The ideas I will present here address the ethics and aesthetics of representation and reception. When museums and other exhibition venues arrange, contextualize, and gloss the extant evidence of inhuman brutality and human suffering, audience members are called upon to be both witnesses after the fact and parties responsible for the present and the future. Museum professionals and museum visitors are thus accountable for the immediate and long-term consequences of their contact with volatile representations. Under these circumstances urgent questions arise: What happens to the “facts” pertaining to victims and perpetrators when they are subjected to the aegis and decorum of a well-composed and carefully formulated history? What is the current status of acts of violence when they are represented in exhibitions? What are the immediate and long-term, possibly traumatic effects of our exposure to such representations? These questions require us to confront the morality of human actions and yet, while the answers have practical consequences, our attempts to respond—to find answers—will often lead to the abstractions of theory. I will also take this turn, but in examining actions before turning to theory I hope to mitigate the more comfortable realms of abstraction. In this case the actions, and my experiences as witness and theorist, took place in a tangible zone of contact where images, people, and events coexisted in less-than-hospitable but perhaps morally effective environments.

My practical examples are two exhibitions with a common historical subject and shared object base but quite different “poetics” of visual display. As objects of study these two exhibitions, which I will place under the intentionally troubling rubric “the afterlife of lynching,” are important ends in themselves. At the same time, they bring into focus a broader field of inquiry: the institutional re-presentation of human suffering. I use the term “institutional” here to locate national and local governments and competing special interest groups; buildings which
house exhibitions; habits, customs, conventions of visual display; and, last but not least, rituals of academic and critical reception, including journals, reviews, symposia and conferences.¹

Early in the year 2000 two exhibitions of lynching photographs were presented in New York City. The first, entitled *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield*, was mounted at the Roth Horowitz Gallery (January 13-February 12, 2000); the second, entitled *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, brought the Allen and Littlefield collection and other objects together at the New-York Historical Society (March 14-October 1, 2000). Each exhibition title underscored the self-reflexive nature of being a party to such displays, and by this I mean a party to acts of collection, exhibition, viewing, reception, and analysis. In each case the composition of the exhibit entailed the re-presentation of human suffering but the photographs of the original events naturally took on new meaning as a result of the context in which they were presented. Because the exhibits offered viewers two radically different approaches to the re-composition of this history, they have given us a valuable opportunity to analyze the ethics and aesthetics of our encounters with the afterlife of lynching.

When we attempt to recompose human suffering we may encounter defiance and disturbance in various forms. Consequently, as I go on to describe and compare these exhibitions, several ethical/aesthetic concerns will hover in the background:

- the stark contrast between the disorder of a traumatic experience, an event which causes a separation from coherent /continuous / linear time in the individual and/or collective consciousness, and the more deliberate, generally lucid patterns of history

¹In *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*, Jonathan Markovitz surveys and analyzes the efficacy of the lynching exhibitions, related public programs, reviewers’ critical reactions, and ongoing Web dialogues, and he asks probing questions about the ongoing use of lynching as an explanatory metaphor and/or analogue. In light of these questions I should note that the annual conference of the American Studies Association (held in Hartford, CT, October 16-19, 2003) was devoted to the theme of “Violence and Belonging”; this conference gave me an opportunity to present the first version of this essay, “Where Does Violence Belong?: Memory, Museums, and the Institutional Re-Presentation of Human Suffering.”
the audacity of violence when it is first experienced by individuals and communities, and later when it is re-composed within the narrative field of an exhibition
- the active versus passive gaze
- the collective versus individual gaze
- the disagreements which arise when individual, collective, and institutional memories find themselves occupying a single ground and must negotiate the distinctions between “memory, mythos, and history” (Ruffins 509)

These concerns emerge in debates about the mission, design, and location of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, about how to prevent a scene of violence from being trivialized as a tourist destination, and about the proprieties (decorum) and conflicting demands of commerce, public memory, and personal memory at the site of the World Trade Center in New York City. The stakes seem to be no less than the creation of what Peace Studies scholar Terence Duffy describes as “a human rights culture” (10).

