

EMINENT DOMAIN

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of The
Graduate School at The University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

MATT R. RAHNER

Assistant Professor Joe Johnson, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2014

© Copyright by Matt Rahner 2014

All Rights Reserved

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School,
have examined the thesis entitled

EMINENT DOMAIN

presented by Matt Rahner,
a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Joe Johnson, Assistant Professor,

Department of Art

Matt Ballou, Assistant Teaching Professor,

Department of Art

James van Dyke, Associate Professor,

Department of Art History and Archaeology

DEDICATIONS

This work is dedicated to all those who have supported me in the crafting of this exhibition and thesis. To my beautiful wife, Anmarie, your love and dedication over the course of the last three years have been paramount to my success. To my daughters Elsa and Ada, your inspiration and boundless energy have kept me going. To my Mom and Dad, your love and support have enabled me to create this body of work. To my sisters, Kristin and Katie, for giving me a place to stay and someone to talk to on my many trips to Kansas City. To my instructors and fellow graduate students who helped to shape me as an artist and productive member of the arts community. And finally to all the neighbors and residents I encountered during the making of this project, with your open-minds and willingness I have been able to make this exhibition into what it was. I thank you all!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank my committee, Assistant Professor Joe Johnson, Assistant Teaching Professor Matt Ballou and Associate Professor James van Dyke for all the input and revisions of this thesis over the past 18 months. Your guidance as mentors have enabled me to create and craft this thesis and exhibition. I would also like to thank Ameena Powell for introducing me to the neighborhood, and for having the courage to stand up for herself and those around her. I would also like to thank those neighbors who took their time to speak with me, and share their experience of eminent domain: Fred and James Hadley, Personna Parks, Anita and Stephanie Briggs, and Joe Watson.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Acknowledgements</u>	ii
<u>List of Illustrations</u>	iv
<u>Abstract</u>	v
<u>Chapter I: Eminent Domain: The History</u>	1
<u>Chapter II: <i>Eminent Domain: The Series</i></u>	8
<u>Chapter III: Installation of <i>Eminent Domain</i></u>	14
<u>Chapter IV: Influential Precedents: Author and Idea</u>	19
<u>Chapter V: Conclusion</u>	31
<u>Bibliography</u>	33

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. <i>Ameena on the steps of the Jackson County Court House</i> , 2012. (Matt Rahner)	10
2. <i>Keepsake Boxes with Found Items</i> , 2014. (Matt Rahner)	14
3. <i>Marcus Lyman on Lion Statue, Moving Day</i> , 2012. (Matt Rahner)	17
4. <i>Rocking Horse and Cinder Block</i> , 2014. (Matt Rahner)	18

EMINENT DOMAIN

Matt R. Rahner

Assistant Professor Joe Johnson, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Eminent Domain is a documentary photographic project and an archival exploration of a neighborhood located on the East Side of urban Kansas City, Missouri. The series documents a four-block portion of the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood that was bought out and demolished under the premise of eminent domain. Photographs from this series are connected to a continuum of documentary photographs in pictorial approach and aesthetic choices. The project is related to the work of contemporary artists such as LaToya Ruby Frazier, Jim Goldberg and Ira Nowinski. By working across traditions and modes of image making, including portraiture, typology and appropriation, this project is concerned with exploring the use of eminent domain and its ensuing realities.

The project began with the knowledge that one day there would inevitably be a void: Occupied homes would become empty, then demolished, and the piles of debris hauled away. The neighborhood's process of arriving at this void was the physical manifestation of eminent domain that could be photographed. I gathered tangible photographic evidence through looking, interpreting and collecting. In the final display of this exhibition the images confront our gaze squarely. In addition to the production of images, I collected found objects, ephemera and photographs from vacant lots and homes. These objects signify the intangible, for example, the qualitative being-ness of

this neighborhood and its residents. Aware of my inability to photograph the past, these objects allowed me to look back and know the story more completely. This series allows interpretations of many narratives such as Kansas City's racial history, African-American familial histories, larger questions surrounding urban renewal, and the ability of one entity to forcefully remove others from their homes.

Chapter 1:

Eminent Domain: The History

My thesis project, titled *Eminent Domain*, focuses on the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood, which is located between 26th and 27th Streets, between Prospect and Brooklyn Avenues in urban Kansas City Missouri. The project explores this historic neighborhood as it underwent a dramatic transformation from August 2012 until January 2014, and it documents former residents as they endured a process of forced relocation. In this work photography was used as a tool to uncover the disparities between eminent domain and its ensuing realities of displacement, anxiety, and loss of home. The work explores themes of race, class, and power.

In August of 2012 Kansas City's arts and culture newspaper *The Pitch Weekly* ran a related cover story by Matt Pearce titled "Blight Flight." The article described the details of the City's plan, and Pearce recorded the grievances of residents who objected to relocation. The article left me with more questions than answers, and I began to investigate this neighborhood on the brink of demolition and disappearance. In 2010 Kansas City's Council and Police Boards began to search for suitable locations to build the new East Patrol Police Department and Crime Lab. They sought to consolidate two existing facilities, which were ill-equipped to handle the caseloads and demand for the area's police force (Pearce, "Blight Flight").

The City has stated they evaluated 25 sites before settling on a four-block portion of the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood, yet there is no documentation proving the other 24 sites were considered. Wendell-Phillips was chosen despite the fact that it was located

outside of the East Patrol's boundary. The site contained 43 occupied homes of which 75% were owner occupied. All but one home was built between 1892 and 1917. Of the 25 sites considered, this portion of the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood had the highest rate of occupancy.

While never legally implemented, the city began buying out homeowners under the guise of eminent domain. The majority of residents - who were unable to fight for their property and unaware of legal protections - accepted the city's initial offer. Residents who rejected this initial offer were subjected to having their homes condemned by order of the 16th Judicial Circuit Court of Jackson County, Missouri.

