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PHILIP BROOKMAN
In the Light of Memory
1969–2021

Top left: Carla and Louise, Santa Cruz, California, 1984
Top right: Washington, D.C., Fencing Around U.S. Capitol (Winter Light), 2021
Bottom: New York City, Shipping Containers, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, 2019
Opposite: London, Street at Night (Zone Ends), 2005

CURATED BY MILENA KALINOVSKA
On behalf of the American University Museum community, I am pleased to present Philip Brookman: In the Light of Memory, 1969–2021. The interview published here between curator Milena Kalinovska and Brookman offers a wonderful discussion of the exhibition in the context of Western art, history, and culture. Brookman describes that context: “Because I am also an historian, the pictures I make are deeply shaded by photo history, art history, American history, and world history… It’s not just a record of time and place, but one that is filtered through the weight of all that history.”

Among other cultural references, the interview pulls in philosopher Henri Bergson, novelist Franz Kafka, filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, painters from Rembrandt van Rijn to Gerhard Richter, photographers from Henri Cartier-Bresson to Sally Mann, and the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Sun Ra. It is a pleasure and an education to follow the trajectory of their learned and engaged conversation.

Brookman’s exhibition appears at a particular moment on campuses and in society when the hegemony of Western culture is very much in dispute. After reading a short piece by W. Richard West, Jr., Director Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, I thought I would take a different approach to interpreting Brookman’s photography. West wrote that we are accustomed to measuring Native art by Western standards. To evaluate contemporary Native art, he argues, “…the only feasible approach is one that is rooted neither in purely Native views nor in Western art historical terms; it incorporates the maxims and dictates of art history as well as the… potent combination of cultural values, process, and creativity…” What would happen if the tools of evaluation West applies to Native art were used to measure the success of Brookman’s exhibition, thoroughly embedded as it is in Western art and culture? Can we find the synthesis of aesthetics and cultural meaning that West requires of contemporary Native art? To put it more directly, does Brookman’s process of making perform a communal function? Are his photographs, in West’s words, intentional “statements and reflections… of collective and communal values, as much or more than they are individual creative statements?”

The short answer to this question is “yes.” In the interview Brookman describes his photographs as a visual diary of his experiences, the result of an intuitive creative process. He hopes they will communicate “…something new about our perception of the world as it is, as we see it…” He declares his intention to “lift us beyond ourselves… a transcendent notion not often found in a single photograph, but more in the combinations and spaces between them, in the stories they tell.” As in West’s understanding of Native aesthetics, Brookman’s photographic prints are really a byproduct of this creative process. His objects are secondary to the stories they tell.

Museums can serve important functions. We all have something to gain by seeing the world filtered through an artist’s sensibility, intelligence, and understanding of history. We also benefit from moving beyond our own cultural frame of reference to find a fresh perspective on ourselves.

Jack Rasmussen, Director and Curator
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

CONVERSATION BETWEEN
MILENA KALINOVSKA AND PHILIP BROOKMAN

MILENA KALINOVSKA: It seems to me that you photograph whenever you can. Would you say that your pictures constitute a visual diary, a captured record of your experiences at a particular time and place?

PHILIP BROOKMAN: Some photographers say you should always carry your camera with you so it’s ready when “the picture” presents itself. It doesn’t always work that way for me. My pictures are a visual diary of my experiences, but it’s a diary that does not follow a timeline or narrative. Maybe it’s more like a dream journal, where I choose what to record from all the visual information that I take in—it’s not everything—and what I produce is selective, heavily edited, and sometimes fictionalized, so I can be involved in how it is interpreted. Because I am also an historian, the pictures I make are deeply shaded by photo history, art history, American history, and world history, not to mention many of the artists I have known and worked with. It’s not just a record of time and place, but one that is filtered through the weight of all that history.

MK: You seem to connect what you photograph with your emotions. Philosopher Henri Bergson argued that immediate experience and intuition are more significant than rationalism for understanding reality. Would you say that this argument works for you?