Witness was installed in the intimate (roughly 16’ x 16’) space of the Roth Horowitz gallery. Co-owner Andrew Roth, motivated by the desire to “reveal history” in a “millennium” exhibition (it was, after all, the turn of the century), took a collection which “no one else wanted to show” and let the photographs speak for themselves. For Roth this was a “heterogeneous” installation which, in keeping with the rare book and manuscript component of the gallery, included some literature. Visitors to Witness were confronted by approximately sixty images confined within close quarters. The gallery is a slightly modified version of the conventional “white cube,” but here the strategies of display ran counter to austere, modern, “institutional” gallery practices which might insist upon uniformity of frames, ample space between objects / images, and ample space for visitors. In the course of a conversation about institutional “aesthetics,” Roth recalled that his intention was to “give each image its own territory” but, and this is due in part to the overwhelming number of visitors, I would testify that both viewer and image seemed to occupy an appropriately constricted space in which to bear witness.

2These observations and direct quotations are based on personal interviews with Andrew Roth and access to comment books and files at the Roth Horowitz Gallery.
Visitors encountered the horrible excesses and chilling formalities of lynching via clusters of mainly postcard-size images; we did so in a deficiency of viewing space. In order to enter, once the exhibition had been widely covered in the media, we had to endure long lines and bitterly cold temperatures; to enter the gallery we had to step down and pass through a narrow hallway leading to the small exhibition space. Once we were inside, the images were inescapable—there was no sanctuary. In retrospect, as my horizon of reception shifts, I find a resemblance between my experience of the clusters of images at Roth Horowitz and my subsequent experience in the days after the attack on the World Trade Center, when New Yorkers gravitated toward the spontaneous arrangements of objects (pictures, drawings, messages) which collected our grief in public spaces. It is necessary to note, however, that the first 9/11 memorials were composed of celebratory life-affirming moments (graduations, weddings, anniversaries, and parties), not documentation, certainly not celebration, of violent death. As collector James Allen notes, the unmediated documentary value of lynching photographs is complicated by the fact that photographers often "compulsively composed silvery tableaux (natures mortes) positioning and lighting corpses as if they were game birds shot on the wing" (204). Given the circumstances of the composition of these "originals," is it possible and/or ethical that, in their afterlives, these compositions can be re-composed and asked to function as memorials? If yes, under what conditions? If yes, what and who are we remembering?

*Without Sanctuary* was a much larger exhibition which included the Allen-Littlefield collection and other objects, plus ancillary events, at the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS). Institutional conventions including the mat, the frame, the label, and the explanatory wall panel were in place. In a 1,540 square-foot exhibition space (54'x27'), roughly six times that of the Roth Horowitz space and with double its ceiling height (8' at the gallery and 16' at N-YHS), evidence of crucial counter-movements was installed, including the ongoing anti-lynching crusade and key political and artistic achievements of African Americans. The Society's compositional frame thereby incorporated a broader historical perspective and interpretation.

Using major wall panels and a more heterogeneous collection of objects, while keeping mainly within the genre of photographic images,
the N-YHS supplied the orientation and deeper context that was absent in the Roth Horowitz gallery presentation. The N-YHS exhibition emphasized both the lawlessness of lynching—"Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the victim has no means of redress, since the mob functions as self-appointed prosecutor, jury, judge, and executioner"— and the dedicated, well-organized crusade against lynching. The key roles of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Committee on Interracial Cooperation, and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching were emphasized, and the anti-lynching efforts of prominent "activists and intellectuals," including Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, George H. White, Mary Church Terrell and W.E.B. Du Bois, were acknowledged. A wall text also warned visitors that "The photographs in this exhibition are painful to see." Through the use of photographs from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the N-YHS brought Douglass, Wells-Barnett, Terrell, Du Bois, White, Joel Springarn, Arthur Springarn, James Weldon Johnson and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as numerous unnamed participants in anti-lynching demonstrations, into the compositional frame. The dense composition of the lynching canvas was further realized via the addition of objects, primarily from the Society's collections, which included books, pamphlets, broadsides, and lynching-related objects such as a whip with a wood handle bearing the image of a screaming man.

