

Memory as Site in New Orleans and Beyond

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One hundred and four portraits grace the walls of the entire downstairs quarters, formerly the entry parlor and dining room, of what was once a very rich man's house. The pictures are hung salon style in almost genealogical groupings, and some rooms contain dozens of images on each wall. All the faces are of African-American men and women. This is in itself unusual: when was the last time one saw so many black faces lining the walls of a room with marble mantels, gleaming hardwood floors, and glittering chandeliers?

There is a richness both to the quantity of the images and to their deceptive surfaces: each portrait is a sepia-toned oil-on-linen painting overlaid with a photographic image printed on silk. However, unlike most portraits, which are generally commissioned by the sitters or their families, these photo-paintings depict everyday people coerced into appearing before the camera. They are mug shots; each image portrays a person holding or wearing a police identification number. The contrast between the sumptuousness of the materials—oils, linen, and silk—and the discomfiting nature of the subject matter is heightened by the conflicting visual information each layer of the split image contains. Rendered in the translucent silk scrim that is Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry's signature process, the subtle, iridescent top film bears the original photographic mug shot, including the identification placard. The oil-painted underlayer uses the mug shot as its source but does not include the numbered tag. The card has been excised, painted out of history. The effect created between the two registrations of the image is perceptually disorienting and complex. The images that McCallum and Tarry have altered depict ordinary people, whereas the original photographs portray criminals.

The portraits in these rooms range in size from twelve by nine inches to twenty-three by sixteen inches, much larger than the scale of the original 1956 police photographs that are their source. Each is encased in a simple white wood frame. Although the lower layer of each image is painted, it is done so in gray-brown tones so that the overall effect of the portraits remains photographic. These two aspects—the large scale and monotone color—are unusual too; rarely was a nineteenth-century home hung with large-scale photographic images.



*Bradley McCallum and
Jacqueline Tarry. The Evidence
of Things Not Seen. 2008.*



Large images of black faces hanging in what used to be a rich white man's house: that is a mind-bending anachronism. Two visions of history have been stitched together, and yet the seams are still evident: each portrait exhibits the division between a painful reality in the United States—slavery and imprisonment—and a lush ideal: proud citizenship and democracy.

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When I moved from Puerto Rico to North Carolina as a girl, my grandmother began taking me on road trips throughout the South. Born in Beaumont, Texas, near the Louisiana border, she remains a deep partisan of the “Southern cause,” at times to such a degree that one would scarcely imagine she was born in the twentieth century. Our trips brought us to celebrated period homes, to antebellum plantations, and to the historic monuments and battlefields of the War Between the States, as she always called the Civil War.

We toured those mansions with groups of curious retirees and Daughters-of-the-Confederacy types, and visitors and guides alike expressed a great deal of unctuous delight in the opulence of these faultlessly restored spaces. I don't know how enlightened such tours are today, but in the 1980s the narrative was of a genteel lifestyle of hospitality, taste, and refinement—in short, “Southern living”—brought crashing down by the War of Northern Aggression and Reconstruction. As the plantation tours wound down on lovely verandas and under towering colonnades, the entire economic substructure of the lavish prosperity on display was dispatched with a passing gesture toward the outbuildings in which “the help” had lived and cooked for the big house.

Karl Marx once famously wrote that capital comes into the world dripping with blood and dirt. Undoubtedly, the wealth extracted from human bondage has erected some of the most extravagant architectural fronts to mask its ignoble origin in the “peculiar institution” of slavery and, in the United States, its continuation in policies of racial segregation and Jim Crow.

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The portraits described at the beginning of this essay belong to McCallum and Tarry's body of work called *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (2008), which was first shown in a restored plantation space in New Orleans much like the ones I visited with my grandmother.¹ McCallum and Tarry have collaborated since 1999, and maintain a studio in Brooklyn. Tarry is African-American, and McCallum is of European descent. Much of their work confronts the legacy of racism in the United States, sometimes by probing the history of legislation, and later de facto prohibitions and taboos, outlawing interracial relationships. In some instances,

1. Their title comes from a 1985 book by James Baldwin of the same name, which itself is taken from Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (New King James Version).

they produce work that considers histories of racial discrimination, incidents of legal injustice, and patterns of economic inequality in the specific locations in which they have been invited to exhibit.