In the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood there were homes that could be considered *blighted*, a term that signifies neglected and derelict homes. However, the City did not do any formal blight studies, but argued in the public realm that blight was a determining factor in choosing Wendell-Phillips. In reality this section of the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood had a greater number of intact homes than much of the surrounding area. I wondered what effect race and class might have to do with the decision to build a Police Station and Crime Lab on the footprint of an historic and heavily occupied African-American neighborhood. Class, used here, refers to "a group of people with a common relationship to the power structures of political and economic power within a particular society" (Jones, *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy*, 161). In this case, the neighborhood's residents were members of a class who were easily subordinated and targeted because of their economic conditions. This neighborhood did not just one day arrive at this juncture by chance; the assumption of blight was in direct relation to the

neighborhood's demographics and class structure. As a result, class became the determining factor to implement eminent domain and evict a neighborhood.

The Wendell-Phillips neighborhood is bordered to the east by the Prospect Avenue corridor. The street is a major thoroughfare connecting the central urban core with the southern portions of Kansas City and other townships. The area is rife with racially sensitive histories, and in particular the blocks surrounding 27th Street. Bisecting Prospect Avenue, 27th is of significance because it demarcated a systemized racial line of division until 1948. The use of eminent domain in Wendell-Phillips in 2011 is a result and an extension of the racism that was prevalent in the area for over 100 years.

The neighborhood just southeast of Wendell-Phillips is Santa Fe Place, one of Kansas City's first planned neighborhoods. Located east of Prospect, between 27th and 31st Streets, the neighborhood was platted in 1897, and construction of homes began in 1902. Santa Fe Place had a homeowners' covenant that predated the city's first zoning ordinance of 1923. The covenant stated that homes were to be single-family with a minimum cost of construction, have uniform street setbacks and no commercial establishments. Santa Fe Place is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The neighborhood is significant because its original planning and architectural character have remained predominately unaltered. Before the demolitions there was little visual difference between the neighborhoods of Wendell-Phillips and Santa Fe Place, yet ironically one has been torn down and the other stands on a National historic register (*Prospect Corridor Initiative*, 95-99).

After the 1880's, African-Americans were forced to concentrate their residences, businesses, and churches within the area north of East 27th Street, due to restrictive real

estate covenants, red-lining, and the coercive practices of realtors, bankers and community councils. “The meaning of ‘red-lining’ derives from the practice of drawing a redline on a map to demarcate areas where banks, businesses, and government institutions will not invest” (Daderko, *LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness*, 7). As they suffered from institutional discriminatory practices, African-Americans built a community around these neighborhoods. Today this area is known as the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood.

More restrictive neighborhood covenants were the result of landmark legislation in 1934 when the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was established. The driving force behind these covenants was the national real estate industry that sought to turn pre-established racial deed restrictions into government policy. The FHA at the bequest of the realtors created the country’s modern mortgage system by backing loans for millions of families. However, black families were denied these loans based on the condition that loans were to be made only in “stable” neighborhoods. Stability was measured by whether or not the neighborhood had restrictive covenants, no blight, and racially homogenous populations. These conditions were by definition nearly impossible to meet in any inner city African-American neighborhood. Once this legislation was put into practice, African-Americans were either excluded from loans, or given loans at high interest rates that would ultimately force the homeowner to lose ownership.

This form of legal inequity was in place until 1948 when the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial discrimination in covenants and deed restrictions in the landmark case, *Shelley v Kraemer* (“Shelley House”). However, with this decision came more problems for the stability of the Wendell-Phillips and Santa Fe neighborhoods. As soon as African-

Americans were allowed to move south of 27th Street, a new mode of discriminatory practices emerged, and the area saw a de-investment through white flight. Local realtors began to play off of racial fears and stereotyping through the coercive practice of 'blockbusting,' the practice of persuading owners to sell property cheaply based on fears of another race or class of people moving into the neighborhood, thus realtors profited by reselling at a higher price. As black homeowners moved south of 27th Street into previously all white neighborhoods, realtors approached white homeowners and convinced them that their home and property values would fall dramatically when African-Americans moved onto their street. This practice was predicated on fear and the misunderstanding that a dark skin color was indicative of poverty, home neglect and criminal behavior. The realtors in these situations were the only victors, as the white homeowners sold their houses at reduced prices, and the realtors flipped these houses to incoming black families at a premium (Shortridge, *Kansas City and How it Grew*, 115). This blockbusting generated huge profits for brokers, and the process continued for decades, slowly converting the neighborhoods' racial balance.

Since the 1950's the tax base of Wendell-Phillips eroded as white homeowners moved to the suburbs, and business owners either moved or closed down their shops. Some homes fell into disrepair as a majority of landlords moved outside of the neighborhood and did little to maintain the upkeep of their properties. This inattention resulted in the appearance of "blight". Under Missouri Law a blighted area is defined as "that portion of the city within which the legislative authority of such city determines that by reason of age, obsolescence, inadequate or outmoded design or physical deterioration have become economic and social liabilities, and that such conditions are conducive to ill

health, transmission of disease, crime or inability to pay reasonable taxes” (“Missouri Revised Statutes Chapter 353 Urban Redevelopment Corporations Law Section 353.020”). Wendell-Phillips may have met one or more of these conditions; however, Stanford University Law Professor Lawrence Friedman believes other factors influence questionable blight designations. He stated “finding blight merely means defining an area that cannot effectively fight back, but which is either an eyesore or is well located for some particular construction that important interests wish to build . . . Urban Renewal takes sides; it uproots and evicts some for the benefit of others” (Ira Nowinski: *No Vacancy*, vii). Many homeowners I spoke with were actively improving their homes or had recently done major renovations. The worst homes in the neighborhood were owned by the city. Boarded up and left to rot, these foreclosed structures were treated with the least care and attention possible. The presence of such decrepit properties fueled the perception that the whole area was in complete disarray and is ultimately the true source of blight in the neighborhood. The City was able to pass off their neglect by creating the perception that residents held the responsibility to maintain the abandoned homes.