The planning phase, an uncharacteristically brief period due to the unexpected opportunity to exhibit the Allen and Littlefield collection after its showing at Roth Horowitz, entailed an intense effort to involve every member of the staff. Through meetings and discussions, including sessions with the organization Facing History and Ourselves, staff members, including security guards, received training in the presentation of "difficult history" (Hulser). Significant attention was given to public programs; financing was supplied by The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and other sources that enabled the Society to organize a series of public symposia. Julia Hotten, then at the Schomburg Center, was hired as co-curator to develop the larger historical context. By examining the exhibition files and speaking with

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3The New-York Historical Society staff provided access to the exhibition files; the active dialogue and cooperation of L.J. Krizner, former Director of Education, and Kathleen Hulser, Public Historian, were essential to my research.
members of the exhibition team, I came to understand the great effort involved in presenting this multi-dimensional composition of history. The N-YHS and collector/co-curator James Allen sought ways to offer a fuller context and more comprehensive history of lynching. This exhibition was intended, in part, as a corrective to the Roth Horowitz presentation of the images,\(^4\) where very little space was devoted to a larger context (of the anti-lynching crusades, for example).

At the N-YHS this comprehensive history was offered not only by incorporating some of the Society's relevant holdings, which also introduced New York itself as a context, but by expanding the literal and intellectual space of the exhibition through dialogue and debate. It was an unusual undertaking at a number of levels. According to Kathleen Hulser, Public Historian at the N-YHS, the fact that no temporary walls were erected to manage the pre-existing space, and that the lynching images were not enlarged for display, demonstrated that the integrity of the original images was a primary concern. The lynching photographs themselves were hung in a single row, at eye level, circling the gallery (Turner). However, via the homogenizing force of single-point perspective as a "window" or opening onto a rational "spatial continuum" (Panofsky 27), the Society's effort to "centralize" the anti-lynching campaign within the exhibition's assertive compositional frame was realized.

Their goal was not to present an "encyclopedic treatment of lynching in America"; they hoped instead "to provide interpretive tools for the audience to understand a collection of challenging documents in American history. . . ." (Desmond). The resulting paradox is that, by offering a more heterogeneous and more deeply contextualized re-composition, which incorporated constructive counter-movements, the organization of the Historical Society's "canvas" was arguably too rational, too homogeneous, an unintended result of the imposition of that deeper historical perspective. The exhibition successfully mirrored the work of the original anti-lynching forces, but in doing so it distanced and protected the viewer from the unadulterated, searing violence to which the actual lynching images testify. Arguably, the deeper context for lynching at the N-YHS afforded viewers an opportunity to regain

\(^4\)The need for a corrective was noted by Grady Turner, then Director of Exhibitions at N-YHS, who explained that the absence of context at Roth Horowitz contributed to the impression that the images were being aestheticized.
their composure in the face of lawlessness. In contrast, the unmediated and largely unmitigated re-composition at Roth Horowitz gave the viewer little recourse to the space beyond lynching. Clearly re-composition is unavoidable in our attempts to represent the past, but in taking such actions we sometimes risk diluting or overwhelming our primary subject. In this context it becomes necessary to consider some larger issues: the ongoing status of outrageous acts of violence which remain latent in our lifeworlds; the immediate and long-term traumatic effects of these acts on communities and individuals, including visitors to an exhibition; and the reappearance of these acts under the aegis of a carefully formulated history.