PB: I do connect what I photograph with my emotions, but it’s an aesthetic or humanistic emotionalism. It sometimes has to do with the senses: I feel the sun’s heat reflecting off the sidewalk; I smell tamales steaming in a street vendor’s cart; I see colors coming together in a mix of fashion, architecture, and foliage out in the world. All these situations trigger memories and indicate aesthetic connections that could lead to an interesting picture. There are also the social, political, and historical signposts I associate with these things—the signifiers. Most of the photography I do takes place out on the street or in the country—while traveling, moving, or watching things change—so there is never time to think much about what I am doing. Your eyes, mind, and body must intuitively work together in a totally practiced way, in combination with your understanding of technique and willingness to experiment and break the rules. It rarely works, but when it does you have a shot at getting something interesting. As for Bergson’s philosophy, I would agree that experience and intuition are better tools for me and many other photographers. There is nothing rational about the kind of photography I do. By embracing intuition I hope to convey something new about our perception of world as it is, as we see it, rather than about some reality or truth.

MK: Novelist Franz Kafka wrote in his diary that he hoped to acquire a way of seeing in which life would keep its heavy moment of rise and fall, but would at the time be recognized as nothing, a dream, a drifting state. What way of seeing life would you say you have acquired?

PB: Kafka understood the temporal and unsettled nature of history. His characters could manipulate their narrative history by manipulating their perception of reality. We are taught that history is rooted in documented facts, but Kafka’s notion of history presumes that there are no facts—they don’t exist. Dreams are real, perception can be altered, and history is based on nothing. I would like to think of photography and film as mediums that can document what’s real, but they don’t. It’s impossible because, as Robert Frank once said, “What’s out there is always changing.” I try to see things through the kaleidoscope of art and history. It’s a pastiche, acquired by looking, reading, traveling, and listening to every different viewpoint. One’s “point of view” is very important in photography and I’ve learned that there is no one correct way of seeing. As long as we understand history as a construct of experiences that can illuminate more about today than the past, then both culture and history can be viewed as the DNA of personal experience. Are these the malleable building blocks coded to make us who we are? The question gives me permission to use this diaristic form of storytelling rooted in memory and call it art. It’s more about searching for answers than finding them.

MK: Sarah Sentilles, a writer you recommended to me, asks in her book, Draw Your Weapons, what does it take for a person to have impact, to inspire compassion, to respond to violence. She quotes from a letter to one of the main characters by his wife: “I think it is important to ever keep aware of the greatness that exists around us…that lifts us beyond ourselves…” How do you picture greatness?

PB: Greatness doesn’t come from outsized power, money, fame, or being named to a list in a magazine. Greatness can be found in a water drop or a young child’s play. We have to work so hard to recognize that and articulate our recognition. For me it’s about maintaining a sense of wonder, which is hard to do when everything around us pushes against that. You have to
look closely at everything and tune out the interference that keeps you from recognizing or responding to greatness. I agree that it should “lift us beyond ourselves.” It’s a transcendent notion not often found in a single photograph, but more in the combinations and spaces between them, in the stories they tell.

MK: How long does it take and how hard is it to take a good picture? What is a good picture to you? Is the decisive moment—taking an essential picture of an event, a concept made popular by street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson—still relevant?

PB: It takes just a split second to shoot a photograph and a lifetime of experience to understand what it means to make a good photograph. For me, a good photograph is one I haven’t seen before, one that holds meaning and context and mystery within its frame or frames. It’s not really about the moment or the picture’s technical qualities. The photograph records the moment when the present becomes past—it’s about time. It’s also about the interaction of light with the chemistry of film or the electronics of digital technology, combined with the interaction of the photographer with their subject. It’s a bit like painting in that we create a picture with a set of tools and some understanding of how to use them, but with photography there is always something real involved—the light or heat or electronic signal which is reflected back by the world. It’s that reflection, both literally and metaphorically, which makes a photograph so intriguing and mysterious. And it’s these literal and metaphorical elements that combine to convey meaning. I think Cartier-Bresson will always be relevant because he was attuned to surrealism and taught us how to see it in the world. In the end, he decided to be a painter.

