

Off the Record

Curated by Ashley James. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

April 2 to September 27, 2021.

Reviewed by James Lowry, Queens College, City University of New York

Records manifest and manufacture power, project authority, and lay claim to evidentiality: a new exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum surfaces how constructed and contingent are these properties and effects of records. *Off the Record* puts the complexities and caveats, already well known to archivists, in public view.

Kathy Carbone, who has worked extensively at the intersection of archival studies and artistic practice, writes that

Artists apply a variety of critical and aesthetic approaches to the archive, and their archival interventions are often concerned with constructions of meaning, challenging or provoking change in a situation or condition, opening out possibilities for new meaning-making processes, and providing alternative and more socially situated meanings that diverge from an 'official' interpretation.¹

All of these preoccupations are evident in *Off the Record*, carefully curated by Dr. Ashley James, associate curator of Contemporary Art for the Guggenheim and former assistant curator of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, where she was the lead curator for the museum's presentation of *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2018–19), organized *Eric N. Mack: Lemme walk across the room* (2019), and co-curated *John Edmonds: A Sidelong Glance* (2020–21).² James has curated *Off the Record* from work from the Guggenheim's new acquisitions, as well as a loaned piece. Thirteen artists, largely from the US, working with a range of media, but notably with photography, printmaking, and textiles, trouble notions of evidence in the aftermath (?) of a federal administration built on deceit, and at a time when documentary traces of Black death are rendered on our screens daily and to little positive effect.

This phenomenon of being of the moment yet seemingly constant is captured in the loaned piece in the exhibition, Tomashi Jackson's three-dimensional work, *Ecology of Fear (Gillum for Governor of Florida) (Freedom Riders bus bombed by KKK)* (2020),

¹ Kathy Carbone, "Archival Art: Memory Practices, Interventions, and Productions," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 2 (April 2020): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12358>.

² "Ashley James," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/staff/ashley-james>.

which is a comment on the failure of true democracy in the US, as Jackson [explains in an audio recording on the exhibition webpage and Guggenheim SoundCloud account](#).

Sadie Barnette's *My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation* (2017) comprises inkjet prints that replicate folios from the artist's father's FBI file, detailing the agency's surveillance of Rodney Barnette in connection with his Black Panther organizing. Barnette has marked the pages with aerosol paint. Perhaps referencing graffiti's subversive and celebratory reterritorializing of state and private property, these streaks of pink and purple break through the drab official pages triumphantly, echoing the notions of survivance in the artistic repurposing of police surveillance records at the City of Portland Archives and Records Center, described by Carbone.³



Installation view, *Off the Record*, on view April 2–September 27, 2021, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2021.

In *Herald Tribune: November 1977* (1977, printed 2008), a series of prints by Sarah Charlesworth, the front pages of a newspaper are redacted to isolate the images, accentuating the prevalence of white masculinity and violence in the international and public space that is, or was, the daily newspaper. Nearby, a triptych of tall,

³ Kathy Michelle Carbone, "Surveillance to Art: 'Flipping Around the Paranoia,'" in "Information/Control: Control in the Age of Post-Truth," eds. S. E. Wood, J. Lowry, and A. J. Lau, special issue of *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i2.77>.

narrow oil on linen works by Glenn Ligon plays with a quote from Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love*: "They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning." Genet was writing about Black people in America. Ligon literally and visually reformulates Genet's proposition, repeating and layering the text so that black dominates the surface, asking, "Why must we be the ink that gives the white page a meaning?"

Obscured histories are brought into view in Carlos Motta's *Brief History of US Interventions in Latin America Since 1946* (2005), an "endless supply of an offset lithograph on newsprint." Folded and stacked on the gallery floor, one side of these sheets of newspaper carries smeared handprints that are based on a "photograph by Susan Meiselas of the White Hand signature left by a Salvadorean death squad on the door of a slain peasant leader," and on the other side, details of American interference in Latin America. By encouraging us to take a copy, Motta has us leaving the gallery with blood on our hands, figuratively. Format also places the spectator in a dyad of responsibility and participation in Lorna Simpson's *Flipside* (1991); the two photographic portraits show the back of a Black woman's head and the back of an African mask and seem to comment on the long history of the Western gaze, anthropological and curatorial, captured in the field (the American city, the foreign country), and confined in the collecting institution: the viewer soon realizes that they are participating in this consumption of documentation and display, while the turning away from the camera is also an assertion of sovereignty; the subjects refuse their subjection.

Though largely monochromatic, *Off the Record* is punctuated by vivid color in places, such as two large works on paper by Sable E. Smith. *Coloring Book 9* and *Coloring Book 18* (2018) present images from a children's book about the judicial system, which "serve to teach children the logics of incarceration." The bright coloring outside the lines becomes a liberatory intervention in this context. Rich color also distinguishes the three Hank Willis Thomas prints, which come from the series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black Corporate America* (2005-2008). The prints are advertisements from old magazines, seamlessly redacted to present the images of Black people in or with luxurious products, but without the advertising copy; a comment on corporate targeting of a growing Black middle class and capitalism's response to the Black is Beautiful movement.



