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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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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.

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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