McCallum and Tarry installed *Evidence* at the African American Museum in the Tremé Villa, an antebellum mansion, as part of the Prospect.1 Biennial in New Orleans in 2008. The work consists of portraits drawn from a recently unearthed cache of mug shots of civil-rights campaigners arrested throughout the 1955–56 Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycotts protesting racial segregation.² McCallum and Tarry's installation in New Orleans employed brilliant chandeliers and regal claret-colored—one could even say blood-colored—walls to dramatize the distinction between the criminalized protesters and the opulent architectural backdrop. Accompanying the installation of these variously sized rectangular and oval works was a sound component with two voices, call-and-response style, listing the names of those depicted.

McCallum and Tarry's portraits represent men and women of all ages dressed in their Sunday best, along with men in military and ecclesiastic uniforms. Familiar faces—a sweetly boyish Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., noted civil-rights leader Ralph D. Abernathy, and boycott inspirer Rosa Parks with a flower in her hair—are recognizable among dozens of ordinary citizens who also chose to present themselves at the Montgomery courthouse in the spring of 1956, after being indicted under the flimsy charge of violating a 1921 statute that prohibited boycotts “without just cause or legal excuse.”

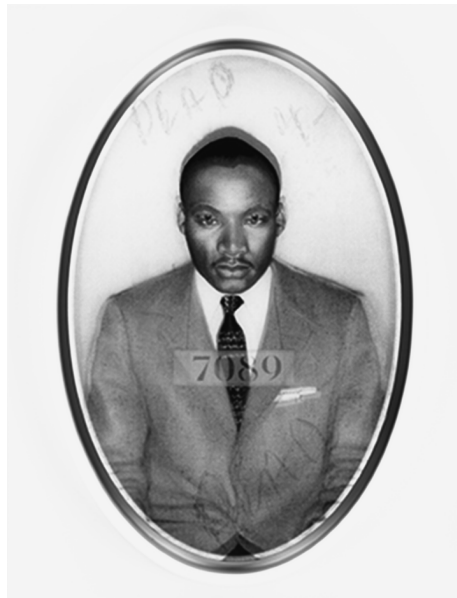
The Evidence of Things Not Seen moved from one fraught site in the history of African-American labor to another. From May through July 2010 it hung on the ground floor of the Charles Carroll Mansion, a house museum in Baltimore's historic Jonestown neighborhood, adjacent to Little Italy and the Inner Harbor. This house, built between 1804 and 1808, was the winter residence of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic signatory of the Declaration of Independence and one of the fledgling nation's wealthiest men. Recognized as the nation's largest slaveholder at the time of the American Revolution, Carroll owned between four hundred and five hundred slaves in the 1770s.

These two sites of slavery are several generations removed in time from the bus boycotts in 1950s Alabama, just as we are two generations from Rosa Parks's arrest in 1955, which triggered the protests. The Tremé Villa and the Carroll House are luxury products of the labor expropriated from black slaves. With the end of de jure slavery in 1864, the unequal benefits to whites of that system of power were of course maintained by exclusionary regulations such as the Jim Crow laws upholding segregation, laws that were challenged many times, most galvanically in Parks's refusal to cede to white privilege.

2. The mug shots were found in the basement of the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department. Though nearly 150 citizens were arrested, only 104 portraits were discovered. The portraits are logged in a sequence that begins with 6691 and continues through 7133.



McCallum and Tarry. The Evidence of Things Not Seen. 2008.





McCallum and Tarry.
Bearing. 2006.

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Because the projects McCallum and Tarry undertake frequently relate to the local contexts for which they were commissioned and at which they were originally exhibited, remounting their works presents challenges. In the context of their mid-career retrospective “Bearing Witness: Work by Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry,” which took place in the summer of 2010 throughout seven venues in Baltimore, the citywide collaboration featured locations that juxtaposed their work with aspects of the city’s local histories, themselves resonant with themes central to the artists’ practice.³

