

This essay accompanies the exhibition Jason Lazarus - *T.H.T.K. (Toronto)*
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Jason Lazarus – *T.H.T.K. (Toronto)* by Gabrielle Moser

There is a photograph in Jason Lazarus's *Too Hard to Keep* archive (2010–present) that I keep coming back to, even though it has almost nothing to show me. It is a pixilated landscape, seemingly taken from a moving tour bus, that shows rolling hills and a winding road leading into an unexceptional clouded horizon. The land, like the sky, is ordinary: the weather is fair and clear. The only remarkable detail in the image is a faint reflection provided by the bus window, indecipherable shapes that offer a trace of the presence of the photographer and suggest her fleeting, unmoored position in this environment. There is little that should hold my attention in this casual composition—it is a decidedly boring photograph—and yet I find myself returning to it and looking again. It is its unrelenting banality that makes it familiar. It feels like a photograph that I could have taken, indeed that many of us *have* taken: uncertain of its aesthetic composition in the moment of its production but convinced that somehow the final image would nonetheless show something, acting as a mnemonic device

for how we felt, or what we were thinking, in the moment that the photograph was made.

Seen in isolation, this particular photograph—untitled, undated and authorless—communicates none of the information we first want to ask of a photograph. No amount of looking will help us deduce who took it, where, when and for whom. But its visual reticence, and its placement in the *Too Hard to Keep (T.H.T.K.)* archive, prompts another set of questions: questions about what we, as viewers, want from photographs, and what we do when images challenge these expectations by refusing to provide easy interpretations. Started in 2010, Lazarus's *T.H.T.K.* is a repository for photographs, photo albums, photo-objects, and digital files that are too difficult for their owners to hold onto, but which are too meaningful to destroy. Stored in the artist's home, the growing archive comprises more than 3,000 photographs, which are exhibited in site-specific installations in the gallery. Bringing together a wide range



Jason Lazarus, *Too Hard to Keep*, 2010–present.

of anonymous images, including portraiture, landscape and still life, the archive also includes “private” photographs: photographs donated by participants with the stipulation that they are not to be exhibited publicly, and which Lazarus installs face-down, the image facing the gallery wall.

Mimicking the instruction-based strategies of conceptual art, and following in the footsteps of participatory online art projects such as Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July’s *Learning to Love You More* (www.learningtoloveyoumore.com) or the rabidly popular PostSecret project (www.postsecret.com), Lazarus’s work sees the artist act as the collector and curator of pre-existing images, rather than as the producer of new works. As the photography historian Shawn Michelle Smith argues, Lazarus “offers himself as archivist for other people’s ‘difficult images.’”¹ But if Lazarus is an archivist, he has a decidedly *laissez-faire* approach, one that sees him care for the objects of others but, unlike an institutional archivist or academically trained anthropologist, has no interest in collecting the meta-data that would normally accompany these objects. The photographs in *T.H.T.K.* are shown detached from their original context, without any textual information about whom they depict or where they circulated. Lazarus’s archive puts stress on the images themselves, asking viewers to look at them without the framing devices of the caption or the didactic panel. The only help we have in interpreting these images is through their visual and material relationship to the other photographs in the collection, and the vague, evocative promise that, at some point, someone found them too hard to look at any longer. If, as Tina M. Campt writes, vernacular photographs operate as historical traces that “bear witness to things not put into words,” producing “affective resonances and attachments in ways we cannot necessarily explain and that are often

detached from personal or biographical investments,” then Lazarus’s project provides an environment where these previously unarticulated visual narratives can come into view.² *T.H.T.K.* asks us to think about how we understand images that are separated from their owners’ narratives and about why we continue to feel affective attachments to photographs as objects, even when the specific event they represent remains illegible to us.³

Despite the extreme language of the archive’s title (the word “too” suggesting these images are limit cases for what their owners can tolerate as viewers), the photographs that have been donated to Lazarus’s collection are surprisingly ordinary in appearance. Polaroids, poorly composed snapshots, cheesy commercial studio portraits and vaguely artful landscapes are the norm, while photographs of singular events—like a blackened eye, the open casket at a funeral service, or a skateboarding accident—appear as punctuation within this flow of everyday scenes. These are images typical of vernacular photography: that genre of innumerable, non-art photographs, usually printed on paper, that seem the product of both an everyday compulsion to make images as an aid-to-memory, and of a dumb aesthetic luck made possible by the ubiquity of cheap and portable camera equipment. As Campt writes, “These are images whose most striking feature is that they are *not* singular or exceptional; rather, it is in the sheer ordinariness and prevalence of these images and practices in multiple cultural contexts that their import can be found.”⁴ We immediately recognize the mundane events of Lazarus’s archive—the family road trip, the high school graduation, the wedding portrait—as photographic situations: the milestones of an (implicitly white, middle-class)⁵ culture that are familiar to us because they are structured around, and mediated by, the



Jason Lazarus, *Too Hard to Keep*, 2010–present.