The observation by Professor Friedman seems fitting to the circumstances in Wendell-Phillips. It became easy for the City to “find blight” and declare the area fit for demolition despite the fact that homeowners were financially and emotionally invested in the neighborhood. Once the city decided to move forward with the project homeowners had no options. Many could not afford outside legal representation to fight back and had neither the time nor energy to represent themselves in court. Another calculated tactic was used to purchase homes: neighbors were approached by the city individually and not as a group. This approach undercut any possibility for the residents to organize an effort

to block the eminent domain process. The homeowners perceived that they had little choice and hastily sold their homes to an anxious city council ready to get the job done. As one 23-year-long resident said, "I'm 73, and I just don't have the energy to fight anymore" (Pearce, "Blight Flight"). For residents who chose to stay and contest the city, their effort required a significant dedication of time and resources.

Chapter II:

Eminent Domain: The Series

In August of 2012 I first contacted Ameena Powell, a resident mentioned in the “Blight Flight” article as being one of the few holdouts in a neighborhood whose population was quickly declining. Ameena ran a website dedicated to fighting the blight designation and eminent domain abuse. I contacted her through this website and we met at her home on Brooklyn Avenue in the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood. Ameena explained her experience with the city and her continual fight with the courts regarding her home and compensation. She was upset at the how the City treated her neighbors and was confident that there was a story I could help to tell. Ameena introduced me her neighbors who were all very welcoming, and they shared their experiences with the eminent domain process.

As a curious outsider, my initial meetings resulted in my first photographs and were merely visual note taking. My goal from the beginning was to find a photographic approach that did not imply I had an insider position or that I was from the neighborhood. Through weekly trips to the neighborhood, I decided to develop a portrait series of the remaining residents.

My approach to making portraits began with an explanation that my presence in the neighborhood, and my interest in working there was as an independent artist with no affiliation to the city or news outlets. Residents and I had conversations about life in the neighborhood and their reactions to the eminent domain process. My goal was to photograph those who remained in their homes. Almost all were open to having their

pictures taken. The ensuing photographs of residents became records of their reactions to the process of eminent domain.

Many of those with whom I spoke were overcome with anxiety and the mounting pressures associated with suffering through the process of eminent domain. Their homes were to be appraised three times. They had to look for new homes, sign papers, and move, all while the tasks of daily life were taking place. “It was horrible. I think it’s still taken a toll on her, even though she’s moved,” Denise Fortune said of her mother Sophia Easter, who had lived in her house for over 40 years. (Pearce, “Blight Flight.”)

In many of the portraits my subjects appear defiant, perhaps mirroring their reactions to the presence of two outsiders: my own and the City’s. My belief is that for the brief moment of time when I made their portraits, my camera became a physical stand in for the city’s presence in their lives. However, with their newfound, unfortunate situation in life, our interaction became an outlet to voice their frustrations. The residents trusted me to take their portraits during a very vulnerable time as their power to maintain their homes was stripped from them. My subjects were able to simultaneously project their pride and defiance towards the situation, which I was able to photograph.

The dignity and defiance found in my portraits can be seen in the picture *Ameena on the steps of the Jackson County Court House*, 2012 (Fig. 1). The staging of this



photograph occurred directly after the second iteration of her condemnation trial, where the City was petitioning to condemn her home by court order under Section 82.240 of Missouri Law; which enables the City to take property for public use (“Missouri Revised Statutes”).

Once condemned her home was to be vacated and demolished, but her trial was postponed until a later date. Ameena was not able to find willing legal counsel and instead became a Pro

Matt Rahner, *Ameena on the steps of the Jackson County Court House*, 2012. Archival Inkjet Print, 42 x 28 in. (Fig. 1)

Se litigant, hence the paperwork she carried in her hands. In this portrait

Ameena stands central in front of the courthouse in the vertically composed photograph. Her figure is framed by the architectural details surrounding her. The door frames, hand rails and windows all enclose her in a geometry that highlights the form of her posture and body position. The Art Deco architectural details above her are intricate, and mimic the organic patterning on Ameena’s blouse. She stands with her shoulders and feet at an angle, but her face and eyes confront the camera. She carries two bags, one on each shoulder. Her expression is determined and confrontational. The combination of elements reveals Ameena’s reaction to the process of eminent domain.

Early on the portraits in this series resulted from my determination that the photographs would follow a pictorial logic in order to maintain continuity throughout the project. Through a process of interviewing, I gauged the reactions of my subjects and developed strategies to arrive at a picture that best reflected their oppositional stance. My strategy was to centrally locate my subjects in the frame. As I photographed I asked questions about the processes of moving and dealing with the city. Asking questions and pausing to take pictures became a cause and effect formula to make photographs that reflected honest reactions to the reality of eminent domain.

I was able to make a large number of portraits from the gracious residents who were left in the neighborhood. However, I had to adjust my process of taking pictures to fit the changing social and physical landscape of the neighborhood. The focus of the pictures became the remaining built environment. I documented these homes and buildings as they devolved from inhabited structures to boarded-up facades and finally to demolished piles awaiting removal. In sequence these pictures reveal the inevitable progression of time and physical manifestations of eminent domain.

