse-midwife Maude Callen on an assignment from *Life* in 1951 as she attended to public health needs in an impoverished region of rural South Carolina. Smith's impassioned series of photographs portrayed Callen's professionalism and expertise, qualities rarely championed in artistic representations of African American women at the time. In *Nurse Midwife* (1951), Smith situates Callen in the fraught context of the American South's racially segregated healthcare system, utilizing photography's documentary quality to expose uncomfortable situations and, thereby, raise social questions.

Elliott Erwitt, on the other hand, focused on the human emotion, sentiment, and even silliness of his subjects to capture the connection among us that transcends our life circumstances. Erwitt rarely constructed his compositions, yet his photographs often carry a casual, seemingly unintentional political message. Taken while a soldier in training himself, Erwitt's *Soldier/New Jersey, 1951* features a fellow soldier whose jocular facial expression is both playful and unsettling, given the seriousness one attributes to wartime military training. Although the photograph's spontaneity and humor first catch the eye, deeper questions soon emerge, including especially how the political context of the Korean War and the recent desegregation of the military would likely have rendered this image politically and socially provocative in 1951.

The power of Garry Winogrand's *New York, 1969* comes less from the significance of the particular demonstration it portrays than from Winogrand's ability to capture both the character of the scene and the individual's role within it. As a photographer, Winogrand positioned himself at the center of the action, enabling himself to interact directly with the scene. Here Winogrand masterfully uses a wide-angle lens to capture the chaos of the ongoing protest, forcing the eye to take in the energy (and hostility) of the scene. Yet the interaction between the beefy-faced man in the center of the composition, the reporter thrusting his microphone into the crowd, and the young girl staring curiously at the reporter draws attention to the individual human stories that collectively make up the broader protest and the overall political activism of the decade.

Lastly, there is a lot we do not know about Elliott Erwitt's *Yale/New Haven, 1955,* and that is perhaps the point. Why does the man look that way? What is the significance of the ritual of parading a college's oldest living graduate before the younger generations? In interesting juxtaposition with Smith and Bourke-White's photographs of populations disadvantaged by racial and socioeconomic hierarchies, Erwitt's image exposes the role of white privilege in American society. Considering that the man in the car was likely to be in his nineties in the 1950s, a key decade in the Civil Rights Movement, this photograph also raises questions about age and the social change that occurs with the passing of generations.

The moments captured in these photographs have all obviously passed, along with the political, social, and racial contexts within which they were framed. Yet these images continue to engage and challenge us to consider *both* their historical specificity and their contemporary relevance. Taken collectively and in conversation with each other, these images raise a multitude of questions. It is up to us, as ever, to answer them.

Sarah Crnkovich '09
Interpretation and Programming Intern

Elliott Erwitt, *Yale/ New Haven, 1955,* 1951, published in 1977, gelatin silver print. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hunter; PH.978.28.1