In search of terms and concepts which may allow us to think constructively about these issues and about the paradoxes presented by the two exhibitions, I will turn to the study of perspective in the visual arts and the study of genres, or the “content of the form,” in historical narratives. My combined approach to visual perspective and historical narrative is indebted to the work of Erwin Panofsky and Hayden White, two major theorists of cultures and their forms of representation. Their work affords us a way of thinking about

1) the role of central (single-point or linear) perspective in the composition of history
2) the role of narrative in the composition of history
3) the benefits and burdens of parataxis (presentation without hierarchical ordering) in the presentation of history

Panofsky and White identify certain strategies that have enabled artists and historians to recompose the world, and their observations prove useful in analyzing both the motives and the methods used to exhibit and thus recompose human suffering. The consequences of these acts of re-composition and their subsequent reception by the viewer / reader are of special concern when the subject matter itself continues to trouble the present and to call for responsible action, as it does with the “history” of lynching. This theoretical work on representation is helpful in the articulation of very practical issues concerning the ethics and aesthetics of a museum and/or gallery exhibition, since here, too, we create spaces in which reason and coherence are brought to bear on

See for example Stolberg, “The Senate Apologizes, Mostly,” in which recent attention to “lynching victims and their descendents” exposes an ongoing lack of consensus on how best to take responsibility and make amends.
physical evidence of actions that defy reason and disturb our composure. Theory, in this case, offers a way to explain how the visitor's encounter with the radical force of lynching may have been formally compromised at the N-YHS where, when located in relation to its contemporary counter-movements, lynching was effectively contextualized within a rational construction.

In *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1925), Panofsky investigates the motives, methods, and manipulations of single-point perspective, in which objects are represented and arranged in space as they would appear from an ideal, single point of view (76-77). He points out, however, that such representations are not realistic insofar as they create "a fully rational—that is, infinite, unchanging and homogeneous visual space" which can be postulated visually but never performed experientially (28-29). An additional concern for our context, as Susan Sontag emphasizes in * Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), is that "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (7). Panofsky appears to anticipate Sontag's ethical sensitivity by paying very close attention to the unrealistic and manipulative dimensions of single-point perspective. He explains that the creation of such space is not, in fact, an approximation of reality but an "abstraction from reality," since "we can no more speak of homogeneity than of infinity" (28-30).

Panofsky claims that "it is not only the effect of perspectival construction, but indeed its intended purpose, to realize in the representation of space precisely that homogeneity and boundlessness foreign to the direct experience of that space" (30-31). When referring to the phenomenon of "geometrical" homogeneity, the construction of space which gives it a uniformity that it cannot have in reality, he claims that perspective "Negates the differences between front and back, between right and left, between bodies and intervening ('empty' space), so that the sum of all the parts of space and all its contents are absorbed into a single 'quantum continuum'" (31). One could say that the actual three-dimensional space of an exhibition allows the viewer to infer empty spaces, at times to see the fronts and backs of objects, to reverse direction, etc., and it appears that such freedom of movement was intended by the N-YHS staff. If the overall compositional or governing "narrative" of an exhibition is persuasive, however, then the viewer will
likely make these moves within the directive confines of that perspectival frame.

When we analyze linear perspective as a key factor in exhibitions, several of Panofsky's observations prove crucial. The first is that the "material surface" (I will say the putatively raw gallery space) is "negated" by this "symbolic form" in order to make room for the "projection" of the "various objects" (lynching photographs and other materials) which will contribute to the illusion of three-dimensional space and its total content. It seems significant, however, that in trying to approximate three-dimensional space we assume or privilege the fixed, one-dimensional position and stare of a single, ideal viewing subject. Panofsky refers, in fact, to the "artificiality" of "natural" perspective. He also notes that these illusions of "reality" depend on a central vanishing point and a horizontal line drawn through that vanishing point. These guideposts—and the lines leading toward or away from them—supply mechanisms of control, helping to construct a "psychophysiological space" of vision and cognition. They do so in part by neutralizing the natural effects of retinal distortion, by righting inversions, by straightening concavities, etc. (27-31).

