

Means, Motive, Opportunity: **A Conversation with Peter Higdon**



Black Star: *Wounded Airman, World War I*

In February 2005, when the 291,049 photographs in the Black Star Collection were moved to Toronto from a bonded warehouse in Montreal, they were transported in a pair of temperature-controlled semitrailers owned by a company whose primary business was shipping blood and perishable blood products throughout North America. The trucks were driven by two individuals who happened also to be members of the Bandidos motorcycle club (then at loggerheads with the Montreal chapter of the Hell's Angels); their job was to get the collection to Toronto and the trucks back to Montreal in the span of a day, with stops timed to the minute and temperature readouts from the cargo bays monitored every quarter-hour. Both drivers were extraordinarily skilled, maintaining an unvarying 100 km/h for hours at a time. One brought his own vegetarian lunch rather than eat rest-stop food; the other held forth critically on the career of Emily Carr. Following the heavily insured collection down Highway 401 in a black Jeep were Peter Gee, from the University's finance office, and collections curator Peter Higdon, who provided these details of the trip.

The Black Star Collection brought a sea change to what was then Ryerson University. At the time, this was the largest single donation of cultural property ever made to a Canadian academic institution. It sparked a redesign and expansion of the School of Image Arts, and groundbreaking occurred just as a new university master plan was being implemented. In turn, this led to elimination of vehicle traffic on stretches of Victoria and Gould Streets, and to the creation of new pedestrian spaces in a key area of the busy downtown campus. Most crucially, the collection was accompanied by funding to begin construction of The Image Centre, a long-planned, museum-standard set of galleries and a research centre, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2022.

While the 2023 release of ***Facing Black Star*** (published jointly by The Image Centre and the MIT Press) marks the emergence of significant new critical perspectives on the role of photographic reportage in the twentieth century, the story of how the Black Star Collection came to Toronto Metropolitan University in

the first place is well worth revisiting. Excerpts from Peter Higdon's narrative, edited for continuity, are below.

Our first experience with Cultural Property donations came in 1994-95, when the art dealer Mira Godard (who had known faculty member Linda Lewis for many years) stated she was willing to offer her personal collection of historic photographs to the Resource Centre on the condition that they could be accepted as Canadian Cultural Property. If not, she intended to sell them the following year at auction in New York.

The TMU Library already had an "A" status certification for the acquisition of certain kinds of archives, and although the Resource Centre was not directly connected, its goals were similar. And we did have a significant, and growing, teaching collection of original prints by historically important photographers, which was begun in 1968.

Seeking advice, I got in touch with David Butler, who worked with the university's upper management, and he was able to make contact with Sonia Lismer, then a senior figure in the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (CCPERB) in Ottawa.

Following their exploratory conversations, we decided to proceed. I prepared an application, which was successful, and we were soon the holders of a remarkable group of works by Berenice Abbott, Eugène Atget, Ansel Adams and Maurice Tabard, among others. The donation received attention in print and on television, and we quickly found ourselves seen by artists and collectors as a potential recipient institution for donations of significant photographs.

Halfway through the first decade of our pursuit of acquisitions through CCPERB, we were handed a challenge from the Moveable Cultural Property Directorate. In 2000, we received a request to clarify the collecting status of the Resource Centre in relation to the university's Library; this was part of a larger review of collecting institutions in Canada. It gave us a chance to begin a more extensive dialogue with the various branches of Heritage Canada, which included Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Conservation Institute as well as CCPERB itself. I began to see that one way or another, we had to build a facility that would meet the criteria for "A" status, and this became our primary goal well before we had any idea the Black Star photographs might find their way to TMU.

Because we did not have the required environmental controls in place at that point, as expected, my 2001 application for 'A' Status failed. We were required from then on to apply for further acquisitions through Category 'B'. The "B" certification procedure involves a complex, two-stage process, which must be undertaken anew for each separate proposed donation. There are all kinds of stipulations about storage and environmental standards, as one would expect.

A bit of background: In 1985, I had attended a workshop on photographic preservation in Rochester, where experts such as Siegfried Rempel, Klaus Hendricks and James Reilly repeatedly stressed the importance of stable temperature and humidity for any long-term preservation of photographs, and when I got back to Toronto, I asked the head of campus engineering, Don Creighton, about what could be done for the Resource Centre, a facility that sat twelve feet below grade. He said it would be impossible to implement precise controls in this small basement area of the Image Arts building, but I purchased a hygrothermograph regardless and started monitoring both temperature and humidity there. When we submitted our documents, I made it

clear that we were continually working to change the situation, and emphasized everything we had learned since 1985. In the end, in this way, a series of donations through Category 'B' were successful.

