

POLITICAL SCIENCE COLLOQUIUM

"Photographing Afterness: Experimenting with Potentiality in Memorial Aesthetics"

by

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Since 2010, the artist Jason Lazarus has been collecting and exhibiting photographs deemed "too hard to keep" by their owners. The growing archive of images contributes to what he calls a "repository of photographs, photo-objects, and digital files [that are] too painful to live with any longer." This is a public receptacle for excessive affect, a place where we can deposit material objects charged with the aura of a feeling that is, as Lazarus writes, too difficult to hold on to, but too meaningful to destroy. What distinguishes *Too Hard to Keep* is the way that it showcases painful traces of loss and brokenness that exist in a suspended space of can't-live-with / can't-live-without. This essay contrasts *Too Hard to Keep* with Dawoud Bey's *Birmingham Project*, another provocative contemporary photographic exhibition that experiments with mediating and responding to loss. *Birmingham* commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama – a flash point for the Civil Rights Movement – and memorializes the lives of the six African-American children who died in the event. Bey photographed present-day residents of Birmingham, half of whom are the same ages of the 1963 bombing victims (eleven, thirteen, fourteen, and sixteen), and half who are the age those victims would have been had they survived the attack. The exhibition features the portraits side by side, as a series of sixteen diptychs juxtaposing what the victims might have looked like at the time of their deaths with what they might look like today, had their lives not been tragically lost. The question is, what contributions can these photo projects make as responses to catastrophic loss? And how do they illuminate the kind of work aesthetic mediation can do for subjects of afterness? Of all the important differences one can locate between the two exhibitions, the one I highlight focuses on the concept of potentiality. Where *Too Hard to Keep* invokes the theme of potentiality by motivating spectators in the gallery to imagine what might have happened in the past to create conditions of unbearability in the present; with *The Birmingham Project* spectators are hailed by the memory of what could have happened but did not – what missed the opportunity to become actual. In this way, *Too Hard to Keep* places potentiality in the past, where *Birmingham* locates it in the future.



Friday, March 10, 2017

2:30 – 4:00 pm

Light Refreshments will be served!
Saunders 624, Harry Friedman Room