MK: Parts of your aesthetic are layers of shapes, views through windows, the role of light, meetings of colors, or a saturation of color in a dominant shade. The sharp angle at which you point the camera or long, receding perspectives of the streets play their role too. You said that you are informed not only by the history of photography, but by paintings as well. Can you be more specific?

PB: Many photographers are informed by the art they see. I am trained as an art historian and my work is always informed by that history. I look at art all the time and go around with a big reservoir of images in my mind—they are always there—so I see the world through this filter of art and history. And it’s not just photographs that I use but all kinds of art, including painting, sculpture, graphics, design, video, performance, film, and architecture. It’s a powerful tool, but it can also be a barrier. I call it the tyranny of modernism. It’s very hard to break free from it. But all forms of art can inspire my work: the focused light in Rembrandt’s portraits, the open windows in Vermeer’s interiors, the layers of accumulated spiritual information in Central African Ikisi sculpture, the descriptive, flattened composition of Japanese woodblock prints, Indian miniature paintings, the narrative authenticity of nineteenth-century French realist paintings, and the documentary conventions of Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, and William Eggleston are all good examples. I also have to remember that my experiences working closely with artists whose work and methods I have been motivated by—Richard Diebenkorn, Eduardo Carrillo, June Leaf, Robert Frank, Jim Goldberg, Gordon Parks, Victor Burgin, Sally Mann, and Deborah Willis, to name just a few—have been most significant.

MK: Artist Gerhard Richter called the photograph “the most perfect picture.” You, on the other hand, have said that a good photographer can create an image that is lot like a painting. You both talk about powerful images that are about something—something that is not false. What is a false photograph to you?

PB: I love Richter’s photographs. He sees the world as subject matter for his art. To me that’s the best way to look at things. He photographs everything—mountains, cities, seas, people—everything around him becomes something new and organized when he photographs it. Then there’s no difference between life and art. Sometimes, his photographs become paintings and sometimes they remain photographs and become part of his diary of pictures, a map of his life or the “atlas” as he calls it. If you can keep it like that—a reflection of your experience—the pictures remain true to who you are. I don’t mean they are factual because every photograph is somehow false. It’s not the thing you see because the technology changes or mediates it. In that way, every photograph is false but holds some truth within its borders, simply because it is about something more universal that we can relate to. The great photographer Gilles Peress once said, “The edge between the real and the unreal is the locus where the picture is made.” I think that’s right—photographs come to life on that edge between art and life, between fact and fiction.

MK: I imagine that film director, screenwriter, and film critic Jean-Luc Godard’s statement: “I hope your documentary is a fiction,” resonates with you. You too shift around the elements of autobiography with current events to tell a story. What is your process?

PB: Godard is relentlessly experimental. He comes from the European avant-garde tradition of questioning realism by experimenting with form—by mixing up time and space and sound and picture. His point is that we might come closer to finding something true in what we see and perceive by making up a fictional story that’s rooted in what we know—not in what we see—and
telling that story by stirring up the narrative through formal innovation. I watched Godard’s films over and over when I was in school, trying to understand all of this in relation to modernism. I think you find that his strategy is not unique. It unfolds in many forms: in the later photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and Robert Frank; the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Sun Ra; the prose of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin; the novels of James Joyce and Haruki Murakami; the plays of Berthold Brecht and Samuel Beckett; the time-based art of Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl, and Arthur Jafa, to name just a few. I am certainly inspired by all these artists and many others. I see this process as somewhat political and rooted in the desire to break down our traditional structures of perception and understanding to question systems and hierarchies of power. My own process is somewhat different but certainly connected. I am interested in working from my own memories, experiences, and relationships—a diary that is inherently disjointed—and constructing a narrative with words and pictures. I often choose a fictional framework with photographs and some writing, such as the form I developed in my book Redlands. If I am working with video this becomes a more indexical form that is connected to documents and archives.