[In the years that followed the Mira Godard donation, Peter wrote or oversaw an additional twenty-seven Cultural Property submissions, bringing work by Canadian photographers David Hlynsky, Rafael Goldchain, Geoffrey James, Ed Burtynsky, Clara Gutsche, Volker Seding, Phil Bergerson, Elaine Ling, Gabor Szilasi, Ruth Kaplan, and Marcus Schubert into the Study Centre's print collection. The acquisition of Black Star was successfully negotiated in 2005, and later, works from the collections of Harry and Ann Malcolmson, Howard and Carole Tanenbaum, Lisa Newman, Mark Wolfson, Michael Torosian, Martin and Gail Bass, and the Gallery TPW Collection were donated, all via the same means. The archives of Berenice Abbott, Wendy MacNeil, Werner Wolff and Jo Spence were also added under Peter's watch.]

The Black Star Collection, which had been purchased by a Canadian individual in 2003 with the intention of bringing it to Canada, needed to be inventoried and evaluated before it could be imported. When first assembling a team for this task, the well-known appraiser Penelope Dixon contacted me, asking if I could recommend some graduates with outstanding cataloguing skills. It turned out that, as Canadians, they wouldn't be able to work in New York, where the collection was then located, but we ended up benefiting from Penelope's work in other ways.

It took her group close to two months, with teams working in shifts 24/7, to catalogue, archivally re-house and generate a database for this immense body of images, a task we could not have undertaken ourselves. And these initial conversations put us, however tentatively, on the donor's radar.

The second appraiser—there have to be two, they must remain independent, they cannot communicate during the process, and their figures must come in within an acceptably small percentage point of the other—was Stephen Bulger, who of course knew us well.

The MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie, which already acquired and housed the Sovfoto Archive, had been under consideration for Black Star, but when those negotiations fell through, Stephen confirmed that Image Arts and the Resource Centre would likely be a good fit. In June of 2004, Adam Kahan, the university's Vice President for Advancement, had a first meeting with the donor's representatives, along with Image Arts faculty Don Snyder and Bob Burley; and in July, Don, Bob, David Harris and I went to Montreal to look at the archive itself.

I wrote the CCPERB application, starting shortly after that trip. The fit was clear, but the physical facilities in Image Arts were a problem—we still didn't have the proper environmental controls, or security, nor even proper windows—so we had to find some way to propose a new facility.

To our great good fortune, the donor agreed to include with the gift a donation of funds, negotiated by Adam Kahan, which would allow us to pursue construction of a facility that would meet proper museum standards. Howard Greenberg, often credited as "one of a small group of gallerists, curators and historians responsible for the creation of the modern market for photography,"—and an acknowledged expert on photojournalism—lent crucial support to our application by providing a statement that confirmed the appraisals and validated the cultural worth of the collection.

As I worked on the Cultural Property Application for Black Star, a complication arose in September, when CCPERB's Sonia Lismer contacted me to ask why we were planning to take the entire collection, and not just the highlights. Fortunately, I was able to persuade her about the essential importance of context: the collection had to remain intact. The Black Star agency flourished during the golden era of photojournalism, when publications such as Life Magazine would run a story over several pages. An iconic image would be surrounded by other contextual ones which, seen as a whole, delivered the final visual narrative. It would have been dishonest in terms of the collection's formation to just take a part of it and, I said so—our application had always been intended to justify acquiring the whole thing. She eventually agreed; by November 10, the application was forwarded to the Cultural Property Board in Ottawa, and we waited.

Approval came on January 18th of 2005 to University Advancement's Louise Yearwood and me—an exhilarating moment, and the work then had to be moved from Montreal. It went to PacArt, a climate-controlled art storage facility on the northern outskirts of Toronto, where it would remain for more than six years. We commuted there to work on scanning the collection. For our initial public announcement on April 11, we brought twelve prints down to the campus in sealed frames, designed to protect the images from humidity and temperature fluctuations for 24 hours or so, and then they had to go back. Until the Image Centre vault was completed, the prints had to stay put in the PacArt environment, in a purpose-built enclosure.

