A.I.R. brochure

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Title: Toward an Ethics of the Double Entendre [Leslie Hewitt]

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Historicism presents an eternal image of the past, historical materialism a specific and unique engagement with it The task of historical materialism is to set to work an engagement with history original to every new present. It has recourse to a consciousness of the present that shatters the continuum of history.

-Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs"

With their acute depth of field, life-size scale and resonating colors, the photographs in Leslie Hewitt's series "Riffs on Real Time" (2006–09) appear hyper-tactile and immediately accessible. Confronted with concentric frames of found photographs, used texts and 70s shag carpet—all reminiscent of some proverbial auntie's attic or pop's basement—the viewer initially gets the impression of accessibility and familiarity. Upon second glance, however, what seemed proximate becomes austere and distant. Pushed back by a disappearing perspective, the objects and the memories they reference are out of easy reach.

While Hewitt's images of celebration and protest, mundane intimacy and reflective domesticity, reflect the idiosyncrasies of one family history, they also function as a kind of public record of and for brown bodies at a particularly transformative moment in American history. Even if these are not your snapshots, the memories they elicit are collective, indexing and inviting the viewer into a shared personal history. Yet Hewitt's reuse of discarded images and texts extend far beyond the more recent history of resistance associated with the post-civil rights cultural radicalism we first see in them. With an uncanny capacity for art historical reprise, Hewitt's photographs function as contemporary still lifes, simultaneously allowing and denying a convention entangled with a history of violence and exploitation.² Objects that sit against geometric wood-block backgrounds and trompe l'oeil refract the ways in which our sense of aesthetics is mired in vexed historical formations. This attention to ethics is extended and activated by Hewitt's use of installation and sculptural heft, which put into relief the subjective relationships between artist, object and observer. Against the wall at human scale,

Hewitt's gouache panels, *AFTER IMAGES* (2008), catalog image fragments from the artist's memory and are imbued with a minimalist sense of theatricality and presence as they wait to be hung or carted away. Making quiet requests for interaction, they acknowledge the specificity of their context and point to interpretive locations before and after their lives in the museum gallery. Hewitt's subtle resistance to the "white cube" not only brings the outside in, but also documents the ways the outside has always been inscribed on the inside, and the inside has always been contingent upon an outside.

Hewitt and her objects speak to an interpreter with knowledge of the objects to which she refers—products of a young black woman's experience in an urban center—to engage a shared discursive space. Their seduction is made most enduring by the use of double entendre, which forces us to look and look again, or perhaps look then listen. Hewitt's "riffs" are as much lyrical reflections on reality as they are meditations on *reel* time and photography's role in the production of reality. Throughout the artist's oeuvre, rectilinear frames seem to imitate photography's historic attempts to delimit its terrain of meaning. Referencing the ways ethnography, anthropology and phrenology used prescribed interpretations of African photography to validate colonial forms of knowledge,³ Hewitt overlaps bounded images from historically distinct contexts to demonstrate how photography has always exceeded its insulation from an infinity of discursive structures. Despite its geographic and temporal rifts, the image is always already in immeasurable conversation.

Ironically, it is our ability as viewers to insert ourselves and our experiences into photography's field of vision that guarantees the specificity of Hewitt's images and the bodily integrity of her objects. Mechanisms that appear to reveal—soft light, direct views, layers of recognizable material—guard moments of intimacy, casting shadows and granting depth as they keep the host of interior spaces to which they allude discreet. By documenting the action of a millisecond, the photographs keep the narratives from which they emerge unknown and intact. These seemingly static renderings of things-that-are-no-longer function as a thesis on change—the process by which objects come together and come apart. Like the moments the photographs represent, the arrangements the artist carefully touches and retouches are transient renderings of objects that, once captured, will return to the world.

If Hewitt recycles aesthetic modes with a troubled past, it is because of their continued currency in securing subjugation and their possibilities for freedom-making. Her recapitulations of aesthetic conventions—geometry and composition, light and

shadow, balance and perspective—require us to behold the beauty of her work, but it is the work's departure from historic models of beauty that elicits the greatest visual desire. Unlike articulations of taste and judgment that necessitate indifference and independence of viewer and object.4 our discernment of Hewitt's work relies on our relationship to the quotidian images and objects she so idiosyncratically catalogs. Hewitt's photographs and sculptures induce visual pleasure precisely because they are embedded in social life. Not only are the objects themselves—hair picks, earrings, compact cassettes, bodega awnings—stand-ins for a series of social encounters, but their significance and signification gesture to an archive of social relations. What at first appears nostalgic and self-affirming places an unexpected set of requests for connection on the viewer, inciting desire for visual difference. One yearns—not for some sentimentalized notion of the past, but rather for an understanding of our historicity that accounts for the disjunctions and recurrences of time and is equally suited to the ethical and affective exigencies of our political present. 5 Highlighting the powerful import of images and objects in the construction of our most intimate selves, Hewitt's photosculptures invite us to collectively reflect upon the after-life of discarded objects and forgotten epochs in the making of modern political life.

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¹ Walter Benjamin, "Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937), in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 352.

² In her work *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, art historian Julie Berger Hochstrasser links the emergence of Dutch still-life painting as an independent genre in the seventeenth-century with the emergence of the commodity form, global capitalism, the Dutch West India Company and chattel slavery. The commodities that were represented—salt, tobacco, sugar and human beings—both reflect and deny the role of material culture, visual culture and New World slavery in the organization of a burgeoning culture of commerce. See Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
³ Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture,

³ Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers," in *In/Sight: African Photographers* 1940 to the Present, eds. Clare Bell, et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 26.

⁴ Jacques Derrida argues that "all [modern and pre-modern] philosophical discourses on art, on the meaning of art and meaning as such," require a distinction "between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object being talked about . . . the limit between the inside and outside of the art object, here a *discourse on the frame* [emphasis in the original]." See Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 45.

⁵ Like Angela Davis's "Abolition Democracy" (Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* [New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005]) and Eric Mann's "Third Reconstruction," (Eric Mann, *Katrina's Legacy: White Racism and Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* [Los Angeles: Frontlines Press, 2006]), which see a continuity between old and new forms of racism under the rubric of slavery, and advocate for a continuation of radical responses to slavery from Reconstruction and the civil rights and black power movements, Hewitt's reflections on time and history speak to the relevance of putatively outdated modes of representation (which render people as property) and the longstanding and myriad forms of protest to these forms of subjection.