MK: Jean-Luc Godard also said, “The eye should learn to listen before it looks.” How do you understand this?

PB: I imagine Godard sitting in a café before presenting a new film at an obscure Swiss festival. He’s smoking and drinking coffee with friends and decides to tell a joke. He makes up something nonsensical that also rings true, like he does in his best work as a filmmaker. And he says, “the eye should learn to listen,” because he understands that our visual perception is so acute that we make judgements about what’s true, based on what we see. And his friends are laughing and laughing and scolding him because our eyes can’t really listen. They can only see but our eyes can also help us to be better listeners. He’s saying that we can’t always believe what we see—our eyes can fool our brains—so they need some help from the soundtrack. All our senses must be part of how we understand the world, but in Godard’s films, the picture is not always in sync with the soundtrack. That’s the joke.

MK: Writer and philosopher Susan Sontag wrote that the possibility of being affected morally by photographs shows the existence of a relevant political consciousness. You have said that in Washington art is wrapped up in politics and you have witnessed artists...
engaging people in vital discussions about what our lives are actually about. In your own work, you do not necessarily concentrate on significant political events. As you said to me, there are enough good photographers to record these actions. Yet, your pictures do talk about the impact of politics on daily lives in the city. You are more aware of politics than your photographs, on the whole, may betray.

PB: I have this ongoing internal debate about the relevance of photography in our everyday dialog about politics. On one hand, all photography can have some role in our civic discourse and our political lives. On the other, it’s up to us to make that happen; the pictures don’t speak unless someone is listening. I remember giving a tour to Senator Diane Feinstein of an exhibition of photographs by Ansel Adams. She told me how important these iconic pictures of the landscape were to Stuart Udall, a politician and Secretary of the Interior during the 1960s. He used these pictures to promote major environmental legislation that helped preserve public lands and establish new National Parks. And, of course, Adams was inspired by the nineteenth-century landscape photographer Carleton Watkins, whose work encouraged the establishment of Yosemite Valley as a National Park. Much more directly, we see today how a video shot by Darnella Frazier documenting the murder of George Floyd sparked worldwide outrage and provided the evidence needed to convict the police officer responsible. Photography is such an important political tool, not only because of its ability to offer evidence. It’s reproducible and does a pretty good job of representing our lives objectively and subjectively. It can also impart that incendiary spark of imagination that teaches new ideas and changes people’s minds. Photography is not only a political medium. It’s also an aesthetic and educational tool, my “choice of weapons,” as Gordon Parks so eloquently said.

MK: Let’s talk about the topics covered in your pictures and what they purport to convey. You said that telling a story matters more to you than creating a particular style. Would you say that there is a difference in your approach to making pictures of street life versus portraits?

PB: Sure, and I also love making portraits on the street or in public spaces. Sometimes I’ll see people who seem interesting. I’ll stop and talk and maybe ask to make a picture. Other times I just won’t intrude. I once went to a hospital in the Bronx with the photographer Robert Frank. We were there for a Thanksgiving celebration, something he knew would be interesting. We watched a series of performances by a few of the patients and one young woman sang a song—it was called “Sad Movies.” This was truly one of the most beautiful experiences I can remember. I walked over next to her with my little camera, sat down and watched, listened—I was mesmerized, but I could not break through this concentration to make a photograph. The picture didn’t matter as much as the experience. I went back, sat down with Robert, and he shook his head, saying without hesitation, “You should have taken it.” That fearless approach is what made him such a great photographer and filmmaker. But, for me, photography is more about the experience, and that’s always different whether you are on the street, in the wilderness, or in an artist’s studio. Sometimes the very best pictures are the ones you never get, but the images stay with you and inform everything else you do. You keep trying to make pictures that evoke the emotions of what you remember.

MK: Your sensibilities must be impacted by your travels. Can you talk about your Cuban experience and resulting pictures?

