

Killed Negatives: Unseen Images of 1930s America

16 May – 26 August

Media View: 16 May 2018, 10-11am

Gallery 4

Free Entry

#KilledNegatives

3 May 2018 – Thousands of negatives by American photographers were systematically damaged in the 1930s; these irreparable images were known as ‘killed negatives’. This exhibition puts this little-known act of suppression on display for the first time in a UK institution; more than 70 ‘killed negatives’ have been printed especially for this show. Transformed into conceptual, beautiful pictures, these images are shown alongside original archival material and contemporary artworks.

Killed Negatives: Unseen Images of 1930s America extends understanding of the historic photographic initiative undertaken by the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) between 1935 and 1944. It revisits how Roy E. Stryker, who ran the project, commissioned photographers including **Walker Evans** (1903–1975), **Dorothea Lange** (1895–1965) and **Russell Lee** (1903 - 1986), to document American farmland and the farmers who worked during the Depression era. The resulting works form an extensive pictorial record of American life between 1935 and 1944.

The exhibition reveals an omitted element from the story of this landmark documentary project; the ruthless method of editing Stryker deployed. All photographers received a set of detailed instructions on how to approach their subject. When the photographs were returned, Stryker or his assistants would select those they felt true to their brief. The other images were punctured through with a hole puncher, ‘killing’ them. These ‘killed negatives’ would feature a black disc, floating surreally over faces and landscapes or obscuring subjects’ faces or bodies. They were rendered permanently unsuitable for publication at the time.

The full selection of photographers included in the exhibition are **Paul Carter, Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Theodor Jung, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Edwin Locke, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, John Vachon** and **Marion Post Wolcott**. In addition, personal and administrative records reveal the way they were briefed in detail on their subjects in advance.

A photograph by Russell Lee is punched through at the centre, obscuring entirely the face of a farmer. In an image by Paul Carter, the black disc hovers surreally next to a shed tilted on its side. In Carl Mydans’ photograph, the punched hole becomes a black sun in the sky above a group of farmers, and in a photograph by Marion Post Wolcott it sits on a shelf in a shop. In these images, the act of censorship results in abstract, conceptual and strangely beautiful pictures.

Work by three contemporary artists who respond to these haunting images will also be on show. **Etienne Chabaud** (b. 1980) responds to a Walker Evans ‘killed negative’ by attempting to fill the hole. **Bill McDowell’s** (b. 1956) artist book *Ground* takes ‘killed negatives’ as its subject. **Lisa Oppenheim** (b. 1975) is interested in the space obscured by the hole; her print after Walker Evans fills in the hole with detail and blacks out the rest of the image.

Press Release

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Notes to Editors

- The exhibition is curated by Nayia Yiakoumaki, Curator: Archive Gallery and Head of Curatorial Studies, assisted by Inês Costa, Exhibitions Assistant, Whitechapel Gallery
- The Archive Gallery is generously supported by Catherine Petitgas
- This exhibition has been generously supported by the Killed Negatives Exhibition Circle: Beth & Michele Colocci, Andrew Simpkin
- A Killed Negatives Study Day will take place on 23 June, 11.30am – 6pm, £12.50 / £10.50 concessions

Visitor Information

Admission: Free

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX

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