As with *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, McCallum and Tarry’s 2006 project *Bearing* addressed a local context in its original conception. First created in response to the Renaissance and medieval galleries of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the seven silk-scrim portraits were originally installed at the F.U.E.L. Collection in Philadelphia.⁴ They depict African-American teenage mothers from Philadelphia before richly lit gold-leaf backdrops. In 2010 five of the panels were reinstalled in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, along with a sound collage of interviews with the sitters (which was also part of the Philadelphia showing). Because the Walters contains a renowned collection of Ethiopian Christian artifacts, hanging these larger-than-life portraits of the women, alone or with their children, alongside historical

3. The show included more than 150 individual works from 17 of the artists’ series. It ran from May 8 to July 31, 2010, and took place in the Contemporary Museum, the Carroll Museums (comprising the Carroll Mansion and the nearby Phoenix Shot Tower), Maryland Art Place, Maryland Institute College of Art, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, and the Walters Art Museum.

4. *Bearing* was sponsored by the Philadelphia Mural Arts Project.



McCallum with Tarry. The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy. 1996.

religious images of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus made for a compelling artistic conversation between works of different periods and cultures. Mary, a poor Jewish woman who some have speculated was a teenaged parent, gave birth to her first son in the straitened accommodations of a Bethlehem stable. The stories of the Philadelphia teenaged mothers reveal contemporary tribulations of exclusion and poverty. *Bearing* links figures who are socially marginalized in the aesthetically rich and possibly redemptive context of the museum, using the quasi-sacralized annunciation of new life as a common thread.

Like *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* and *Bearing*, McCallum and Tarry's *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy* also responds to the specifics of its site. In its original incarnation at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1996, the work consisted of 228 custom-designed manhole covers that together weighed 39,216 pounds. This represented the exact weight of the 11,194 guns confiscated by Connecticut law enforcement and melted down for scrap between January 1, 1992, and July 31, 1996, the period preceding the display of stacks of the manholes on wood pallets in front of the Wadsworth.⁵ When the work was shown in Baltimore in 2010, several of the manhole covers, along with an audio component of the work including testimonies by Hartford residents affected by gun violence, sat inside the base of the Phoenix Shot Tower. The shot tower, near the Carroll Mansion and sometimes known as the Old Baltimore Shot Tower, was erected in 1828—the same year as Tremé Villa—and rises more than 215 feet, which made it the tallest building in the United States

5. *The Manhole Cover Project* predated the formal partnership between McCallum and Tarry. The curators of *Bearing Witness* decided to include this work, generally credited solely to McCallum, in a retrospective of both artists as a nod to the generative conversations that the work triggered, which resulted in McCallum and Tarry's decision to collaborate.

until 1846. It was used to manufacture lead “drop” shot for small-game hunting and other purposes, as well as molded lead shot for guns and cannon.

While the project was on view outside the Wadsworth, a concurrent but independent decorative-arts exhibition was shown within the museum about the life and objects of Samuel Colt, the Hartford-born inventor of the Colt .45 “Peacemaker” revolver (an oxymoronic designation if there ever was one). Obviously, the installation of *The Manhole Cover Project* in Baltimore in a former facility for shot production was no coincidence. The topicality of the piece telescopes in time from the recent victims of gun violence in Connecticut, to efforts in the early 1990s to enforce gun restrictions, to the glorification of Colt as local tycoon and national hero (as evinced in the post-Civil War saying “Abe Lincoln may have freed all men, but Sam Colt made them equal”), to the proliferation of handguns following the invention of the .45 revolver, to an earlier history of the development of mass-produced ammunition by way of shot towers. The form of *The Manhole Cover Project* reverses the traditional techniques of industrial production: for shot production, raw materials—pure lead ingots—were smelted, whereas in this work sophisticated industrial products—handguns—were converted into useful objects.

Together with many of McCallum and Tarry’s other works, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, *Bearing*, and *The Manhole Cover Project* have added historical dimension to their sites as they are reactivated in each curatorial contextualization. Taking the installation of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* as a case study—a piece using the civil-rights struggle in 1950s Alabama as its source material, exhibited in the former homes of slaveholders in New Orleans and then Baltimore—one can see how art practices that have come to be known as “site-specific” may come to concern themselves with more than site alone. These works create narratives about the present and past in ways akin to the kind of civic and cultural representation that was once embodied in history painting. A better designation for these works might be “historically specific” or even “memory-specific.”