PB: I went to Cuba in 2012 to visit the Havana Biennial exhibition. I looked at a lot of art and met so many interesting people from around the world. I wanted to shoot pictures in Havana but I also felt there was a lot of baggage associated with that. Americans already have a picture of Cuba in our minds—the vintage cars, crumbling infrastructure, Caribbean light and color, revolution, people escaping on rafts. Maybe I had seen too many photographs made by other outsiders, which are very different than those made by Cuban photographers. I decided to set some limitations on how I would do it to force a certain kind of difficulty and keep me focused. I only brought two cameras—my old Leica M3 with a limited supply of black and white film, and a small point and shoot digital camera. My favorite Havana photograph is the portrait I made of Abraham. He said I could take a picture of him there on a dark street at night, with very little light. I could tell he was nervous—we were all nervous of being watched by some unseen eye.

MK: For this exhibition, you created a completely new project based on your research about Washington, DC, philanthropist William Wilson Corcoran, who opened the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1869. You worked at the Corcoran, a beloved museum for the Washington community. The gallery had a significant collection and dynamic contemporary programs before it was dissolved in 2014 due to financial difficulties. What steered you toward this research and how will it be presented in your exhibition?

PB: I was led to this by the Black Lives Matter movement and a lot of work I’ve been doing on African American art and history. I worked at the Corcoran from 1993 until it closed in 2014, first as curator of photography and media arts and then as chief curator. My new project is not about the Corcoran Gallery of Art but about the larger, more treacherous legacy of its founder, William...
MK: What kind of cameras do you use? Have you noticed that you change your way of taking photographs over time, and do the results differ depending on the type of equipment used? For example, your Cuba series has soft textures and are almost dreamy in appearance.

PB: Over time, I have changed the way I work and the results are both different and in some ways the same. I think it was Danny Lyon who said “the best camera is the one you have with you” when you want to make a picture. This is pretty much true to how I work today. The Cuba photographs were mostly made with my Leica M3 and a lens that was kind of foggy. The softness that ensues gives the pictures a gentle, humanistic quality, which is something I envisioned. I started out with a Kodak Brownie camera like a lot of little kids in the sixties. That was a beautiful thing—my dad encouraged me, he would bring me film, I would shoot a roll or two, and then he would get it developed and bring me the prints and negatives. I still have those negatives. When I learned more about how to make photographs and develop and print the film, I started using better cameras that gave me added control. I also learned from a good teacher to experiment and not take the severity of technique too seriously. Sometimes we benefit from our mistakes or lack of perfect technique and the freedom to experiment has been very important to me. My grandfather was an architect—a perfectionist—and he gave me his old Leica and a few good lenses when he didn’t need them anymore. This was a game changer and I have used that camera ever since, along with a bunch of other cameras, including a Contax G2, several point and shoot film cameras, and a Rolleiflex. Now I mostly use a digital Fujifilm X-Pro2 and of course my iPhone. I like to go back and forth between film and digital and between color and black and white. To me, the camera phone now is like the Kodak Brownie of the sixties. We benefit from its limitations and simplicity—everyone can be a photographer—plus you can send the pictures around the world in an instant. With this sort of technology, the power and ubiquitous nature of photography has grown exponentially.

MK: “I have the snapshot…I have the memories, and that’s enough for me.” This phrase from one of the characters in your book Redlands speaks to the importance of taking pictures, of making one’s own photographic diary—a kind of scrapbook, a juxtaposition of documentary with the personal, something that is a mixture of what is there in the world and what is remembered. In this exhibition, the works are installed in part to suggest a kind of narrative. Is this what you are doing with your work?