Jason Lazarus, *Too Hard to Keep*, 2010–present.

presence of the camera.⁶

This formal repetition within the *T.H.T.K.* archive should, ostensibly, make for an equally boring viewing experience. But, instead, Lazarus's project provokes a prolonged form of engaged looking that extends the gap between what these photographs show and the meanings we try to attach to them. Presented in spare configurations that respond to the architecture of the gallery, with photographs clustered together in thematic groupings, the images are suggestive for what they do not show, prompting interpretive projections on the part of the viewer because of their absented context. As Kim Simon has written of another group of video and photographic works that she curated, which were similarly provocative in their refusal to directly represent trauma, "The challenge in these particular works resides in their imbrication of a contextual disassociation (where the specificity of narrative lies outside the frame of what is visible) with the fact that these images have an affective impact that highlights the possibilities for sustained engagement. What is of interest then is the slip and the friction between what can consciously be understood or known from an image, and what affect an image provokes."⁷

Installed in Gallery TPW's R&D space, the Toronto iteration of *T.H.T.K.* continues to explore this slip between what the photograph shows (or, in this case, withholds) and the narratives that viewers create out of their affective encounter with this image. The focus of several years' worth of discussions and programming at Gallery TPW, this question of what we do with difficult images has also driven "Coming to Encounter," a yearlong curatorial residency and series of discursive events that experiments with different strategies for looking at difficult images.



Jason Lazarus, *Too Hard to Keep*, 2010–present.

Expanding on pedagogy theorist Deborah Britzman's work on difficult knowledge—the concept that learning from representations of social trauma is a psychically difficult task because it forces the learner to challenge her sense of self⁸—the original premise of the series was that particular contexts and frameworks might make troubling aesthetic experiences more tolerable for viewers: that, by adjusting the conditions in which we encounter a work that depicts violence or trauma, it might be possible for us to speak about this aesthetic encounter differently, with an attention to the messy feelings of complicity, guilt and pleasure that would otherwise go unarticulated in the context of a traditional gallery exhibition.

But my experience over the past year of looking at images and interpreting them out-loud with others has challenged this premise, revealing that it is not what photographs do to us that makes images difficult, but rather what we want to do with them. It quickly became clear that images of graphic violence are not the ones that most trouble viewers, but rather the images, like those included in the *T.H.T.K.* archive, that are ambiguous in what they show us. This is a distinction that Smith makes between photographic evidence—what can be seen in the image—and photographic meaning—the interpretation that viewers make from this image. For Smith, photographic meaning is contingent, malleable and notoriously unreliable: "Photographs as *evidence* are never enough, for photographic *meaning* is always shaped by context and circulation, and determined by viewers. Photographic meaning results from what we *do* with photographic evidence."⁹ Lazarus's project raises the question of where the difficulty in difficult images lies: perhaps it is not in the moment of looking at these photographs, but in the moments that follow. It is in the movement from looking



Jason Lazarus, *Too Hard to Keep*, 2010–present.

to interpreting, of trying to *do* something with our desire to project meaning onto photographs of others, that the *T.H.T.K.* archive poses a difficulty for the viewer. The images are not hard to look at, but hard to put to work. As Smith provocatively argues, Lazarus's project "makes apparent how much of photographic meaning is located not in images but in viewers. An image that looks utterly banal to one viewer might signal anguish for another. The trauma isn't in the photographs, but around and after them, *in us*."¹⁰ While I had assumed that some photographs are unshowable because of the difficult evidence they present to viewers, *T.H.T.K.* suggests that the difficulty resides in the viewer: in the frustration we feel in being unable to pin down the meaning of an image, and the discomfort that arises out of this ambiguity.

Perhaps this explains why I find the ordinary photographs in Lazarus's collection so compelling. A poorly lit photograph of a middle-aged man standing in front of the closet of a hotel room is the kind of image that would not even make it into the family photo album, and yet there is something about it (the shadow of the photographer in the foreground, the sad hotel art on the wall, the casual intimacy of the man's wave towards the camera) that holds my gaze. Perhaps it is photography's strange ability to capture a moment that was insignificant in its passing, a throwaway gesture, and to project it forward in time, to another context where it is invested with the weight of evidence for an event that was yet to come. Roland Barthes famously described the photograph's ability to collapse time in this manner as a kind of punctum,

provoking us to shudder "*over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."¹¹ While it would be easy to read the catastrophe that the *T.H.T.K.* photographs foretell as death or violence, there are other, subtler possibilities that also emerge through Lazarus's project. Some images seem "too hard" for their owners to keep not because they predict a singular, traumatic loss, but because they connote the everyday catastrophes of unrequited love, nostalgia for a lost homeland or longing for an escape from the mundane. This seems especially true of one of Lazarus's most recent acquisitions, a batch of 449 images sent in by one donor. The sheer number of images submitted by a single person suggests a constant engagement with the camera as a way of making sense of everyday life, rather than as a record of exceptional circumstances. As surrogates for lost objects, perhaps these kinds of photographs only become difficult when they no longer operate as a stand-in for a lost person, place or thing, but testify instead to the unreachable distance between the viewer and that other, insisting on what Anne Carson describes as "the absent presence of desire."¹² For Carson, desire can only exist in the act of reaching, of trying to obtain an object that cannot be grasped, and it is telling that she often invokes the photograph as a model for desire and the distance that drives it: the "space of desire in a poem... is like a small, perfect photograph of the erotic dilemma."¹³