The term “site-specific” has been used to describe artworks created in response to the particular location in which they are exhibited. Many have argued about how to be more specific about such site-specificity. According to Thomas Crow, site-specific artworks are most compelling when they are temporary—that is, when they comment on the dynamic spatial and institutional parameters of the sites for which they are conceived and in which they are displayed.⁶ For Crow, Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Window Blow-Out* (1976) was an exemplary instance of site-specificity, a work in which the artist used a BB gun to shoot out the windows of the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies in midtown Manhattan after he was asked to contribute to a show there. The institute immediately boarded up the windows and replaced them soon after, yet Matta-Clark’s prior conversations with

6. See Thomas E. Crow, “Site-Specific Art: The Strong and the Weak,” in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale, 1996), pp. 131–50.

the exhibition organizers about disinvestment in inner-city Bronx neighborhoods, in which vandalized windows remain blown out for years, were powerfully underscored in spite of the brief life span of the piece. Widening this relatively narrow definition of the term, Miwon Kwon has extended the notion of site-specificity beyond the merely temporary material features and conditions of the site into what she has termed “discursive” sites.⁷ By this, she means that the work participates in a longer arc of research and discussion connected to the socio-historical context of its production and reception, as opposed to being solely grounded in the presence, the actual location and space, of the site. For Kwon, what we call the “cultural framework” is in reality a system of institutional, economic, and social frames around the work that are “subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate . . . [a site] structured (inter)textually rather than spatially.”⁸ I would like to push



Gordon Matta-Clark. Window Blow-Out. 1976. © ARS, NY.

further her definition of sites as operating discursively in order to understand how artworks represent events of the past, that is, how they create official histories and bolster private memories using the mutability of sites in a process of curatorial recontextualization that triggers historical revision. In this sense, the historical becomes the discursive; the works continue to comment on and even reshape history *after* they have been completed. Often—and this is particularly evident in McCallum and Tarry’s work—this effort to represent past events not only foregrounds the historical episodes to which the work refers but also emphasizes the time and site in which the work is exhibited and makes connections to future contexts in which it might be displayed. Each work is curated not once but multiple times, with each re-siting folding new contexts into the original work. That is not to say that the

7. Kwon first made this argument in “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997), pp. 85–110, and later expanded upon it in her book *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2004).

8. Kwon, “One Place after Another,” pp. 87, 92, 95.

element of space implied in the term “site-specific” is unimportant. Instead I want to emphasize that the diachronic axis of time and process becomes ever more important as the works travel to various venues beyond their initial one, layering memories of each prior installation on successive sites.

When *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* left New Orleans and entered a new phase of its existence at Baltimore’s Carroll Mansion, it raised the question of how the new location affected the work and how the work affected the new location. In its original iteration, the work not only addressed the history of racial discrimination in the South but was also a response to the sumptuous architecture of antebellum mansions and the histories of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow that were masked by that splendor.⁹ Obviously the subsequent presentation of *Evidence* in the former home of the largest slave owner in the United States reflected a conscious choice. How did the work—installed in response to specific social, historical, and geographical circumstances of Montgomery, Alabama, and the Tremé district of New Orleans—adapt to a new setting, two years after it was first shown?

If we can shift from the particular to the general, it is clear that *Evidence* addresses much more than the February 1956 arrests of African-Americans in Montgomery, that *The Manhole Cover Project* moves beyond a strictly local context and extends into broader debates about gun control and violence in the United States, and that *Bearing* concerns wider issues of urban poverty and the prevalence of teenage pregnancy among minorities beyond Philadelphia. Yet answering the question about the shift from originary to successive exhibition sites might require tracking the “life” of an artwork in ways that are different from traditional understandings. It would mean identifying how a work is redeployed to reflect on new and future sites, even after the artists have completed their initial intervention. In short, this demands a consideration of the choices and arguments that go into curating a work for and at any potential location. “White cube” art galleries function as spaces where numerous unrelated artworks can be assembled. They are conventionally designed to be neutral, with the particulars of the site erased in order to foreground the contemplation of the art object. Of course no museum or art gallery is ever neutral, but in their unadorned uniformity, modern and contemporary art galleries aspire to a certain placelessness, a generalized space of aesthetic reflection.