Panofsky's observations lead me to suggest this paradox: neutralization and correction, in this case the greater depth-of-field achieved at the N-YHS, can actually dilute the force of the re-presented historical moments. Perhaps the exhibition at Roth Horowitz, in spite of its minimal evidence of the anti-lynching counter-forces, was in fact as "realistic" (historically accurate) as its successor at the New-York Historical Society. The carefully composed perspective of the N-YHS exhibition seems to have reoriented the lawless and ruthless space of lynching and replaced it with what Panofsky calls rational "mathematical" space (31). That rational space was created when the N-YHS established reciprocal relations between elements in the composition (relations between lynching and counter-movements) and identified a central vanishing point (the efficacy of resistance and ultimate triumph of humanity) in organizing the canvas (exhibit space). With these lines drawn, the curators could then delineate the reciprocal relations between lynching and actions taken against lynching. Grady Turner, Director of Exhibitions at the time that *Without Sanctuary* was mounted at the N-YHS, remembers, in fact, that hope was the primary
focus. In effect, the N-YHS put “hope” at the vanishing point by including human efforts to stop the lawlessness and end the suffering.

The impulse to create order is fully interrogated by Hayden White in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980) as he analyzes how fidelity, rationality, and coherence are achieved in verbal spaces of historical representation. White asks: “What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story?” Furthermore, he presses us to consider: “What kind of insight does narrative give into the nature of real events? What kind of blindness with respect to reality does narrativity dispel?” (4-5). In his analysis of the coherent, deliberate ordering of the verbal (rather than visual) historical landscape, White notes an “increasing order of meaning” as historical genres evolved from “annals” to “chronicles” and finally to history “proper.” White suspects that “narrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the annals to the fully realized ‘history,’ has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority” (13). He notes that, in stark contrast to the historical narrative, the annals form offers “only a list of events ordered in chronological sequence.” Though it does have a sense of time, this form has “none of the characteristics that we normally attribute to a story: no central subject, no well-marked beginning, middle, and end, no peripeteia [reversal of fortunes], and no identifiable narrative voice.” Using the Annals of Saint Gall (dating from the eighth to tenth centuries of the common era) as his example, White relates that events “seem merely to have occurred”—the entries seem “paratactical and endless” and lack “rank” and “established causation” (6-7). He finds that the “social system” that would “rank” events is “minimally present” in the Annals, while “the forces of disorder, natural and human, the forces of violence and destruction . . . occupy the forefront of attention.” These

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6When I asked Grady Turner whether Without Sanctuary had a vanishing point, he initially said it did not; after thinking further during our conversation, he identified “hope” as the central orientation. Faith in the ongoing efficacy of re-presenting these images also prevails in the “Foreword” by Congressman John Lewis for the book of photographs and essays which was published just prior to the Roth Horowitz exhibition; Lewis states: “It is my hope that Without Sanctuary will inspire us, the living, and as yet unborn generations, to be more compassionate, loving, and caring” (7). Lewis has been an active member of the now successful movement to create the National Museum of African American History and Culture.
accounts tend to deal “in qualities rather than agents, figuring forth a world in which things happen to people rather than one in which people do things” (10).

White observes that the chronicle is acknowledged as a “‘higher’ form of historical conceptualization . . . a mode of historiographical representation superior to the annals form” (16). In the chronicle there “is no justice, only force, or rather, only an authority that presents itself as different kinds of forces” (20). The chronicle, “like the annals but unlike the history, does not so much conclude as simply terminate; typically it lacks closure, that summing up of the ‘meaning’ of the chain of events with which it deals that we normally expect from a well-made story” (16). The chronicle is a “self-conscious fashioning activity” however, and therefore less objective than the annals, in part because it creates a form—a “work of rhetoric” (18).

