

Photographic Agency in Representations and Interpretations of Lynching in the History of American Racism¹

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Introduction

My PhD research on contemporary developments in Chicano Art in Los Angeles explores how artists extend former dialogues in Chicano Art on conceptions of identity and subjectivity that represent radical and transformative political space. My work considers the range of particular cultural issues addressed by artists, such as social displacement and the conditions of post-colonial experience, that resists the historical context of hegemonic marginalisation and that represent commitment to social transformation.

This paper was written for presentation at a conference in the field of History (not Art-history), with the specific theme of 'representations of violence in history'. Therefore, it is directed more towards this field rather than approaching art-historical or art-theory debates. It introduces the subject of Chicano visual representation to British scholars with the intention of showing the value of interdisciplinary approaches in expanded readings of art history.

Amongst the wide range of Chicano scholarship and arts that challenge dominant formulations of history, conceptual photographer Ken Gonzales-Day's critique of the

¹ Presented at the conference *Latino Art Now! The New Wave/La Nueva Ola*, Los Angeles, Ca., November 10-13, 2010, and originally presented at *Worlds of Violence*, International Postgraduate Conference, University of Essex, Department of History, September 9-10, 2010.

edifice of Anglo-American imperialism reflects prevalent views in scholarship that the Mexican American social crisis resulted from 'internal colonialism'. His multifaceted project (produced between 2006-8), titled, *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935*, approaches events in California history that have been conveniently ignored or records practically eliminated. His particular interpretation is associated with a common theme in Chicano arts; the Mexican American experience with the land, the powers that controlled it, and the rights of its inhabitants.

In their 2003 seminal essay, 'The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 to 1928', historians William Carrigan and Clive Webb emphasise that this aspect of American history, although recognised amongst some specialist scholars and by the Mexican and Mexican American community, has been largely neglected. This is partly due to the analysis of violence in the U.S.A. having been based on an over simplified categorization of a Black and White social binary that overlooked other ethnic groups; when, statistically, the numbers of lynchings of Mexicans and Mexican Americans proportional to their ethnic population was as high or higher than those of African Americans.²

Informed by his extensive archival research and a range of historical imagery, Ken Gonzales-Day has presented this little known subject of racial lynching in California in three different forms: a detailed book of the same title; a second, conceptual component that involves participation in a walk to the various geographical sites of a number of the hang trees in the California landscape and what is now urban Los Angeles. The other

² Carrigan, William D. & Webb, Clive 'The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 to 1928', *Journal of Social History*, Volume: 37, Issue: 2, 2003, pp. 411-38

two components - considered here - are photographic works produced for gallery or museum exhibition spaces.



Ken Gonzales-Day, *Run up*, 2002, 40 x 50 inches, chromogenic print, in the series, *Searching For California's Hang Trees*

These are the ektachrome print tree portraits (60x75in.) in the series, *Searching For California's Hang Trees* and, the compositely formed photographic installation *St James Park (The Wonder Gaze)*. In tandem, these two parts present a particular trajectory in the central conceptual theme. This concerns the mediation and agency of photography in the processes of representation and dissemination of history; and specifically, photography's part in the ritualizing processes of lynching in the U.S.A. The dialogue that Gonzales-Day builds through his art generally, on photography in the production of arara – No.9, 2011

social knowledge, links this project to another series (not discussed here) on the processes of social constructions of racial types.³



Ken Gonzales-Day, *St James Park (The Wonder Gaze)*

Unlike various other approaches to this field of study, such as in Michael J. Pfeifer's *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society 1874–1947*, which historically frames lynching within the Reconstruction era and a process of legal history - culminating in the

³ Gonzales-Day, Ken *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006)

Like other scholars, Ken Gonzales-Day reveals that the practice of lynching historically was not directed exclusively towards blacks and not located only in the southern states of the U.S.A. It emerged (prior to the Civil War) as an extra-legal form of punishment; however, a disproportional number of racially directed vigilante murders (lynchings) followed on from this period, including towards Mexicans.

state sanctioned death-penalty, *Ken Gonzales-Day* employs artistic tropes to collapse chronological structure; thus, the temporal ambiguity allows a hypothetical current associative involvement with lynching for the viewer. By realizing the performative, visual spectacle of the strategic social practice of lynching through the vehicle of visual art, Gonzales-Day exposes the illusion of the authoritative status of photographic representation. This work reveals how, in the language of photography, the identities of perpetrator and victim can be collapsed into one concept as a political tool for the control of social groups and people's responses to violence.