Before the buildings were razed I realized that an interesting source of pictures could be of the many items left behind inside and outside the homes. My entrance into these spaces was not forced; I usually walked through the front door or climbed through an open window. Once inside, I found evidence of a hurried move. Among the detritus left behind were stacks of photographs, old toys, decorations, framed prints, magazines, newspapers, and general household decorations. Most of these items were left to deteriorate, exposed to the elements. In Wendell-Phillips, homeowners and residents moved away knowing that they would be the last to live in these homes. The houses

became receptacles for anything they wanted to leave behind. In one instance, an aged poster portraying the Christ figure on the cross surrounded by angels was left hanging on the wall. In other instances entire shelves of books, magazines, and journals were abandoned, eventually buried as the home was demolished and hauled away. Some of the most interesting objects were stray pictures, children's drawings and discarded photographic negatives. The objects that existed in the homes were emblematic of those people who had lived in them. These items were historical markers of a space that was previously occupied but now vacant.

Inside the abandoned homes I encountered scrappers who were after copper piping and the century old architectural relics. Our goals of finding these sought after objects were similar, but the results of our discoveries were different. My impulse to collect came from the same motivation that drove me to take pictures of residents and their homes. bell hooks wrote that “When the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, then documentation may become an obsession” (hooks, *Picturing Us*, 48). I became a relentless documentarian, scavenging for any vestiges of material culture that could be used as a mechanism for discourse on the abuses of eminent domain. Many of these items struck me as being loaded with the evidence of a neighborhood’s unique existence. I began to collect objects knowing that they held the power to provide an evidence of displaced livelihoods, which seemed fitting as the city was replacing the neighborhood with a police station and crime lab. These objects were relics forgotten in the frenzied atmosphere of a forced relocation. Left behind, intentionally or not, the items make evident that families and residents existed in this place.

The found objects became a bridge between the deserted homes and the people who had once occupied them. In their own right they held a specific aesthetic quality. On the surface, and in the context of eminent domain, the objects were interesting; they held the potential to not only be trash, but to become records of a disrupted existence. When amassed as an archive of vernacular photographs and objects, they serve as an access point to the people who had moved. The photography historian Geoffrey Batchen describes vernacular images as those that “preoccupy the home and heart but rarely the museum of academy” (Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, 57). Peter Galassi describes the vernacular as “functional or ordinary rather than refined or exotic” (Galassi, *Walker Evans and Company*, 39). I have a fascination for the things people held on to for so many years, but when the time came, were left behind. These objects represent a legacy and contribute to the completion of this neighborhood’s century old history.

Chapter III:

Eminent Domain: The Installation

For the exhibition of *Eminent Domain* I transformed the space of the gallery from the formalized white walled box into a full scale, immersive installation. In the middle of the space I placed a table that held an array of boxes such as old candy tins, ammo boxes and silverware storage containers. Within these vessels I placed found objects, vernacular photographs, and ephemera that I had scavenged from the neighborhood. In 1980, Hans Haacke wrote “purely visual art is increasingly unable to communicate the complexities of the contemporary world,” and he suggested “hybrid forms of communication, mixture of many media, including the context in which they are applied” (Lippard, *The*



Matt Rahner, *Keepsake Boxes with Found Items*, 2014. Dimensions Variable. In these boxes I place a variety of found objects, from drawings to vernacular photographs and paper ephemera. (Fig. 2)

Lure of the Local, 284). In my presentation I used containers that resembled personal keepsake boxes (Fig. 2). Within these I placed the found objects in specific arrangements to convey a sentimental importance for individuals who lived in the neighborhood. By combining these elements through a process of curatorial decisions, I sought to allow my viewers a meaningful experience of the Wendell-Phillips neighborhood and its history.

Through my process of collecting objects and subsequent display I employed a “quasi-curatorial” arrangement that utilized discarded photography to represent the loss of a neighborhood, its history, and the sense of home. Similarly artist Joachim Schmid did this in his series *Pictures from the Street* (1996). In this work Schmid’s “different processes of archive-construction emphasize that what is being retrieved from the pictures is their status as evidence; that the contiguity between image and object can be shaped to create a re-engagement with forgotten histories and also the [viewers] projected fantasies of their historical and emotional resonance” (Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 212). My goal was to facilitate a creation of meaning in order to elicit within the viewer an empathetic response.

By using vernacular photographs in my exhibition I was able to point to the home life and personal experiences of a neighborhood. Brian Wallis defines vernacular photographs as having an “utter lack of interest in photography’s fine-art status...with no apparent aesthetic ambition other than to record what passes in front of the camera” (Wallis, *African American Vernacular Photography*, 9). I was interested in using the language of these photographs -- made by residents of Wendell-Phillips -- outside of their original intention as recorders of memory. My goal was to build new experiences for my viewer to access, thus personalizing the story. As Mary Sturkin wrote “Memory appears

to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze... Yet memory does not reside in a photograph, or in any camera angle, so much as it is produced by it” (Daderko, LaToya Ruby Frazier, 8).

The objects I used in the exhibition are a curated version of a greater, semi-archival collection that I retrieved from the neighborhood. The pieces convey the accumulation of time that has passed in the neighborhood. I allowed the viewer to discover and arrive at intrinsic meaning in much the same way as I experienced the objects when I found them. Writer and artist bell hooks grew up in a house that displayed many of her family’s photographs, which lined the walls and surfaces of her home. This experience led hooks to reconsider the same photographs later in her life. About this she wrote, “I gather snapshots and lay them out, to see what narratives the images tell, what they say without words . . . searching these images to see if there are imprints waiting to be seen, recognized and read” (hooks, *Picturing Us*, 52). Aware of these potential imprints it was my interest to assemble the found imagery to elicit recognition of a history behind the neighborhood that is full of narrative, life, experience and meaning. In the exhibition relationships between photograph and object are made to create a dialogue that aids the viewer in navigating the space.