Given its lack of order, structure, and resolution, the “crude” annalistic nature of the Roth Horowitz presentation seemed irresponsible to some visitors and critics; evidently when the exhibition’s subject is lawlessness—or arguably a law of misrule—this form of presentation may seem to compound or condone the events it represents. I would suggest that the annalistic Roth Horowitz exhibit appeared “not to moralize” and seemed to lack “self-consciousness” (White 14) while the New-York Historical Society exhibition, with its “fashioning” but not total enclosure of the history of lynching, approximated the form of the chronicle but hovered at the threshold of the full historical narrative.

With its coherency and fullness, the historical narrative, arguably a verbal analogue to visual central or linear perspective, is a “symbolic form” which presents an ideal, highly manipulated, and decidedly not “real” space. In fact, White observes that the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (24). Despite its default to strategies of fabrication, however, the “demand for closure in the historical story is a demand . . . for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.” White urges us to agree and asks: “Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?” (21).
This question might be modified by adding “curator” and “institution” to White’s characterization of an authorial narrative voice, but I think we should resist the easy assumption that “moral sensitivity” was absent from the Roth Horowitz exhibition.

White asks of both the annals and the chronicle whether their “failure to narrativize reality adequately” is a function of “their failure to represent the moral under the aspect of the aesthetic” (25). I read this question as a challenge, a call for us to think more deeply about the comfort of aesthetic solutions, to consider that the aesthetic may be a substitute or simulacrum—a comforting illusion of morality and responsibility. Perhaps when we take up the subject of lynching in an exhibition we wish to see it, and the victims, and the audience (including ourselves) in a different light: the light cast by central, three-dimensional perspective; the light cast by historical narrative; the light cast by dialogue in and beyond public programs and symposia.

White defers to Roland Barthes (“Structural Analysis” 119) to make a distinction between the mere nonnarrative copy of historical events (we might think of the raw annals form of the Roth Horowitz exhibit) and the historical narrative (perhaps the motive of the N-YHS), which “ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted” (White 1-2). There were some ancillary materials (books, pamphlets, etc.) in the Roth Horowitz exhibit and James Allen was often present to talk with visitors; but the absence of wall texts and labels, and the absence of a narrative voice to supply context and perhaps offer some level of hierarchical/lawful comfort to us in the midst of such lawlessness, was often a source of negative critical (media) reception of the exhibition. Yet these missing pieces were rarely problematic for visitors who bore witness in the comment books. Both the gallery and the Historical Society gave me access to these books and, after an initial review, I have as yet found little difference between them regarding the range and nature of visitor reception. This suggests that individual visitors do not make the same distinctions as, or share the aesthetic and ethical judgments of, the critical establishment.7 Reactions most often recorded were shock, horror, disbelief, shame, and disavowal. Common themes included police brutality, the death penalty, the need to guard

7A full analysis of visitor and critical reception deserves separate treatment; the diverse positions on each exhibition demonstrate appreciation, condemnation, and thoughtful reflection.
against repetition, and the fact that everyone should see these lynching images.

Relatively few visitors commented on the materials added by the Historical Society, with notable exceptions; a history teacher from New York City wrote: "Thank you for both showing me the horror and the courage of those who stood up against it"; another New Yorker felt that

The N.Y. Historical Society is to be commended for curating this exhibit, especially including the additional material from other institutions which puts the lynchings in a historical context. It was important to include the activism that continued for many years. . . . Your inclusion of these special people added to the exhibition being more complete.

Yet the archive of responses also reveals that the Historical Society’s broader context was still too narrow for some visitors, one of whom wanted attention to the history of lynching prior to 1880 and another who sought greater attention to the value of tolerance. Reviewing and reacting to the N-YHS exhibit and its depth-of-field, Gregorio Malena wrote in *Harlem Overheard* (2001) that its “nonchalant pose” compromised a “powerful” yet “matter-of-fact” presentation. Interestingly he found that the exhibit was not directive enough: “Many people do not realize how powerful a medium an exhibit can be. It is the only medium into which one can literally walk.” He concluded that *Without Sanctuary* “did not have the power of an immersive exhibit” (12). Malena’s disappointment may have been provoked by the “lack of congruity” between the meanings created by curators and the meanings and expectations carried to an exhibition by each visitor. Incongruent experiences may in fact be one of the key problems for the representation of history in museums, as Susan Crane has argued in “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum.” It is a good problem, however, since it speaks to the active “historical consciousness” of the visitor, a key building block in the development of effective re-presentation and active rather than passive reception.