Ken Gonzales-Day, *Nightfall II*, 2007, 16 x 24 ft. as installed for *Memento Mori* exhibition at LAXART, Los Angeles

Gonzales-Day achieves this in a number of ways. The top of a mighty tree is an allegorical instance; the tree structure, a thing of natural beauty and elegance, is an

instrument of the tensions of determinism, oppression, conflict, violence and death. The particular artistic style of the tree portraits in the landscape series *Searching For California's Hang Trees* performs significantly. The lyrical quality links these images, art-historically, to the high modernist formal tradition exemplified by such works as Ansel Adams' romantic visions of California. But, they are the art gallery's illusionistic compliment to the sites of the walk component of this project, which *abstractly* puts into play the historic and memory with the "collective amnesia" that has subsumed



Ken Gonzales-Day, *A hundred yards from the road*, 2002, 40 x 50 inches, chromogenic print



Ken Gonzales-Day, *Next morning when jimmy woke, the cowboys were gone*, 2002, 40 x 50 inches, chromogenic print

these sites in the processes of development and urban change. These tree portraits set up further temporal flow by visually forming the foil in their chromatic richness and grandeur that contrasts aesthetically with the historicity of the sepia toned photographs in the installation, *St. James Park (The Wonder Gaze)*. Situating the single theme of the sociality of lynching within this striking juxtaposition of different photographic formats, that also bespeaks the contemporary social familiarity of technological processes, sets up an open stream of connected readings that dissolves Pfeifer's intimated framing of the end of an era of lynching. As art historian Amelia Jones articulates in her work on the interpretation of photography, "by performing open-ended readings [...] we work to activate rather than disavow or repress the process of displacement, projection and arara – No.9, 2011

identification through which all intersubjective engagements take place. In doing so, the past can be freed from fixity and the “*having been*” tense of the photograph transferred into the “*not yet*” or *future* possibilities.”⁴



Ken Gonzales-Day, Installation in *Exile of the Imaginary: Aesthetics, Politics, Love* at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, Austria, 2007

The complex formation of the installation, *St. James Park (The Wonder Gaze)* comprises various artistic tropes. Gonzales-Day utilizes the imagery of *other* photographers; those members, who the state-governor and the press referred to as the “Vigilance committee”, who were in the business of promoting and contributing to the excitement generated, in part, by their production of souvenir-postcards of the lynchings. This archival

⁴ Jones, Amelia *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, (Routledge, London and New York, 2006) p. 72.

photographic material exposes a sinister relationship between the generators and a receptive public in the distribution of constructed narratives of history.⁵



Ken Gonzales-Day *This is what he got*, 2006, 3.7 x 6 inches

One well-documented example that demonstrates the influence of photography in generating a heightened social involvement in this often officially sanctioned act is the Lawrence Beitler photograph of the execution of two African-Americans in 1930. This image was so widely circulated it became a famous icon of extra-legal justice. James Cameron one victim who miraculously survived the event, recalled, "[...] For ten days and nights he printed thousands of copies, which sold for fifty cents apiece." It later inspired a Jewish schoolteacher, Abel Meeropol, in 1937 to write the poem "Strange Fruit".⁶

⁵ Gonzales-Day, Ken *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006) p. 111

⁶ Cameron, James *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Black Classic Press, 1982) This book has an account of this lynching by the man who survived. See also:



(left) Ken Gonzales-Day, *Disguised Bandit*, 2005, 3.8 x 6 inches, & (right) *Tombstone*, 2006, 3.7 x 6 inches

Through the mechanics of contemporary digital technology, Gonzales-Day focuses attention on the complexities of the socially mediated and participatory aspects of lynching. One most unnerving trope is his erasure of the referent from those archival images. This disturbance of representational logic, not only evokes the urge to make a mental correction to the image, which involves the projection of one's *own* fear and death into the unoccupied space of swinging bodies, - the installation, furthermore, brings the viewer physically into the central space of this spectacle by the combination of its interrelated elements.

Lynching in the Heartland by James Madison (St. Martin's Press, 2000), chapter 6 which discusses the photograph in detail. And the website *Legends of America*.

<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-lynching10.html>

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America by James Allen, Hilton Als, et al. (Twin Palms Publishers, 2000). <http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>

Apel, Dora and Smith, Shawn Michelle, *Lynching Photographs*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007)



Ken Gonzales-Day, *The Wonder Gaze (St. James Park)*, at *Phantom Sightings*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008 10 x 14 x 30 feet

Two large photomurals, one printed on a textured Mylar reflecting surface, face each other to create an enveloping space. The mirrored view, by virtue of our reflection in it, includes our presence within the mob of spectators. In his manipulation of these source images, the illumination and silhouetting of central figures and shallow foreground accentuates the particular crowd psychology and atmosphere of the event as the subject of this spatiotemporal visual narrative. Paradoxically, this environment registers as a familiar contemporary form, both in its cinematic proportions and in our understanding of digital photographic technology.



Ken Gonzales-Day, *St. James Park (The Wonder Gaze)*, 2006-08



Ken Gonzales-Day, *St. James Park (The Wonder Gaze)*, detail

Nevertheless, the viewer's perception is also drawn back (in time) into the space of the intimate scale of the actual-sized, erased post-card prints situated on the connecting wall, which serve to remind us of the ubiquity of this social ritual. As such, this work offers both a compression and extension of time; the historical also stands as a arara – No.9, 2011

contemporary moment, presenting a field of relations that is resonant today. This work speaks of loss and grief over decades and focuses our attention on the necessity that we must go on addressing the human condition.