For example, I hung the large-scale photograph *Marcus Lyman on Lion Statue, Moving Day*, (Fig. 3) on a wall covered in reconstructed wallpaper that I had recovered from a home. This photograph was taken on the Lyman family’s moving day, and Marcus was there to help his aunt and Great-Grandmother move. The Lyman family lived in their home for more than 40 years and had seen four generations of family live and play in the house. Since he was a child Marcus had sat on the lion statue when visiting, and on this

day he sat on the lion one last time. The photograph captures a history of this home and the personal relationships built around a place. On the gallery floor below this piece I placed a plastic rocking horse, which I had found discarded in the neighborhood, on a cinder block (Fig. 4). In this arrangement of photograph and found object I gave the viewer a way to navigate my installation in a manner that was intuitive and thoughtful. The horse may have been a toy that Marcus would have played on as a child. Displayed together the horse became a physical caption that supplemented the photograph of Marcus on the lion, and was indicative of the familial character of this neighborhood.



Matt Rahner, *Marcus Lyman on Lion Statue, Moving Day*, 2012, Archival Inkjet Print, 28 x 42 in. Background: Reproduction of found wallpaper. Inkjet Print. (Fig. 3)



Matt Rahner, *Rocking Horse and Cinder Block*, 2014. Dimensions variable. Both found objects rest on a plinth in the installation of *Eminent Domain*. This sculpture echoes the lion that Marcus Lyman sits on in the photo directly behind it. (Fig. 4)

These objects could have been from any neighborhood, but they specifically come from a neighborhood that is no longer standing. Whereas the City was creating a new history of the area by demolishing past histories, my goal, and challenge, has been to build a history through the accumulation of objects that speak to a shared history of the neighborhood's residents. As Lucy Lippard states in her book *The Lure of the Local* (1997), "Returning to the home-place when it has been swallowed up by a development, when familiar names have vanished from the neighborhood, is like visiting a grave" (Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 56). My collection in these terms is an attempt at memorialization, preservation and history building.

Chapter IV:

Influential Precedents

Throughout the making of *Eminent Domain* I investigated the history of documentary photography, from its origins to contemporary practice. Since the turn of the twentieth century, photography has become the “pervasive agent of documentary communication” (“Early Documentary Photography”). Throughout the history of documentary photography notions of objectivity and authenticity have been questioned, forcing the medium and its practitioners to evolve their approaches. Four photographers have most influenced my work, and I note the transitions of documentary practice from short form assignments to long form personal projects, to outsider photographers embedded in their subjects lives, and finally to insider, autobiographical documentary practices.

Documentary photography is rooted in the intention to be as objective as possible. Within documentary practice, photographers have sought to represent an untouched and unmediated view of the world. These photographers were concerned with honest, direct line-of-sight representations of the world as they found it. “Documentary refers to a style apart from news and art photography; it implies that the photographer had a goal in mind, usually to expose social injustice and to somehow bring about a change” (Wichlacz, “Jim Goldberg”).

Working in this vein, photographer Walker Evans’s principle subject matter was the vernacular; those elements that were characteristic to the common style of a period, place, and group (“Walker Evans (1903-1975)”). His motifs were working-class people

and the environment in which they interacted. “Evans’ eye is sympathetic to a very special aspect of a very general material,” his friend Lincoln Kirstein once said (Galassi, *Walker Evans & Company*, 16). Evans’s material was America at large, its history and the unfolding present. Only through studying his pictorial output does the ‘very special aspect’ become graspable. Evans “was interested in what any present time will look like as the past” (Thompson, *Walker Evans At Work*, 151). His oeuvre is diverse, yet cohesive, and can be attributed to his interest in photographing the present moment with the understanding that it will be perceived as glimpses of America’s past.

In 1936, during an assignment that sent him to rural Alabama, Evans made possibly his most recognizable body of work. Working in tandem with the writer James Agee, the duo eventually published the journalistic novel *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a sociological study of Depression-era tenant sharecroppers. Originally they were sent on assignment by *Fortune Magazine* to report on current conditions of the rural and poor working class. Agee became involved in the lives of the sharecroppers and saw them as victims of a society that had cast them aside. His writing took a critical stance against the biases of journalism and its consumption by the bourgeois readers. The book became a “talismán for the Depression to people who had not experienced it” (Galassi, *Walker Evans & Company*, 25).

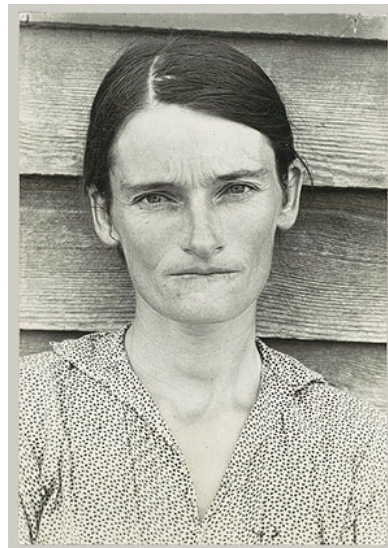
Evans’s photographs for this book can be seen as the culmination of his documentary style: portraits and untouched found scenes that were rendered in crisp detail. As straight documentary pictures, Evans’s work appears to be artless documentation. However it was his belief that “the matter of art in photography may come down to this: it is the capture and projection of the delights of seeing; it is the

defining of observation full and felt” (“Walker Evans”). This belief hinged upon the use of an 8” x 10” field camera, which produced large negatives that would reveal minute details of his subject.

Evans often made multiple exposures of the same scene or person. By using different cameras or lens focal lengths, Evans was able to find the best representation of each subject. This was a practice he maintained throughout the images found in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In Figures 5 and 6, Evans photographed Allie Mae Burroughs, a sharecropper’s wife (Library of Congress). Each portrait offers distinct, yet subtle differences, which affect the overall tone of the subject being represented in the photograph. Her pose is similar, but the tilt of her head, her pursed lips, and furrowed brow may have depicted her inner thoughts as she was being photographed. Evans chose to use a more relaxed portrait of Allie Mae (Fig. 5) in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.