In this context it is important to note Hayden White’s observations on the genre of “historical narrative”: the least objective and yet most reassuring form, it displays “a formal coherency to which we ourselves aspire.” In contrast to the chronicle and certainly to the annals, the historical narrative “reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished,’ done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world,
reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience” (White 21). In our own time this “fullness of meaning” is likely something we have been (academically) trained to distrust. Martin Kemp notes that the “really serious assaults on the value of [single-point] perspective” have come with our general lack of belief in a “stable set of common features in our representation and perception of the world, in favour of a series of relative ‘realities’ perceived differently in different cultures according to sets of social and intellectual structures” (336). Thus an exhibition with a fixed, stable vanishing point is less likely to be well received by those with a relativist orientation toward the truth claims of conventional histories. However, the apparent lack of moralizing and lack of institutional and aesthetic sacralization in the (archaic?) annals form, particularly if found in a gallery exhibition, also makes some visitors uneasy; perhaps this is a result of coming too close to the extremity of lynching and then finding the question of complicity harder to keep at bay.

As Dora Apel argues, the issue at stake today is complicity and “the responsibility of historical witnessing” (459). When examining the Roth Horowitz and N-YHS exhibitions, and subsequent exhibitions at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, Apel moves beyond the historical past to the legacies and permutations of lynching. She claims that “Today when we look at lynching photographs we try not to see them. Looking and seeing become seeming forms of aggression that implicate the viewer, however distressed and sympathetic, in the acts that turned human beings into horribly shamed objects” (457-58). Apel describes the Atlanta exhibition, where “nine glass cases were arrayed in the center of the room with antilynching works by black Harlem Renaissance writers” along with “three glass cases containing printed matter that represented the most important elements of the antilynching movement” (463). She recalls a “subdued soundscape” that included the “sound of chirping crickets followed by clips from four grieving black spirituals.” These “black voices of lament,” she notes, “provided a sense of black subjectivity that worked as a counterweight to the largely faceless black corpses and smug white mobs in the photos.” Yet Apel also suggests that by “providing a sanctuary in which to view the unspeakable, the sacralization of photographs of racist atrocity poses the potential
The act of bearing witness can take many forms; no “ideal” form exists; no form can promise to bring every potential visitor to the brink of ethical action. Perhaps the exposure to the paratactic/annalistic form at the Roth Horowitz exhibition and to the chronicle, bordering on a fuller historical narrative at the New-York Historical Society brought me closer to bearing witness; perhaps one approach informed the other. The two exhibitions have undoubtedly raised the historical consciousness of many visitors and they have raised nagging questions about the relative “value of narrativity” (White) and the “symbolic form” of central perspective (Panofsky) in the representation of reality. How can an exhibition activate as well as re-compose history? How can an exhibition recognize the authority and claims of the past and effectively bear and confer responsibility in the present? How can the act of re-composition come to terms for while not claiming to come to terms with the afterlife of trauma?

Cathy Caruth offers a “general definition” of trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (181). She emphasizes the “curious dynamics of trauma” and “distortion” as part of the process of memory. The problems of re-presenting those dynamics and respecting those distortions bear directly on the question of incoherence as an integral part of museum displays; this is not something to be managed but something to be given due space and time. But what kind of space? What manner of time? Caruth insists that “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs” and “can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (187). How, then, can we begin to grasp the trauma to which lynching images testify and the trauma experienced by the visitor to exhibitions such as those at Roth Horowitz and the N-YHS?