The Evidence of Things Not Seen was not shown in a white cube, but it is not traditionally site-specific in the way it commingles various historical episodes in its migration through multiple sites. The ghostly effect of McCallum and Tarry’s characteristic two-part image processing allows the viewer to exercise multiple dimensions of historical interpretation even in a single image. Because only the top, silk-screened layers contain the numbered police ID placards, the paintings resting beneath are free of any markers of their subjects’ identities as criminal sus-

9. New Orleans was the capital of the slave trade in the United States and the site of the principal slave markets in the nation, though it also had the largest population of free persons of color. A few blocks from where *Evidence* was installed at the Tremé Villa is Congo Square, one of the few sites in the country where blacks, enslaved or not, could congregate freely, but only on Sundays.

pects but are slightly distorted with respect to the top image. As the painted under-layer differs only slightly from the photographic scrim, a nearly holographic depth pushes the images far beyond documentary evidence and, more specifically, the mug shot, which is a particular kind of evidence but also a tool of power. Instead the paintings-cum-photographs become spectral traces of the ever-receding history of Jim Crow, at once reflecting the ambition for every man and woman to be equal under the law, to be free of the stigma of legal persecution and criminalization, and simultaneously exposing the impossibility of that dream for those who lived in the South a generation or more ago. Each image in fact contains a subtle shift in scale between its top and bottom layers, producing a complex spatial projection into the viewer's field of vision. This complicated image field triggers a temporal delay in the apperception of the work, as the viewer tries to resolve how the images operate materially and visually.

After inspecting the 104 images, the viewer recognizes that every face made prisoner is an African-American one. The bus boycott was not an easy struggle, nor was it a victory conceded with grace; people fought hard for their rights and suffered greatly for that labor. They organized car pools and walked for nearly a year even in rural areas. King's own house and those of other boycotters were bombed, and those arrested faced fines and legal fees. The portraits on display memorialize actions of immeasurable courage, as ordinary people mobilized against the seemingly intractable prejudices of Jim Crow. And so the experiential delay in viewing

these works is a metaphor that indexes another kind of delay: the *longue durée* of the fight for racial justice in the United States.

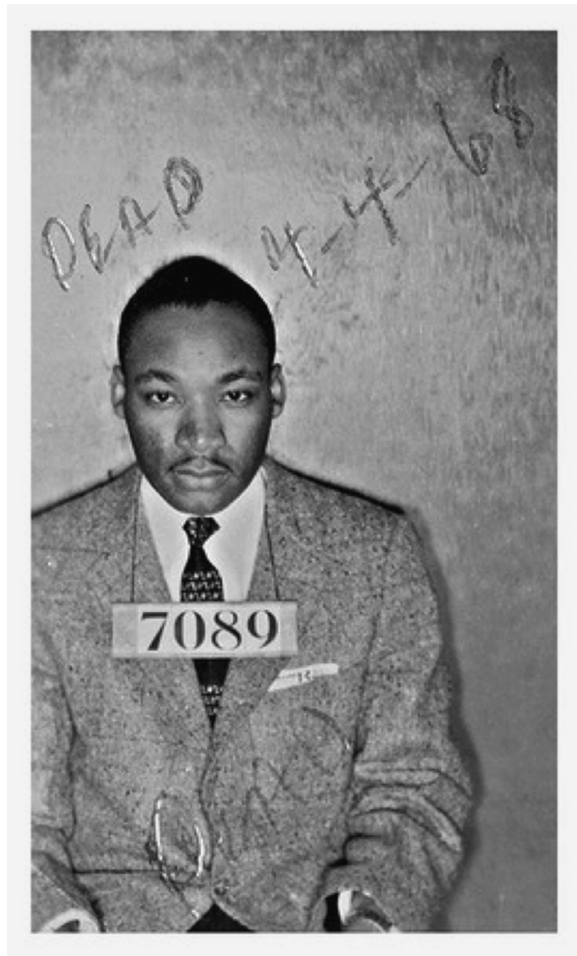
Crucial to the effect of this delay is the issue of recognizability and unrecognizability, of the forensic clarity of the photo as against the blur of the painting. As with Gerhard Richter's work, in which the relation between archival photographs and blurred paintings emphasizes the fragility of memory in contrast to the ostensible clarity of "official" histories, McCallum and Tarry's project transforms the mug shot—an instrument of state power and domination—into something else, something hybrid, transient, subjective, and commemorative.

