Ghosts of Photography—and of Bunker Hill—Past

by Sylvia Sukop

Call it a homecoming.

Nearly half a century after he photographed the down-and-out Bunker Hill section of Los Angeles on the eve of its transformation (still unfolding) into the high-rise district we know today, Robert Frank donated a rare set of vintage prints from that series to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Frank's gift of five photographs to MOCA remains special for a number of reasons. "It was a very sweet gesture," MOCA's grateful chief curator Paul Schimmel told me.

It's also a rare one: Works of art typically trade hands among dealers and private collectors, often over decades, before finally being sold or donated to a museum. Direct donations of work from artists are uncommon.

Making Frank's gift even more unique was the fact that these photographs document the vanished place where they now reside. Like a returning ghost of Bunker Hill's past, they seemed intended, perhaps, to restore something of what's been lost.

"I can only imagine that when he chose to give not just any works but these works, related to this place, that it was a kind of reparation," says Schimmel. "In these photographs is the history of the place in which the museum lives."

The reclusive artist's gift came on the heels of his 2001 visit to the museum's two-part exhibition *A Room of Their Own,* in which his landmark series "The Americans" was featured prominently in the portion of the show presented at MOCA Grand Avenue. Frank never sought publicity for the gift, and until I learned about it during MOCA's 2009 exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the publication of the book *The Americans,* no one had written about it.

However belatedly, I felt that these little-known photographs and the historical moment they document deserved attention.

Subjects were "fragile, soon to be gone"

Robert Frank originally came to Los Angeles in 1956 in the course of photographing what would become "The Americans." Traveling across the country on back-to-back Guggenheim Fellowships, the then 30-year-old Swiss-born artist took more than 25,000 pictures. He systematically edited this vast pool of images down to the 83 photographs published in 1959 as *The Americans,* with an introduction written by Jack Kerouac.

At once critical and elegiac, "The Americans" exposed a hidden side of post-war America marked by racial and economic injustice and disappearing ways of life. It remains the single most-exhibited group of works in MOCA's photographic collection.

"No one ever complains that we show it too much," says Schimmel. "And the amount of time that people spend with the work is very gratifying."

What makes these photographs so consistently compelling, even 50 years on?

"Frank's pictures captured America in change, an America that was going to disappear," offers Schimmel. "Whether it's a rodeo cowboy in New York City or a Victorian house here on Bunker Hill, Frank

was looking for those things that were fragile, soon to be gone."

Significantly augmenting MOCA's Frank collection, the five black-and-white Bunker Hill photographs are among those that the artist printed in the 1950s. However Frank ultimately chose not to include the five in the final set of 83 that comprises *The Americans.* The five have not been exhibited, even at MOCA, nor have they been made available online. But they are signature Frank images, wholly in keeping with the aesthetic and social concerns of "The Americans," including an interest in subcultures and in the dissonance between American symbols and realities.

One photograph shows several young Latino men standing atop a rattletrap car that bears a hand-painted number 20, possibly waiting for a street race to begin.

Another captures a civic gathering—a groundbreaking perhaps?—with long lines of business-suited men standing at attention, one of them a veteran in a military cap saluting what might be an American flag outside the frame.

American post-war patriotism meets Los Angeles real estate boosterism—it's a potent and familiar equation that Frank complicates by capturing in other pictures a fragile sense of street-level integration in a city where racially restrictive housing covenants were still firmly intact.

Photographed in the lofty stairwell of what looks to be a government building, a handful of black and Latina women sit embedded within a large, mostly white group of several dozen spectators, all facing the same direction, as they wait patiently, it seems, for an event to begin. Only one face is completely hidden, and deliberately so: A person in the second row holds up with two white hands a blank card, perhaps a pamphlet, to block their face, both a momentary act of individual resistance to Frank's camera and an enduring visual placeholder, a photographic tomb of an unknown citizen.

To the picture's latter-day viewers—us time-traveling spectators now present at the scene—the faces of this civil crowd in their steeply raked, impromptu seats rise up like an oncoming tide with nothing to hold them back but a slender cord stretched out before the bottom row.

At the time Frank visited, Bunker Hill's days were numbered. As part of a federally funded "slum clearance" campaign, the crumbling Victorian houses would soon be razed and its inhabitants relocated. An era of downtown "redevelopment" would begin and MOCA's own construction in the 1980s would become a key feature of the Bunker Hill redevelopment plan, the building funded in part by developers' mandatory percent-for-art contributions.

Series "the big prize" in 1994 acquisition

The gritty style of black-and-white, serial documentary photography pioneered by Frank came to dominate the field for more than a generation.