Ken Gonzales-Day, "Erased Lynching Series" in *Exile of the Imaginary: Aesthetics, Politics, Love*, Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2007

In foregrounding the photographic medium itself as crucial to the psychological impact of this artwork, beyond a simple retelling of history, the work identifies photography as a technology and as an episteme integral to lynching's structural conditions. However, the aestheticization of technology and reproductive processes is ironic in its potential to subvert the norms of society from within one of its institutions, the museum.⁷ According to art historian Erica Segre, the 'disturbingly seamless' and 'polished' techniques of

⁷ Gonzales-Day's work was included in the exhibition *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2008 (and toured to several other museums in the United States and in Mexico). This evokes some questioning of the complex situation of the curatorial role in the exhibition that was considered to be a curatorial milestone in its focus on new conceptual Chicano art. For a discussion on this, see; Hill, Jason 'The Camera and the "Physiognomic Auto-da-fé": Photography, History and Race in Two Recent Works by Ken Gonzales-Day', *X-TRA, Contemporary Art Quarterly*, (Volume 11, Number 3, Spring 2009) p.16-22

digital avant-garde photography present “an interesting recuperation /or reification, of the language of severance and transgression.”⁸



Ken Gonzales-Day, *The Wonder Gaze (St. James Park)*, installation view

This thinking, I suggest, corresponds to the kind of language transformation Jacqueline Goldsby discusses in her 1996 essay ‘The High and Low tech of it: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till’ in which she refers to the notorious and controversial metaphor - the ““high-tech” affair” of lynching that Clarence Thomas applied to his own congressional hearings on his nomination to the United States Supreme Court in 1991. Jacqueline Goldsby uses this famous example to demonstrate how different forms of violation can be sustained, through this invisible resource, which has

⁸ Segre, Erica *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture* (Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2007) p.187-8

metamorphosed “*the* image that compresses the horrific brutality of America’s racial history [...] into a singular act: lynching”⁹



Ken Gonzales-Day, *St. James Park (The Wonder Gaze)*, detail

Discussing this idea in Gonzales-Day’s project, art historian Jason Hill suggests that, so dense is the (psychological, sociological and historical) accretion of manifestations, that a defining image of lynching “resists being set into form, resists *representation*.”¹⁰ Day’s sloughing of the ritualised representational subject, therefore, does more than alert us to the misleading artifice of photography.

⁹ Goldsby, Jacqueline ‘The High and Low tech of it: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till’ in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Volume 9, Number 2, Fall 1996. p. 246

¹⁰ Hill, Jason ‘The Camera and the “Physiognomic Auto-da-fé”: Photography, History and Race in Two Recent Works by Ken Gonzales-Day’, *X-TRA, Contemporary Art Quarterly*, (Volume 11, Number 3, Spring 2009) p.16

This alone is a dense subject of lynching photography that has been taken up in such publications as, *Lynching Photographs* by Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, and *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, in which James Allen details the complex range of exploitative political agendas behind the falsely constructed and commercially produced items.

Along with this aspect, the elements in Gonzales-Day's multifaceted project also brings into focus the psychology involved in lynching as a metaphor in contemporary American culture relative to changing values of social formations. Thus, prompting the question what is the reality of the social dimensions in present day U.S. society? In this way, I suggest, Gonzales-Day's work on how the lynching metaphor enters into contemporary thinking, links with a range of scholarship; it contributes to the important debates on the definitions of social meanings and political mediation of photo-journalism.

In conclusion, I will mention that it is open to debate how this art, as a culturally spatial representation, is being read today. The work was produced in the context of a 'neo-conservative' agenda of the G.W. Bush administration, which accentuated the necessity for a constant critical awareness in terms of a balance of political powers. In terms of the political content of this work, I suggest, the play of the invisible is a powerful trope, and the amalgam of images performs paradoxically. The vehicle of mechanical reproduction sets up a vacillation of iconological readings between the economic values within modernity and the social values of the violated community. The important role of ambiguity, paradox and irony embodied in Ken Gonzales-Day's art can contribute to a more open kind of language for the perception and understanding of society.

I will finish by quoting Guy Brett from his essay, 'Art and Freedom, or a Joke Amidst Shadows'. Speaking on *irony*, he writes;

"It can be used both to destabilize the excessively stable and established, and, to stabilize the unstable, arbitrary and chaotic"¹¹

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Ken Gonzales-Day (born 1964 in Santa Clara, California) is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Studio Art at Scripps College, California.

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(Images, courtesy of the artist).

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¹¹ Brett, Guy 'Art and Freedom, or a Joke Amidst Shadows' in *Carnival of Perception: Selected Writings on Art* (Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), London, 2004) p.255

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