PB: Yes, it’s a fictional memoir, and very much about memory. I have to work from what I know. But there are limits to that approach—when you work with photographs you must contend with the objective nature of what you are looking at. That is what Redlands is about. I wanted to create a story with pictures, but I found that to do this I had to invent a new story. Otherwise, there would be no story—the pictures would not be meaningful outside my own memories. I had to write it out in the form of a short novel and then put that back together with the pictures. The two had to work together but one could not illustrate the other. This almost drove my designer and publisher crazy, but they let me do it. It’s a difficult balance that I learned to navigate in my work. It really came into focus for me when I worked with Jim Goldberg on his book Raised by Wolves. Together we understood that to come close to saying something true with photographs, text, and documents, we had to work in a fictional form and let the reader discover the truth within it. We are the children of the sixties, of Jean-Luc Godard and Robert Frank. So where do we go now? I am very impressed with what I see emerging from the next generations of photographers, filmmakers, and media artists. Their work is more clear, less cynical, and they have seized the power to change how we see the world in ways we don’t yet know.
Top: Watsonville, California, Rail Yard, 1982
Bottom: Washington, D.C., David Hammons/Jessie Jackson (How Ya Like Me Now?), 1989
Top: New York City, Central Park (Summer), 1978
Bottom left: San Diego, Rose, 1985
Bottom right: San Diego, U.S. Imports (Woman and Children), 1985
Top: Richard Diebenkorn in His Ashland and Main Studio, Santa Monica, California, 1974
Bottom: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Louis Malle, Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, 1986
Top: Eli Reed, Washington, D.C., 1999
Bottom left: San Francisco, Antiwar Demonstration, November 6, 1971
Bottom right: San Francisco, Workers, 1971
Top: New York City, Demolition Worker, 1986
Bottom: San Francisco, Boys with Stuffed Bear, 24th Street, 1983
Middle: Richmond, Virginia, Woman Waiting for Bus, 2005
Bottom: Honey with Her Flag, Honey’s Thrift Shop, San Diego, 1985
Opposite: New York City, Jackson Heights, Queens, 2018
Top: Secaucus, New Jersey, Approaching New York City (Amy on the Train), 1985
Bottom: Chicago, Construction Worker on Curb, Randolph Street, 2018
Santa Cruz, California, Amy in the Window, 1978
Top: Watsonville, California, Baton Lesson (Girl in Red Dress), 1982
Middle: Watsonville, California, Strawberry Workers, 1982
Bottom: Cleveland, Butcher Shop Worker, 2019
Top left: San Diego, Man Reading Bible, 1984
Top right: San Diego, Man with Baby (Heaven), 1985
Middle: Allen Ginsburg, New York City, 1985
Bottom: New York City, Avenue A, 1977
PHILIP BROOKMAN

Philip Brookman is consulting curator in the department of photographs at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. There he has organized Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950 and Intersections: Photographs and Videos from the National Gallery of Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. He also edited the recent book Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950 with the National Gallery of Art, The Gordon Parks Foundation, and Steidl. He was a museum fellow at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles from January through March 2020 and is currently working on exhibitions about Dorothea Lange’s portraits and the relationship between photography and the Black Arts Movement.

Brookman was chief curator and head of research, senior curator of photography and media arts, as well as curator of photography and media arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art between 1993 and 2014. He organized or co-organized many projects there, including exhibitions on Eadweard Muybridge, Hank Willis Thomas, Taryn Simon, Sally Mann, Robert Frank, Gordon Parks, Jim Goldberg, Gilles Peress, Larry Sultan, and Danny Lyon. He oversaw development of the Corcoran’s photography and new media collections, curated numerous exhibitions from the collections, and curated the Corcoran Biennial exhibition in 2000. Brookman also organized and co-organized exhibitions for Tate Modern and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and held curatorial positions at Washington Project for the Arts, Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, and the University of California, Santa Cruz between 1977 and 1992. He is also a photographer, filmmaker, and writer, working primarily on issues of modern and contemporary art and photography. In 2015 Steidl published his book Redlands, a work of fiction with photographs.

MILENA KALINOVSKA

Milena Kalinovska, curator of the exhibition, served as director of modern and contemporary collections at the National Gallery Prague, Czech Republic; director of education and public programs at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston; and associate curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York.

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All exhibited works are inkjet prints unless otherwise noted.