Walker Evans, *Allie Mae Burroughs (1)*, 1935 or 1936, Photographic Negative, 8 x 10 in., Library of Congress. (Fig. 5)



Walker Evans, *Allie Mae Burroughs (2)*, 1935 or 1936, Photographic Negative, 8 x 10 in., Library of Congress. (Fig. 6)

A definition of the mode in which Evans worked was set forth in William Stott's book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973) stating that documentary photography “defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render it superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak” (Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 14). By the 1960's this faith in the document began to crumble as notions of objectivity began to be questioned. The invisible hand of the photographer was recognized to be a component of any picture. Photographers maintained biases and had to tailor their practice accordingly. Unlike Evans, many artists began to use the long-form documentary, which they made out of choice rather than assignment.

Working in the long-form approach, documentary photographer Ira Nowinski made an influential body of work that dealt with the relocation and redevelopment of a San Francisco neighborhood. Titled *No Vacancy: Urban Renewal and the Elderly* (1979) the series addresses “one of the fiercest battles in American redevelopment history” (Solnit, “Out of Print SOS!”). This work was distributed through the publication of a small book in 1979. He read an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* titled “Ninety-Six Senior Citizens Thrown out of Hotel”, and subsequently became interested in the area known as South of Market (Nowinski, *Ira Nowinski's San Francisco*, 17). Starting in 1972, Nowinski made a compelling documentary series of portraits, architectural details, and records of the hotels in various states of demolition. He continued this project for seven years. At the time in the South of Market district there were thousands of single men, mostly retired waterfront workers, who were living in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels. While in the hotels the residents formed a strong sense of community. The

men living in these hotels were unwilling to move without a fight and organized a group called TOOR (Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment) that sought to guarantee proper relocation and development of new low-cost SRO housing. Many displaced residents were not given such accommodation and were forced onto the streets to fend for themselves.

A hotel resident, Pete Mendelsohn, stated “They started forcing us out, kicking us out at night and kicking in doors. People started to die during the fight—the fight had a lot to do with the dying. People can’t live with that kind of tension” (Nowinski, *Ira Nowinski’s San Francisco*, 21). The men who had been kicked out began to look for rooms in other hotels, but were greeted with claims of “no vacancy.” This was true to an extent, as the city was not letting anyone new move into the vacant rooms.

The photographs in Nowinski’s book gaze into life inside of the hotels, and the residents sparsely furnished rooms. Nowinski’s portraits vary compositionally from formal, frontal pictures to intimate pictures of everyday life. In each photograph Nowinski controls the information presented and guides the viewer’s understanding of life within the hotels. His pictures reveal the gritty nature of living minimally in cramped conditions. Nowinski does not lead the viewer to believe his subjects are suffering within their living accommodations. There is a sense of loneliness and despair in some of the portraits, yet many residents reveal independence and dignity. The photographs are “an important social document, a visual record of certain truths about the quality of life in our inner-cities and our treatment of the disadvantaged and the aged” (Hoover, *No Vacancy*, vii).

No Vacancy documents an area that was termed “blighted” by the city of San Francisco in order to evoke eminent domain and to make it legal to evict residents and tear down buildings. In the eyes of officials, the end goal was a higher, more beneficial use to the city of San Francisco, and as a consequence many hundreds of economically expendable residents lost their homes. At the time the director of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA) Justin Herman stated “This land is too valuable to permit poor people to park on it” (Solnit, *Ira Nowinski’s San Francisco*, 13).

The quieter pictures in the series are scenes that Nowinski had come across in the rooms of the residents. In *Vacant Room, West Hotel*, 1974, Nowinski photographed a powerful scene composed of a stained, uncovered mattress, a matching uncovered pillow, a wrought iron headboard, and a print of the American Flag that hung affixed to the wall with eight pieces of white tape. In this asymmetrical and vertical composition, Nowinski captured the stripped down existence of life within the hotels. Undoubtedly aged, the ex-resident had an appreciation and reverence for America. The flag is proudly displayed in his home. The unframed print is placed squarely above the center of the bed, with masking tape crudely holding it to the wall. The stripes of the flag are echoed in the covering of the lines on the stained mattress and pillow, and the stars of the flag are visually related to the buttons holding the mattress’s top and bottom together. Also, the flag is on the same central axis of the pillow, which is of a similar size and shape. However the flag is flat, made of paper, and cannot serve the purpose of a traditional flag. The position of the pillow and creasing of the fabrics resting position bear the mark of human presence, mimicking the gesture of a flag flapping in the wind. Finally, the rod iron headboard with its five vertical rods reference the stripes in the flag and mattress, but

also seem to have associations with the walls of a cage or bars of a prison cell. Nowinski was conscious of the way he represented these interior tableaux and aware of the associations that could be made. When viewed as a complete and intentional composition, it is evident that Nowinski was thinking of issues related to American values, poverty and the lack of compassion to which the residents were subjected to by the SFRA.

One of the first portraits Nowinski made in the series, *Joe Marsh, Joyce Hotel*, 1971, is a revealing look at life in the hotels. Joe Marsh had lived in the Joyce Hotel for 17 years. Nowinski met him on his first trip to the South of Market Neighborhood. That day Joe was in the process of moving out of his room and waiting for his son to pick him up. As these were the last moments in his room the scene is given an added urgency, both for the photographer and viewer, to take in all the details and make sense of the history behind the photograph. Joe Marsh was forced to leave a place he had come to now for over a decade. The tension lies in the knowledge that his life has been disrupted. Nowinski's portrait is a dignified representation of life in the hotels. The photographer played the role of "artist as historian, as community advocate, as champion of other versions of history" (Solnit, *Ira Nowinski's San Francisco*, 15).