While, for some, trauma is a “basic feature of consciousness,” as Michael Roth and Charles Salas explain, “for others, trauma underscores the inability of any representation to fully convey experience” (2). The implications of trauma studies for the re-presentation of human suffering are quite serious since they call into question the potential of single-
point perspective (Panofsky) and historical narrative (White) to “convey experience.” Roth and Salas go on to observe that “The recognition of this inability [the inability of representation] has led some historians and critics to argue that the structural importance of trauma should reinforce our basic human and ethical obligation to hear one another out. An openness to testimony is seen as an ethical response to the fragility of representation and the woundedness of consciousness” (2). This leads Roth and Salas to ask not only historiographical but museological questions: “Do we construct our present and future by domesticating that extremity? Or do we find some mode of narrating, imagining, re-presenting those events that, at least to some extent, does their extremity justice?” (3). Of course the problem of finding a form and a forum for witnessing “extreme events”—for witnessing the afterlife of lynching—is unresolved, and these questions lead me back to the question of composition or, as White puts it, “the content of the form.” If the content is so severe, and so severely urgent as it is in the outrage, violence and inhumanity of lynching, it seems that we can take no chances. We want to carefully measure the ground, provide guidelines, avoid the replication of the outrage and avoid meeting it on its own outrageous and ultimately immeasurable grounds.

As I continue to encounter these lynching images I also turn back to Sontag’s piercing analysis of the “rhetoric” and ethics of photographic records and to Apel’s review and meditation “On Looking.” Sontag directly addresses the Roth Horowitz exhibition by asking, “What is the point of exhibiting these pictures?” (91). In the course of her response she proposes that we have a duty to look, but she makes it terribly clear that looking is no simple matter. Apel addresses the ethics and aesthetics of looking in the context of the open-ended nature of racial violence in America. Ironically, in terms of the afterlife of lynching and the documentation of those actions, I should note that I have not been able to locate any “primary institutional” photographs of the New York exhibitions: the Roth Horowitz gallery, contrary to their own norms, failed to take installation shots; it seems that some poorly lit slides were taken at the New-York Historical Society, but they are not in the exhibition files. Some photos are obtainable from media coverage, and they are valuable records of looking; however, they do not supply the sterile yet very useful view of the space as it is inhabited solely by its historical objects and appended narratives, if any.
Having raised many questions, I will conclude not by offering answers but by looking toward a hybrid form of re-composition, a way to “grasp” the trauma of history. I am thinking of the open or “visible storage” facilities at the New-York Historical Society, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Although it is perhaps the most static of exhibition modes, since objects are taken out of hidden storage and crowded into glass cases arrayed in closely packed rows, visible storage allows for an uncanny recirculation of history in the lifeworld of the viewer. I am also thinking of exhibitions like Mining the Museum, a collaboration between the Maryland Historical Society and the Contemporary (Gallery) in Baltimore curated by Fred Wilson and Lisa Corrin. These inventive developments make history visible by bringing objects and visitors together in sometimes stark, disturbing juxtapositions. They often disobey the laws of genre by allowing “material culture” to reside with the “fine” and “decorative” arts. They offer a three-dimensional space of documentation and accusation on slavery, race, and class relations and they preserve some open (not negated) space for individuals to move toward interpretation and the assumption of responsibility.

My general proposal involves the elaboration of temporary exhibitions like Mining the Museum, Witness, and Without Sanctuary in the more permanent yet fluid form of visible storage. With objects in close and often provocative proximity (without a governing narrative) and with no gloss beyond a catalogue or accession number, visible storage permits visitors to create a personalized depth of field. Searchable databases are accessible at the visitor’s discretion, making it possible for anyone to combine the most delicate and the most incendiary images and objects and, with a maximum degree of flexibility, access the substantial scholarly historical “documentation.” In this space the visitor may actively and interactively grasp objects, reach into the archives, and construct a personal course of study.

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8The facilities at the N-YHS are funded by The Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture; those at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art are funded by The Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art.
Works Cited


Hulser, Kathleen. Personal interviews. 12 June 2003 and ongoing.