Photographs have long been understood to have a special propen-



Gerhard Richter. October 18, 1977. 1988. © Gerhard Richter.

sity for being reproduced, exceeding their original time and space and outliving their original subjects. Yet photographs do not circulate as perfect, infinitely reproducible copies; instead, they are continually re-exhibited and re-sited in specific ways. Take, for example, the portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. in *Evidence*. The original mug shot is an off-center image measuring 2.5 by 3.5 inches, produced at a modest scale to reside among others in the files of the criminal archive. As they did with each photograph in the *Evidence* series, McCallum and Tarry enlarged the King photo to more than twenty times its original size and centered the civil-rights leader's seated figure in an elegant oval frame. In the process, the artists preserved markings that were inscribed on the original image at some time after King's assassination. Scrawled on the photograph in a blue ballpoint pen is the date of King's death, "4-4-68," accompanied by the aggressive all-caps proclamation "DEAD," both above King's head and across his chest, below the identification number. The second iteration of "DEAD" was inscribed with enough force to tear the surface of the photograph.



*Montgomery (AL) Sheriff Department
photograph of Rev. Martin Luther
King, Jr., taken February 22, 1956.*

No other image notes the date of death of its subject; in fact, none of the others have markings on them of any kind. King's notoriety and his assassination made him one of the most famous fatalities of the 1960s. The defacement of the tiny mug shot—possibly a spiteful act on the part of an employee in the Montgomery sheriff's office, perhaps a public intervention by some graffitist who encountered the image there, or perhaps merely a dutiful staff member's addition to the record of the



Montgomery (AL) Sheriff Department photographs of bus-boycott arrestees, taken February 22, 1965.

office's most famous convict, a worker who struggled with a recalcitrant ballpoint pen that had to be pressed onto paper with some pressure in order to produce ink—is blown up to headline size, marking the distance between the source photo and its new life in *Evidence*. This goes beyond what Roland Barthes claimed of the fundamental pastness of each photograph, that the subject of any photograph is the passing of time, the imprint of a body on paper that will likely outlive its subject.¹⁰ Rather, the shifting context of the image—its new size moving it from the archive to the realm of the commemorative portrait—makes the document of a past moment an anachronism; it is ripped out of its own time and brought into our own, to different effect.

Why does the scribbled “DEAD” seem like a defacement now? Do we value King’s mug shot as a memorial portrait, rather than as a merely functional image? Each subsequent reinstallation foregrounds our distance from that moment on February 22, 1956, when the twenty-seven-year-old Reverend King was told to wear placard number 7089 to be photographed. There was the time after his death at age thirty-nine in 1968 when the image was thumbbed and marked up; the day in July

10. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

2004—King would have been seventy-five years old—when a sheriff’s deputy, who was cleaning a basement storage room, discovered the bound volumes of mug shots; the time in the fall of 2008 when McCallum and Tarry, after doing research on women’s participation in the civil-rights movement, hung all 104 enlarged and repainted images in a museum in New Orleans; and the time of the reinstallation in Baltimore in 2010. King would have been eighty-one when this most recent reconsideration of the image of his arrest occurred.¹¹

McCallum and Tarry’s work insists that viewers think not just about the geographical place in which they find themselves but about the historical place, too—about relationships among viewers, works, institutions of display, and local areas and larger communities. *Evidence* provokes pressing questions about how a curatorial process can extend the life of site-specific works by transplanting them to new contexts. In this sense, historically specific art practices use locations as an aid to memory and to bring to light things that are experienced but rarely seen. These histories—of slavery, of bus boycotts—may not have been lived firsthand by the majority of viewers. And yet the consequences of these histories persist in the present. McCallum and Tarry’s work therefore brings to mind and memory that which was not experienced before, creating a vital encounter with histories whose effects are still evident though not directly experienced.

11. This was his second arrest. His first arrest took place less than a month earlier in Montgomery, on January 26, 1956, for driving thirty miles per hour in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone. It was part of a campaign of trumped-up speeding charges that resulted in more than one hundred citations in three days for car-pool drivers ferrying bus boycotters.