No Vacancy can be seen as a break from past photographers like Evans who was interested in society but did not make invested long-form documentary projects. Nowinski used documentary photography to fight against oppression and to encourage self-preservation. He brought the practice into another era by using new visual strategies of sequencing and by embedding himself in his surroundings. Later, another development in documentary practice began to emerge as objectivity was questioned and the

subjectivity of the photographer was seen as influencing the final result of the new documentary.

The subjectivity of photographer Jim Goldberg responded to the changing landscape of the practice by involving himself with the lives of his subjects, and becoming a part of the project. In the book *Raised by Wolves* (1995) Goldberg spent over a decade following the lives of homeless youth living in motels, abandoned buildings, and under bridges in and around Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California. His subjects ranged in age from 13 to mid-30's. Living in the area allowed Goldberg to spend a great deal of time interacting with his subjects, forging lasting relationships.

In *Raised by Wolves* Goldberg took many different approaches to create a multi-level documentary. The book is “part photojournalism, part novel, part movie, part comic, and part museum display” (Wichlacz, “Jim Goldberg”). At the core of the book are his pictures of the homeless men, women, and children he encountered. Whether they were using intravenous drugs, having sex, or just hanging out, the photographs describe daily activity of life on the street. Throughout the book Goldberg transcribed recorded conversations, which he used as short, scene-setting stories. The reader is able to follow characters as they prostitute themselves for drugs, beg for money or make attempts to get clean and off the streets.

Goldberg had the intention to make the work into a book from the outset. He collaborated with his subjects and showed them the layout, asking for their opinions. As life on the street dictated, they were not concerned with their representation but instead focused on survival and scoring more drugs. The unique way Jim Goldberg constructed

the book has made it a touchstone for practitioners of documentary practice. Goldberg used all types of photographic information, from contact sheets to blurred images and Polaroid photographs. Goldberg set a dire tone in the book through a multitude of approaches. He displayed clothing worn by the youth, their personal belongings, writings scribbled on paper and photographs which revealed their most vulnerable moments. This approach encapsulated a multi-level documentary style that added authenticity to the tone and structure of the book while drawing attention to the artist's act of collection and curation.

Unlike Evans, Goldberg took a hands-on approach and interacted with his subjects. He intervened in their lives by buying them dinners, contacting family members and social service organizations. No longer was he the observer on the fringes of his subjects' lives, but an embedded, subjective documentarian. There are moments in the texts of the book where Goldberg is addressed directly by his subjects, and his presence obfuscates the role of the documentarian. Still, he remained on the outside, going home at night to sleep away from the turmoil's of street life.

Historically, documentary photographers imagined the world as outsiders. Subjectivity in documentary has been associated with outsider photographers making judgments and influencing events. A lesser-seen category of documentarian is the insider with points of view no one else can access. To that end, LaToya Ruby Frazier is a young African-American photographer whose work revolves around the circumstances of her family in Braddock Pennsylvania. The work she creates is uniquely personal and autobiographical, yet it raises questions about larger societal issues of class, race and gender. Her work investigates the effects of post-industrialization, redlining, and white

flight as it pertains to her family and hometown. Frazier's work deals with "the story of economic globalization and the decline of manufacturing as told through the bodies of three generations of African-American women" (Daderko, *LaToya Ruby Frazier, Witness*, 7).

The primary individuals in Frazier's work are her Grandma Ruby, her mother, and the artist herself. Her Grandmother Ruby died from pancreatic cancer; her mother suffers from both cancer and an undiagnosed neurological disorder, and Frazier herself has Lupus. Her photography tells the story of her family's struggle with environmental health issues and the decline of her mostly African-American hometown. Braddock lost its only hospital, The University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), and in response to this closure Frazier made the series *Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital)*. The series addresses "the reverberations of the shuttering and demolition of this facility in 2010-2011, while UPMC simultaneously constructed a new \$250M facility in an affluent Pittsburgh suburb" ("LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness").

Frazier's work "is a form of visual propaganda that is deeply concerned with how power can be identified, claimed and redirected" (Daderko, *LaToya Ruby Frazier, Witness*, 22). She presents her viewer with a story that acts as a mirror of contemporary society in turn implicating the viewer as a part of the problem. Frazier's level of involvement with the subject she documents is completely personal though she is able to remove herself from the situation enough to successfully investigate it.

This lineage of photographers and traditions I have discussed are select points along a continuum of approaches regarding the documentary process. Like Evans I am interested in sharp pictures of observations that can be experienced in the future. In the

story of Wendell-Phillips I was keenly aware that the neighborhood was sooner than later going to disappear. The act of photographing the neighborhood captured a present-moment that in the span of only a few months would be seen as the distant past. This impending sudden change led me to voraciously collect data, and preserve a history that had previously gone unrecorded. In this pursuit I acknowledge a connection with Ira Nowinski's work documenting a vanishing neighborhood and its people. Our sequencing and subject matter are eerily similar, and I realized there is a common narrative arc to the erasure of a place. I felt the need to encapsulate more of the neighborhood and began to collect ephemera and objects the same way I took pictures, seeking out those visual occurrences that established the presence of a unique person, in a place, at a particular time. My fascination with multi-level approaches forced me to acknowledge the influence of Jim Goldberg's *Raised by Wolves*.

Once I investigated the history of the neighborhood I realized that larger issues were at play in Kansas City Missouri and beyond. The decline of the urban neighborhood can be seen in almost every major American city, and those most affected in these places are African-Americans. As a white outsider I often questioned my role and ability to interpret the situation with integrity and subjectivity. To find some answers I looked to the work of LaToya Ruby Frazier who represents her family and is the definition of an insider. I found similarities in the reasons we make our work and the questions we pose with it. Frazier is concerned with how power can be "identified, claimed and redirected" (Daderko, *LaToya Ruby Frazier, Witness*, 22). I have seen and experienced the privilege of power and am interested in subverting the relationship of power struggles in American

society. Both Frazier and I approach this conundrum from our respective positions as documentarians, yet we are simultaneously the insider and the outsider.