"Although there were predecessors like Brassaï and Levitt, Frank was the game-changer," says Schimmel, and many contemporary artists, including Nan Goldin and Larry Clark, have looked to Frank in their own exploration of narrative series.

MOCA prides itself on collecting artists' work in depth, rather than aiming to build a "trophy" collection of a single work by every well-known artist—an approach that artists, not surprisingly, especially appreciate. They want their current, not just their past work, to be seen and known.

The museum jump-started its collecting of Robert Frank when it acquired the Ralph M. Parsons Photography Collection in 1994. Originally formed by New York dealer Robert Freidus beginning in the 1970s, the Parsons Collection totaled

2,300 photographs—and in one fell swoop its acquisition by MOCA for $1.15 million increased the museum's photographic holdings five-fold. The centerpiece of the new collection was "The Americans."

"The Frank was the big prize," says Schimmel. "There are only four complete sets of 'The Americans' in the world, and ours was the first set that he ever made, selling it to a dealer who sold it to another who sold it to Freidus."

The book *The Americans* has seen numerous reprintings including a new 50th-anniversary edition from Steidl. Steidl simultaneously published The National Gallery of Art's in-depth examination of this body of work, *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans.* This 506-page expanded edition is a library unto itself, brimming with scholarly essays, a definitive chronology and map of Frank's travels, contact sheets, letters and other revealing archival material—most of it drawn from the National Gallery's extensive Frank collection.

History of art as a history of friendships

Selections from "The Americans" were first shown at MOCA as part of the 2000 photography exhibition, *The Social Scene;* the presentation was thematic, situating the images within a social narrative. Schimmel tried out a new curatorial strategy in the MOCA exhibition *A Room of Their Own* in 2001–2002.

"I thought this would be an interesting time to break the material division between photography and painting," he recalls. "It made a great deal of sense to place these photographers [including Frank] both chronologically and in the context of the dear friendships they had with other artists."

This same strategy guided Schimmel's organization of the current *Collection: MOCA's First Thirty Years* show.

*"*No photographer wants to be left in the photo ghetto. So it was obvious—let's put Robert Frank between Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg. These are two great artists, friends of Frank, who in their own way were exploring American culture at the same time as Frank, from a New York vantage point."

In the center of the room lined with photographs from "The Americans," Schimmel has placed a boldly colored crushed-automobile sculpture by John Chamberlain, seeing it as yet another remnant of American culture. More importantly, Schimmel adds, "Chamberlain and Frank are friends, they go back a long time."

As a curator, Schimmel is constantly thinking about these kinds of personal relationships. "You put the history of art together in terms of shared genre, shared iconography, but also in terms of shared relationships. These things count for a great deal. There's something about the relationships that transcend both the material and iconographic aspects. I don't even try to enumerate it, I don't put it into a wall text. I feel like people get it."

Certainly the artists themselves get it. And although, in 2001, Robert Frank's was a private "stealth visit"—typical, says Schimmel, for artists visiting shows in which their work is featured—Frank's positive reaction did get back to Schimmel who was delighted to hear it.

In 1994, the same year that MOCA acquired "The Americans," the National Gallery organized *Robert Frank: Moving Out,* its first-ever exhibition devoted to a living photographer. *Moving Out* traveled internationally to five other venues including the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles.

According to Schimmel, Frank was so pleased with the show that he decided to donate work from his personal collection to each of the participating venues. Since the

Lannan subsequently ceased collecting art, Frank made his gift of five photographs to MOCA "in honor of the Lannan Foundation."

The end of documentary?

Schimmel sums up the history of documentary photography in three distinct phases.

"It began by trying to capture the perfect moment, then moved to voyeurism—this middle period where Frank is—then to immersion, where the photographer is no longer outside the picture but participating. So when Larry Clark is taking a picture, it's Larry Clark's world, not somebody else's."

This is a history that is largely behind us now, Schimmel believes.

"The tradition of 'documentary' photography to a large degree has played itself out. We've come to realize that photography is not about truth. Now we know photography is among the most successful media for *manipulating* the truth. It looks real, it appears to be representing reality, but in fact it's not always the case."

After completing "The Americans," Robert Frank's primary art practice famously shifted from straight photography to filmmaking and other forms of constructed narrative (photo-and-text collage, for example).

His shedding of the documentary tradition coincided with, perhaps even contributed to, the art world's loss of faith in a form that nevertheless maintains a strong grip on legions of museum visitors and book buyers, and on many younger artists working today.

It's a tradition that refuses, finally, to vanish forever into the past. ◈