The absent presence of the photographers in the *T.H.T.K.* archive is what compels us to look at these images,



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but their inferred presence also raises questions about how these images ended up in Lazarus's care and what prompts people to donate to the archive. What does it mean to refuse to look at a photograph that you own, but to insist that others see it? Why does the affective charge of an image seem to shift when it moves from private to public channels of circulation? In the context of photojournalism and human rights campaigns, this move to make a difficult image public is meant to incite anger, empathy or outrage in viewers in the hopes of provoking meaningful political engagement. In these cases, Smith writes, "the person most traumatized by the view [the photographer or subject]... made others look, made others see with her and judge."¹⁴ But the donors to the *T.H.T.K.* archive do not seem to ask for our judgment, but rather just our sight: they cannot look at these images any longer, but they feel a compulsion for them to be shown to others, even (or perhaps especially) if their specific emotional import is illegible. It is impossible for us to determine who is the rightful "owner" of these images, and whether all of the parties who were present in the moment of the photograph's production now know where their images have ended up. I wonder, when looking at intimate snapshots of a couple kissing, or at a man asleep in a darkened bedroom, whether the responsibilities between the subject and photographer have shifted now that these photographs have entered the public sphere, or whether the idea of a private photograph is always a fantasy.

Perhaps this is a part of the appeal of looking at the *T.H.T.K.* archive: that it allows the viewer to perform as an

emotional tourist, being affected by their encounter with the images without having to do the difficult psychic work of recognizing the important differences between themselves and the subjects that the photographs depict. Not only are the traumas of the *T.H.T.K.* photographs ambiguous—not immediately evident in the frame of the photographs, or literally unseeable by being hung with the image facing the gallery wall—but the purpose of our looking at them is equally ambiguous. There is no obvious way to instrumentalize the complex affective ranges they elicit in the viewer. We are both too close to them (we project our own experiences onto their banality, our own melancholia onto these lost love objects) and yet too far from their anonymous producers to be able to come to terms with the specific losses they depict.

But rather than interpret our distance from these subjects as one of photography's insufficiencies, Lazarus's project seems to point to the interpretive possibilities that this space opens up. By looking without knowing exactly what it is we are seeing, the *T.H.T.K.* archive displaces the viewer's usual processes of identifying (or disidentifying) with the subject of the photograph and allows another form of working-through to unfold. In our encounter with *T.H.T.K.*, where prolonged looking is encouraged and judgment can (at least temporarily) be suspended, it becomes possible to think about what we want from our encounters with difficult images, and what we are compelled to do when it is too hard to look at them anymore.



Jason Lazarus, *Too Hard to Keep*, 2010—present.

Endnotes

1 Shawn Michelle Smith, "Difficult Images," conference paper from the "Crossing the Line" symposium, Art Gallery of York University, February 28, 2013.

2 Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) 6; 16.

3 The premise of *T.H.T.K.* also troubles some of our assumptions about artistic authorship, purposefully referring to the participants in the project as "owners" rather than "producers" of these images. Is it the photographer, the subject or the person who has physical ownership of the print who has decided to give these photographs to Lazarus?

4 Campt 14.

5 Though it is tempting to read Lazarus's project as an inherently democratic one (and the artist does receive submissions from all over the world), it is telling that the normative subject constructed by the T.H.T.K. archive tends to read as white, North American and middle-class. Lazarus has proposed this might be the result of his audience, which usually finds out about the archive through his exhibitions in contemporary art galleries, spaces that are not necessarily accessible to everyone.

6 See Sharon Sliwinski, "Seven Theses on the Photographic Situation," *The Photographic Situation*, August 3, 2012, <http://thephotographicsituation.wordpress.com/2012/08/03/seven-theses-on-the-photographic-situation/>, accessed June 28, 2013.

7 Kim Simon, "Decisive Moments, Uncertain Times," curatorial statement, Gallery TPW, October 20 to November 11, 2011, 1.

8 Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 118.

9 Shawn Michelle Smith, "The Evidence of Lynching," *Lynching Photographs* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007): 10-41, 41.

10 Smith, "Difficult Images," emphasis added.

11 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 96.

12 Anne Carson, *Eros the bittersweet: an essay* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 30.

13 Carson 30.

14 Shawn Michelle Smith, "Difficult Images."

Thanks:

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Jason Lazarus is a Chicago based artist, curator, writer, and educator who received his MFA in Photography from Columbia College Chicago in 2003. His work has been exhibited internationally and is in major collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Bank of America LaSalle Photography Collection, and the Milwaukee Museum of Art among others. Major exhibitions include "Black is, Black ain't" at the Renaissance Society, "On the Scene" at the Art Institute of Chicago, "Not the Way You Remembered" at the Queens Museum of Art, "Image Search" at PPOW Gallery in NYC, "Michael Jackson Doesn't Quit, Part 3" at the Future Gallery, Berlin, "Love to Love You" at MASSMoCA, and "Tiny Vices" at Studio Bee in Tokyo, Japan.

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