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## *A Brand New End: Survival and Its Pictures*

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Carmen Winant, *Healing from trauma is a process that involves joy and coalition*, 2022, installation view, The Print Center, Philadelphia, PA (photograph provided by the author)

How do we tell the stories of domestic violence? Most domestic violence happens behind closed doors, as does most advocacy to assist survivors. Artist Carmen Winant's installation brings documentation of abuse and advocacy together through a reconsideration of photographs, newspaper clippings, guidebooks, and other ephemera culled from the archives of Philadelphia-based organization Women in Transition and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

On the first floor of the installation are several collages. In one, *Moon faces Demons* (2022), Winant presents a group of sixteen photographs, each centered on a faded piece of construction paper then adhered together with blue tape. In two of the photos we see clenched hands. In five others we see women staring, clutching, holding: they are worried. In three photos, we see the same woman with a coffee cup in front of her,

perhaps sitting in the kitchen of a domestic violence shelter, an eye, a cheek, and her arms bruised. In four photos, we see another woman in a hospital room, her eyes blackened, her nose bandaged, and her arm in a sling. In the final two images, a woman's body is sprawled at the bottom of staircase covered with a sheet. She is dead.

Upstairs at The Print Center Winant covers an entire wall with yellowed newspaper clippings; the headlines could be captions for photographs elsewhere in the exhibition: "Nanny survived bullet to the head from ex." "Hotlines and shelter provide welcome relief for battered wives." Centered on the wall opposite is a shelf of manuals created and revised over the years to assist survivors: first-hand expertise translated into interventions and programs. On a large table in the center of the room are stacks of Risograph prints of the iconic "power and control" wheel created to visualize common experiences with abuse: coercion, isolation.

In a small back room is *Healing from trauma is a process that involves joy and coalition* (2022) which comprises seven slide projectors that cast images on three walls. In these photographs we see the couches, kitchen tables, and board rooms where women collectively transform listening into strategizing. Feminist movement-building is nothing if not intimate. Women sit on sofas, notebooks and folders on their laps: a training session. Women pull up chairs to a table: a real or mock counseling session. These are scenes in which women are believed and believable. There is exquisite attention, there is intimacy in how women tilt their heads to listen to one another. These photos of day-to-day consciousness-raising are very different from the street protest photographs that have come to signify social movement action. Slides that depict advocacy are interspersed with scenes of pain, including photographs seen elsewhere in the exhibition.

The slideshow format, made famous by Nan Goldin, imparts an informal feel: the sense of sharing a moment of the past. The life-size cast of the slides allows the viewer to imagine oneself in any of these scenes: sitting at a desk with a phone to your ear, listening to a hotline call. Yet we do not know who these women are, not really. Does it matter that we do not learn their names, what they are working on, what happened after the images and documents were created? This anonymity is powerful in that it tasks individual photographs with telling a collective story, one open to viewer interpretation. But as the materials in the exhibit point to a specific place and time, this anonymity—the lack of identifying any past actors or events—leaves the exhibition only tenuously moored to the present moment. It is unsettling.

There is always a kind of violence in photographs taken to represent the vulnerable, maybe even more so when intended to make a moral claim on viewers. Images of suffering continue to provoke questions. Once apprehended, once seen, once felt, once interacted with, *what then?* Does this question shift if—as is the case with this installation—images of suffering mingle with images of care and with artifacts that evidence radical coalition building? When images of pain also reference a web of advocacy that has happened inside and outside of the photographic frame? When the photos themselves are intended as a form of witness?

Photographer Susan Meiselas grapples with this weight in her work: What comes to mind (besides her Archives of Abuse project) is her returning to Nicaragua with photos she took between 1978 and 1979 during the revolution to ask what the images might mean decades later. Perhaps outside of the scope of the installation itself, I nevertheless found myself wanting this level of engagement with the affective potential of these materials. What memories might they evoke for those in the photographs, for those involved in creating and using the materials? For those who survived for “a brand new end”?

As a visual anthropologist, domestic violence survivor, and former domestic violence counselor who trained with Women in Transition years ago, I remain obsessed with these questions. For me there is both beauty and terror in these archival materials. In introducing them to a new audience, Winant opens them up to new interpretations, new embodied relations, new potentials. What can these materials tell us about the contemporary moment? What abandonment (that of women’s bodily autonomy and safety) do they (continue to) enunciate?

The analog aspect of Winant’s installation, her insistence on the value of collating archival items in a physical space, allows us a somatic pause to consider: How do we represent violence that is both a past event and an ongoing condition? During the months Winant’s installation was on view at The Print Center, the Amber Heard domestic abuse trial commenced and concluded. Gendered violence may remain invisible even when made visible, unbelievable to many despite the personal testimony of a survivor. Winant’s installation reminds us that feminist activism created spaces and times in which women were and are believed and believable. Yet survivors often remain suspect when the violence they experience is made visible publicly and thus subject to a kind of social scrutiny, a censorious ridicule. The violence that Heard and many others have experienced is often unable to disrupt the impunity afforded perpetrators with social power or prestige.

During the short span of Winant’s exhibit, the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* ruling also happened, a gut-punch reminder that these spaces—where women’s bodily autonomy is upheld, valued, provided for, protected—are neither assumed nor guaranteed. How do the photos and archival materials that Winant considers in her installation, ones that visualize the kind of (private) spaces in which women are believed, behave in the midst of this kind of (public) media environment and during this particular moment?

I think here of Ariel Azouley’s question from her book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008): What does it take to transform a photograph of gendered violence from a banal reading of routine violation to an emergency claim—one in which violence enacted on (women’s) bodies is an exception rather than a quotidian reality? In other words, what do we *do* with these images now?

I ask myself this question as I listen to the asynchronous click and hum of the slide projectors. As I (re)imagine myself into the scenes they project. As I lift my hand into the amber light and watch it cast an image fragment on my open palm, as my hand then casts a shadow on the wall—as I interrupt, just for a moment, the photograph as it moves in the world.

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