

HYPERALLERGIC

Sadie Barnette: "Off the Record Confronts Our Understanding of Objectivity"

By Alexandra M. Thomas

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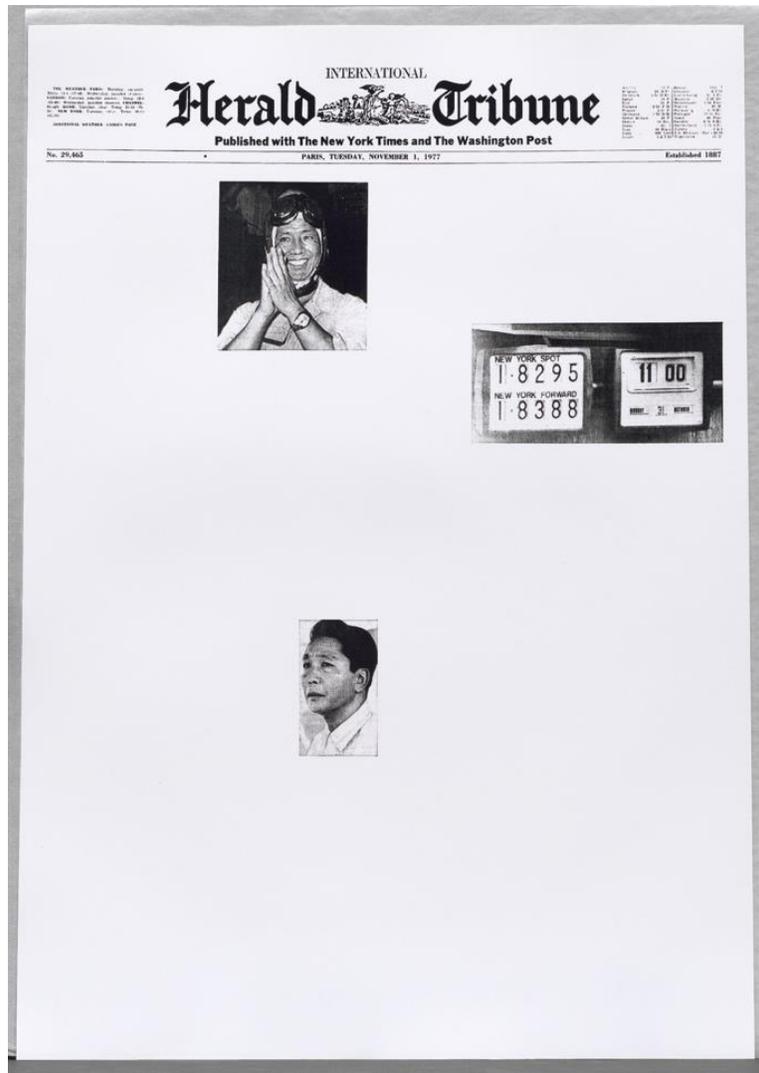


Lorna Simpson, "Flipside" (1991), Gelatin silver prints and engraved plastic plaque, diptych, 51 1/2 x 70 inches, overall, edition 2/3 (all images courtesy the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; © Lorna Simpson)

From the jump, *Off the Record* refuses claims of neutrality. Foregrounding the tradition of artists speaking truth to institutional power, the Guggenheim exhibition confronts the so-called "objective" nature of cultural and governmental systems by unearthing their deeply biased natures. Works by contemporary artists from the museum's collection form an assemblage of radical, visual strategies, remixing and blurring photographs, newspapers, FBI files, children's coloring books, and other media.

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Sarah Charlesworth Herald Tribune: November 1977 1977 (printed 2008) 26 chromogenic prints 23 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches (59.7 x 41.9 cm) each
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Purchased with funds contributed by the Photography Committee, 2008 2008.50 © 1977 Sarah
Charlesworth From the Modern History series

The politics and poetics of these works are organized into three curatorial groupings: “Undermining Objectivity,” “Shaping Culture and History,” and “Scribbling Against the State.” Apropos to the speculative framing of the exhibition, these are porous categories that stimulate further exploration, as opposed to rigid barriers. Fittingly, the open-walled gallery design features dispersed interpretive texts, which introduce these themes while refraining from designating strict separations.

“Undermining Objectivity” opens with Sarah Charlesworth’s “Herald Tribune: November 1977” (1977, printed 2008), in which the artist white-outs the newspaper’s text en masse, ultimately spotlighting its photographic focus on white masculinity, war, and devastation. (Charlesworth emerged among the Pictures Generation of the 1970s, as part of a cluster of artists who investigated and exposed the implications of mass media strategies.)

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“Shaping Culture and History” frames Lorna Simpson’s black-and-white diptych, “Flipside” (1991). Images of a Black woman and an African mask sit side by side above the following text: “the neighbors were suspicious of her hairstyle.” Both photographic subjects, objectified in some way by Western art, face away from the camera, and with that, refusing the white gaze.



Leslie Hewitt, Riffs on Real Time (3 of 10) (2006–09), Chromogenic print, 30 x 24 inches, edition 5/5

Three collages from Leslie Hewitt’s 10-part series, “Riffs on Real Time” (2006 — 2009) are spread across a free-floating wall at the center of the gallery. Collaging personal documents and photographs with widely circulated images from Ebony and Jet magazines, Hewitt merges the individual with the collective. Meanwhile, the use of domestic flooring as a background underscores the everyday intricacy of record-keeping, reminding us archives can be both institutional and mundane.

“Scribbling Against the State” frames annotating and coloring as an aesthetic and political gesture. Sable Elyse Smith’s “Coloring Book” (2018), for example, reveals how something as seemingly innocuous as children’s coloring books can become a medium for normalizing carceral logics through benign imagery of the criminal justice system. Likewise, Sadie Barnette’s embellishments on her Black Panther father’s FBI files, in bright pink and inky

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black spray paint, focus our attention on state surveillance practices that have long aimed to quell liberation movements.



Sadie Barnette, "My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation" (2017), five archival pigment prints, 22 x 17 in. (55.9 x 43.2 cm), edition 3/5 (© Sadie Barnette. Photo: Courtesy Fort Gansevoort)

In our (post)Trump era, combating "fake news" and "alternative facts" remains essential to resisting state surveillance and media propaganda. As the works on display remind us, there is no such thing as neutrality under the white gaze.

Off the Record continues through September 27 at the Guggenheim Museum (1071 5th Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan). The exhibition was curated by Ashley James.

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