

# School Photos and Their Afterlives

January 8 to April 12, 2020



Steven Deo, *When We Become Our Role Models #2*, 2004, mixed media; acrylic and collage on canvas. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; MIS.2004.65.

**Curated by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer**

*School Photos and Their Afterlives* presents archival class photographs from diverse communities across the globe in critical dialogue with works by contemporary artists who reframe and comment on them. Ranging across photography's histories, the exhibition shows that despite the uniformity that they share with other everyday photographic genres, school pictures perform important social and ideological functions. Strictly conventional and most often structured by an institutional gaze, school photographs provide visual evidence of official attempts to minimize and disguise or, at times, to maximize the social differences shaping communal life both outside and inside the school. They create national and imperial subjects and they also create "others." Yet, in highlighting community, solidarity, hope, and the desire for learning, they can also allow us to imagine justice and a more democratic future.

Reflecting on the afterlives of school photos taken in times of transformation and of social and political crisis, this exhibition seeks to expose the powerful and often problematic role of vernacular photographs and photographic archives, their affective resonances, and the many imaginative ways that artists around the world bring these into visibility.

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## Why School Photos?

School photos appear surprisingly early in the development of photography. Strictly conventional and uniform, shaped by an institutional gaze, they have attracted no critical attention. Virtually absent from histories and theories of photography, they have largely been ignored as historical sources.

But what if we consider school photos as historical *actors*? What personal, social, and political functions do they perform? What, in fact, do they *do*—from the perspective of institutions that commission them, and from that of children facing the camera?

Look closely. Watch and try to listen to the students. How much of their story—and of their hopes and dreams—can we recover? What do these photos reveal, and what do they conceal?

## Why Afterlives?

Photographs do more than document the time of their production: they create a sense of a future in which they will have new roles to play as objects of memory and documents of history. To appreciate how photographs keep developing, as it were, we might think of them in *liquid time*—a term borrowed from the artist Jeff Wall's essay "Photography and Liquid Intelligence." Like the analog image in its developing bath, photos shift in meaning over time. Never really "fixed," they remain open to ever-new interpretations.

What, you may want to ask, does each image do *here*, in this exhibition? How, as institutional technologies, can school photos retain their fluidity?

## Why Artists and Archives?

Artists from around the world have engaged and reframed school photographs, inserting them into liquid time. Enlarging photographic archives, they reveal, and also playfully dislodge, the power of institutions to frame children. We might say that they practice, and that they invite us to practice, what scholar Gabrielle Moser has called a *disobedient gaze*.

How do artists make visible the conformity, discipline, and indoctrination that shape the ideologies of schooling? And how do they comment on the role of photography in furthering these ideologies?

The artists in this exhibition invite us to engage with everyday school photos while also questioning the stories they tell and the ways in which they tell them.

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### *Europe and Its “Others”*

Technical innovations in photography in the second half of the nineteenth century coincided with the development of state-accredited education in Europe, the United States, and Euro-American colonies. In their efforts to manage religious, ethnic, national, and racialized differences in their heterogeneous populations, authorities used school photography to further their assimilationist and socially transformative ideologies.

Notice how similar sets of strategies promoting social integration—or separation—emerge in vastly divergent sociohistorical contexts. Note, too, how the conventions of school photography bring these common tactics into view.

This section displays images from missionary, private, and public schools in the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet empires. They show both ethnically integrated classrooms (within Europe) and segregated schools (in European colonies) that nevertheless shared a common purpose: to induce students to conform and become supporters, if not agents, of the ruling state. Class photos of Armenian children before the 1915 genocide, and of Jewish children during the Holocaust, however, show the fragility of the assimilationist project, revealing its other side: separation, exclusion, and murder. Note how, at such moments of extremity, school photos can become vehicles of communal resistance and of memorialization. Note also how artists respond by aligning us with the children rather than the institution.

### *The United States and Its “Others”*

In the United States, schooling was largely segregated along racialized lines until the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954. Public and private schools upheld white supremacy even while nominally, and separately, providing opportunities for the transformation of nonwhite children to the values and life ways of the Euro-American mainstream.

This section features photographs from US territories in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and from boarding schools created as transformative institutions for Native American children after the American Indian wars, and for African American children after emancipation. Boarding and missionary schools used photography to promote assimilationist practices that eradicated native cultures. “Before-and-after” images deliberately staged what white officials presented as the students' initial cultural “degeneracy” and their dramatic, visible physical and cultural changes after the schools' conversionist practices took effect. Responses to these institutional images appear in photos by a First Nations Canadian student, Beverley Brown, and in works by Carrie Mae Weems and Steven Deo.

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We see the culmination of segregationist policies in school photos from US concentration camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. This section also features iconic school images from the movement to end segregation and fight for equality in education during the Jim Crow era and after. David Wojnarowicz and Lorie Novak comment on the fraught history of inclusion and exclusion in US schools. And Sandra Ramos critiques the indoctrination of schoolchildren in Cuba.

### *Imagining Justice*

This final section shifts the focus to repressive regimes in Mexico and Argentina and their targeting of students and young people for persecution, disappearance, and murder. School photos have served as evidence of past existence and as vehicles of the struggle for accountability in the aftermath of state violence. Marcelo Brodsky and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer engage viewers in this struggle, asking us to imagine justice for and practice solidarity with the disappeared students.

### **Featured Artists**

Marcelo Brodsky (Argentina)  
Steven Deo (Muscogee/Euchee, United States)  
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Mexico, Canada)  
Mirta Kupferminc (Argentina)  
Silvina Der Meguerditchian (Argentina, Germany)  
Diane Meyer (United States)  
Vik Muniz (Brazil, United States)

Lorie Novak (United States)  
José Clemente Orozco (Mexico)  
Sandra Ramos (Cuba)  
Tomoko Sawada (Japan)  
Abdel Salam Shehada (Palestine)  
Carrie Mae Weems (United States)  
David Wojnarowicz (United States)

Archival originals and digital reproductions from Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bolivia, Canada, France, Lithuania, Palestine, the Philippines, Poland, Puerto Rico, Romania, Russia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, the Soviet Union, and the United States

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Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer are co-authors of *School Photos in Liquid Time: Reframing Difference* (University of Washington Press, 2020).

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