The public announcement of our acquisition on that day in April drew immediate press acknowledgement and brought increased recognition of our role in the cultural life of Toronto, and beyond. The event, which featured New York based photo-historian and critic Vicki Goldberg as keynote speaker, was heavily attended and the excited culmination of long labor and struggle. Goldberg spoke admiringly about the prescience of a Canadian institution in taking such a significant collection from under the noses of her American colleagues, and was genuinely congratulatory. Referencing the Collection's strong holdings of Civil Rights imagery, Bob Burley spoke movingly of the vivid childhood memory of his Canadian grandmother's shock and anger at seeing Charles Moore's powerful photographs of police dogs attacking demonstrators, reproduced in Life Magazine in 1963. The celebrative day delivered a pivotal moment in the evolution of the university, and led to wide recognition in the photographic and academic communities.

Acceptance of a Cultural Property donation entails not only an obligation to preserve the work, but also a responsibility to make it accessible through exhibition and publication, and to researchers. Everyone involved with the project agreed at the outset that whatever form the new gallery might take, it would always be open to the public without any admission charge. And as the gallery and storage vault were being designed and built by our architects, Diamond + Schmitt, and with the prints out of public view in a remote location, it was seen as equally imperative to find a way for people to see the Black Star images, at the very least via credible reproductions.

The Black Star Collection: Highlights, initially curated by Judy Ditner for the university community and shown by projection in the Image Arts Gallery, was expanded to form a key exhibition during the 2006 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, and Black Star: The Celebrity Persona, curated by Valérie Matteau, was produced for CONTACT in 2007. Photo Narratives: Remembering the 20th Century, again curated by Valérie, was featured in 2008. These exhibitions, all at the Allen Lambert Galleria at BCE Place in downtown Toronto, were viewed by many thousands of people. Selected images from the Highlights

exhibition traveled to Washington DC in 2007, to be displayed at the Canadian Embassy and later, at the PhotoFest DC festival. That same year, Black Star photographs were shown at the Luminato Festival and during Nuit Blanche.

Black Star photographers Dennis Brack, Steve Schapiro, Fred Ward, James Pickerell, Bob Fitch and Matt Herron, and photo editor John Morris, all came to Toronto during the interim period while the new gallery was under construction, sharing their work and experiences with Black Star in both conferences and public lectures; most of them took part in an oral history project, coordinated by Valérie Matteau, which continued until 2011. Of all these activities, among the most memorable was Bob Fitch and Matt Herron's lecture about their years photographing the Civil Rights Movement in the US during a very divided and dangerous time.

The Black Star prints were finally transported to the university campus in May of 2012, and *Archival Dialogues: Reading the Black Star Collection*, the new Image Centre's inaugural exhibition, curated by IMC Director Doina Popescu and arts writer Peggy Gale, opened in September. It was followed in 2013 by Mark Sealy's *Human Rights, Human Wrongs*, and Steven Loft's *Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.* was installed that same year.

Subsequent exhibitions involving Black Star images include, among others, Sophie Hackett's *What It Means to Be Seen: Photography and Queer Visibility* (2104), Thierry Gervais's *DISPATCH: War Photographs in Print* (2014) and Gaëlle Morel's *Burn with Desire: Photography and Glamour* (2015). *Stories from the Picture Press: Black Star Publishing Co. & the Canadian Press*, curated by Paul Roth, Gaëlle Morel and Rachel Verbin opened on September 13, 2023. **Facing Black Star**, mentioned above, was released in June.

About the new book, and what it implies—I think this represents a new sort of scholarship. When 20th century collections began to be formed, they were often begun by practitioners, and the overall context was what was going on at George Eastman House, where the curators were also practitioners. They formed a community of people who loved the medium, in an art world in which photography was not always appreciated. These individuals, and those they trained, built collections all over North America; one significant example was Peter Bunnell, who was a photographer as well as a collector and historian. Bunnell began his study of photography under Minor White and Clarence H. White Jr, and later, as a curator, built a legendary collection of photography at The Princeton University Art Museum.

This is what we were doing at the School of Image Arts, and the early years of the Lecture Series likewise reflect that: there was an appreciation for the importance of photographs. People got wind of what was happening...there was a whole continent-wide movement to accredit photography as a significant form, and in those early days you could buy important photographs for very little money.