Chapter V:

Conclusion

Eminent Domain is an investigation into the repercussions and reality of a power construct that allows one entity to forcefully and legally relocate others against their will. This body of work is concerned with an area that is, and historically has been, predominantly African-American. Through a history of institutionalized discriminatory practices, such as restrictive covenants and red-lining, African-Americans in Kansas City have historically had little control over their ability to choose where they live, and I see this abuse of eminent domain as an extension of what was thought to be in the past. It is my belief that the governmental bodies of Kansas City have proven they are willing to sacrifice viable neighborhoods and gamble on questionable means of urban renewal. In this specific case of the East Patrol Police Station and Crime Lab project and Wendell-Phillips neighborhood, the City was not flexible in selecting a site that may have displaced fewer residents. Through my photographs, found objects, and installation methods I am acting as an unofficial archivist, and asking viewers to consider the ramifications of the process of eminent domain.

This exhibition is situated within a tradition of documentary photography that spans back to the earliest iterations of the medium. Through a long-form documentary practice, I have established a photographic narrative arc that describes the destruction of a neighborhood and the displacement of its residents. By building a related archive of objects I am able to fill in the gaps of this history. Found items become points of reference to understand what happened before I was able to take pictures in the

neighborhood. They access a past that I was unable to know firsthand. By displaying the photographs with the objects I created a space where the authority of the picture and the reality of the object interact. The pictures portray people who are identified by name, location, and time. The objects, which are not attributable to a specific person, cannot be identified and are placeless. It is my hope as a photographer that the viewer is able to situate these objects as a placeholder for the neighborhood that once stood.

Bibliography

- Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941.
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Each Wild Idea*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001.
- Contemporary Art Museum Houston. "LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness." Accessed April 04, 2014. <http://camh.org/exhibitions/latoya-ruby-frazier-witness>.
- Cotton, Charlotte. *The Photograph as Contemporary Art, 2nd Ed*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2009.
- Daderko, Dean. *LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness*. Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013.
- Evans, Walker. *Allie Mae Burroughs (1)*. 1935 or 1936. 8 x 10 in. The Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
- . *Allie Mae Burroughs (2)*. 1935 or 1936. 8 x 10 in. The Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
- Galassi, Peter. *Walker Evans & Company*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000.
- Goldberg, Jim. *Raised By Wolves*. Zurich: Scalo, 1995.
- hooks, bell. *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. New York: New Press, 1994.
- Ira Nowinski: *No Vacancy: Urban Renewal and the Poor*. Introduction by Catherine Hoover. San Francisco: C. Bean Associates, 1979. Exhibition Catalog.
- J. Paul Getty Museum. "Walker Evans." Accessed May 06, 2014. <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=1634>
- Jones, R. J. Barry, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy: Entries A-F*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2001. Accessed April 03, 2014. <http://books.google.com/books?id=a29qBofx8Y8C&pg=PA161#v=onepage&q&f=false>, 161.
- Lindquist, Greg, and Charles Schultz. "In Conversation: LaToya Ruby Frazier," *The Brooklyn Rail* (2013). Accessed April 03, 2014. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/07/art/latoya-ruby-frazier-with-greg-lindquist-charles-schultz>.

- Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of place in a multi centered society*. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Missouri General Assembly. "Missouri Revised Statutes, Chapter 353 Urban Redevelopment Corporations Law, Section 353.020." Accessed April 04, 2014. <http://www.moga.mo.gov/statutes/C300-399/3530000020.HTM>
- Missouri General Assembly. "Missouri Revised Statutes, Chapter 82, Constitutional Charter Cities, Section 82.240." Accessed May 06, 2014. <http://www.moga.mo.gov/statutes/C000-099/0820000240.HTM>
- National Park Service. "Shelley House." Accessed May 5, 2014. <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/mo1.htm>
- Nowinski, Ira. *Ira Nowinski's San Francisco: poets, politics, and divas*. Berkley: Heyday Books, 2006.
- Pearce, Matt, "Blight Flight," Pitch Weekly (Kansas City, MO), August 14, 2012, <http://www.pitch.com/kansascity/kcpd-east-campus-development/Content?oid=2970344&showFullText=true>
- Prospect Corridor Initiative: Strategic Plan*, Prospect Corridor Initiative (Kansas City: City of Kansas City, 2002) Accessed April 03, 2014. <http://zru5b3x41ea3ct5vgj46zvitm.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wpcontent/uploads/2013/07/prospectcorridor.pdf>.
- Shortridge, James R. *Kansas City and How it Grew, 1822-2011*. Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012.
- Solnit, Rebecca. Foreword to *Ira Nowinski's San Francisco: poets, politics, and divas*, by Ira Nowinski, 9-15. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2006.
- Solnit, Rebecca. "Out of Print SOS!" Supplement Photobook Review, *Aperture*, November 2013.
- Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Early Documentary Photography." Accessed May 06, 2014. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edph/hd_edph.htm
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Walker Evans (1903–1975)." Accessed April 04, 2014. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/evan/hd_evan.html
- Thompson, Jerry L., *Walker Evans At Work: 745 Photographs together with Documents, Selected From Letters, Memoranda, Interviews, Notes*. New York; Cambridge; Philadelphia: Harper & Row Publisher, 1982.

Wallis, Brian, and Willis, Deborah, ed., *African America Vernacular Photography*. New York/Gottingen: ICP/Steidl, 2005.

Wichlacz, Sarah. "Jim Goldberg: 'Raised by Wolves as a Non-Fictional Multi-Media Narrative'." *American Suburb X*. (2014) Accessed May 06, 2014.
<http://www.americansuburbx.com/2009/11/theory-raised-by-wolves-as-non.html>

Willis, Deborah, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. New York: The New Press, 1994.