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A recontextualization of photographs is also performed in three pieces from Leslie Hewitt's *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–09) series, which are prints of assemblages of images that place the intimate with the public, the personal with the political. Lisa Oppenheim's prints, *Killed Negatives, After Walker Evans* (2007), play with the materiality of photography too, rehabilitating discarded negatives of the influential photographer Walker Evans' documentation of the Great Depression in a meditation on appraisal. Photographic evidence is augmented with personal documentation in Adrian Piper's *Decide Who You Are #19: Torch Song Alert* (1992) triptychs, which comment on race and class-based discrimination. Among Piper's source materials is an image of the Crown Heights riot in Brooklyn in 1991; her written recollections of aggression and discrimination make this piece as pertinent now as it was thirty years ago. Sara Cwynar's *Encyclopedia Grid* (2014) pieces get at the construction of knowledge by lifting images about selected topics from across a number of encyclopedias, reminding us that all of our sources are filtered or selected somehow.

Carrie Mae Weems' two chromogenic prints with etched text on glass from their mid-1990s series *From Here I Saw What Happened and Cried* present images of enslaved people from mid-nineteenth century daguerreotypes, which were originally made as "evidence" of Black inferiority for a white supremacist pseudoscience project by Harvard's Louis Agassiz. But Weems tells a very different

story by captioning the images; for example, the image of the enslaved man reads “Descending the throne you became a foot soldier and cook.”

The prevalence of black and white in this show, as well as themes of historical and current racism, violence and loss, puts *Off the Record* into conversation with an exhibition happening at the New Museum: *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*.⁴ Conceptualized by Okwui Enwezor before his death in 2019, the exhibition was realized by curators and advisors (including Glenn Ligon) at the New Museum in a tribute to his vision, and, in its way, *Off the Record* also pays homage to Enwezor, whose seminal *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008) exhibition at New York’s International Center of Photography was an important moment in the archival turn in art.⁵

Like the pieces on show, the design of the Guggenheim exhibition space also gestures to recordkeeping, with colors, fonts, and visual elements that make conscious references to the aesthetics of the file. A [blog post by Claire Lui](#) discusses the imperial history of the manila folder (see Craig Robertson’s new book *The Filing Cabinet* for more on that) that informs the color scheme of the gallery space, and the blog post contextualizes other aspects of the visual design of the show.⁶ Similarly, the audio content, including dialogues about and descriptions of the pieces, extend and enrich the exhibition. Reflecting on the exhibition as a document, curator Ashley James notes that the show, like other records and archives, reflects the biases of the various collectors, curators, and institutions involved, in a clip called “[Recording Off the Record](#),” where we also get to hear the registrar talk about the Guggenheim’s own recordkeeping.

⁴ Weems has works in both shows, and their contribution to *Grief and Grievance* is one of that show’s most affecting pieces. *All the Boys (Blocked 2)*, of 2016, a partially redacted copy of a Sanford Police Department report concerning the murder of Trayvon Martin, is powerful in its simplicity. Centering the sparse data points in the record—identity markers about the victim and the witnesses—tells a disturbing, racialized story of Black death and white testimony and complaint. By lifting this one page from the official file and presenting it in isolation, Weems shows us how records tell stories about our racist society while they appear to document discrete events.

⁵ Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson, whose work appears in *Off the Record*, also had work in *Archive Fever*. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Göttingen and New York: Steidl/International Center of Photography, 2008).

⁶ Claire Lui, “A Manila Envelope: The Inspiration behind an Exhibition’s Graphic Identity,” April 2, 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/a-manila-envelope-the-inspiration-behind-an-exhibitions-graphic-identity>; Craig Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).



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Ashley James has created a thoughtful exhibition that reflects many of the concerns of the archival field, concerns with how culture is shaped, history is told, the state is encountered, and facts are constructed. As archivists know, context is everything, and the intellectual labor around this show is surfaced in clever ways in the visual design and accompanying online materials. Though the content of the show is critical of “the record,” at the same time it speaks to the importance and potential of records, as the label text notes: “While all of the examples are defined by a certain amount of skepticism toward the record, they also evince a sense of possibility in and beyond the margins.”

Much of the work on show can be viewed in the Guggenheim’s Collections Online, in the category “On View in New York.”⁷ The exhibition website includes a brief video walkthrough, audio recordings of discussions with artists and Guggenheim staff, and audio descriptions of selected works. There is also a digital audio guide that can be downloaded, and a PDF “welcome packet” that includes images of and exhibition labels for each of the works in the exhibition. *Off the Record* is on display at the Guggenheim from April 2 to September 27, 2021.

⁷ Guggenheim’s Collections Online, accessed May 14 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/collection-online>.