It was very different from today, when a curator is not necessarily a maker. And photo theory has been brought into play by people who are often not creators of photo objects. A hyper-critical and constantly shifting stance has swept all the arts, and social engagement and political commitment have become new measures of value.

What we did has to do with the love we had for a good picture. This is not such a factor anymore—apolitical images are currently of lesser interest.

It is unquestionably true that many aspects of the medium and many practitioners have been historically under-represented. Incorporating this fact, it remains to me more important to focus on evolving through exploration and creation of new work than to only dwell critically on what has come before.

Something that springs to mind in relation to all this is when Bernd and Hilla Becher, renowned as practitioners and educators, came to Toronto for the Lecture Series in January 1993. As their talk progressed, and they spoke with enthusiasm about their many documentary series, the audience, which seemed neatly divided between theorists and practitioners, was practically quivering with curiosity.

The Bechers were known as significant figures in the establishment of the Düsseldorf School, where theory was seen as a critical component of photographic production; and thus, someone, in a tone of slight exasperation finally asked the question: "Would you please speak about the theoretical underpinnings of your work?" Both photographers looked at each other, and after a long and uncomfortable pause, Hilla replied: "Well, you know...we just like to take pictures!"

The audience responded audibly with surprise, equally divided between irritation and delight. You could feel it everywhere in the lecture hall. The next day, as they were being driven around Toronto in search of industrial sites, they spotted the Canada Malting Silos at the foot of Bathurst Street. Delighted, Hilla exclaimed, "Bernd – look! Easy!!!" And to the driver, she asked: "Can we please stop?"

[A brief profile of photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose work "changed the course of late twentieth-century photography... [and] challenged the perceived gap between documentary and fine-art photography", can be found at <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/becher>.]

In 2014, the original Resource Centre, later the Mira Godard Study Centre and then simply the Study Centre, was renamed the Peter Higdon Research Centre. Peter retired in 2014, and the Image Centre finally was granted "A" status by Canadian Heritage in 2017. The collection has continued to grow, and now includes significant bodies of work by Bruce Davidson and Jim Goldberg, as well as collections of work by Francis Bedford, Canadian photographs from the collection of Christopher Varley, and the New York Times Canadian photographic collection, donated by the Rudolph B. Bratty family.

A complete list is available at <https://theimagecentre.ca/collections/>.

PHOTO NARRATIVES:

REMEMBERING THE 20TH CENTURY

ALLEN LAMBERT GALLERIA
BROOKFIELD PLACE (FORMERLY BCE PLACE)
181 BAY ST, TORONTO / MAY 4-30, 2008 / 8AM-10PM

Featuring a selection of digital images from Ryerson's
Black Star Historical Black & White Photography Collection



www.ryerson.ca/collection

Ryerson's **Black Star Historical Black & White Photography Collection** provides a remarkable visual record of the twentieth century's defining moments, including the First and Second World Wars and the civil rights movement in the United States. These photographs have recorded historic events from around the world and capture war and conflict, political personalities, celebrities, popular culture, and advances in the fields of science and technology. The visceral responses that these iconic images evoke speak to their universal appeal and historical significance.

This expansive collection was assembled at the Black Star photo agency in New York City. Over a period of 80 years, more than a quarter of a million photographs were gathered to capture the personalities, events and conflicts of the twentieth century from before the First World War to the Vietnam War and beyond. These photos form a complete media record and a repository of memories that can be passed on to future generations. The Black Star collection is a significant archive that helps illuminate the twentieth century by capturing its most important people and events.

The collection was gifted to Ryerson University by an anonymous donor in 2005. In receiving this gift, the university has been entrusted with preserving these photographs and making them accessible to the public through exhibitions and publications.

The collection positions Ryerson University and its School of Image Arts as a leader in the study of photography and in the production, research, curation and collection of photographic imagery from the early years of the medium to the present.

COVER: Spectators at the Apollo 11 launch / Cape Canaveral, Florida / July 26, 1971 / NASA / FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Passengers prepare to board the Hindenburg / location unknown / circa 1936 / Max Baer / The Ohio National Guard arrests students at a protest / Kent State University, Ohio / May 4, 1970 / Emilio Mistralani / A rifle marks the site from which Lee Harvey Oswald shot President Kennedy / Dallas, Texas / November 22, 1963 / Gene Daniels



Brochure for *Photo Narratives: Remembering the 20th Century, 2008*