



without sanctuary

At Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum, a wrenching exhibit on lynching helps a young man confront his family's past—and a reluctant community examine its feelings about race.

*By Jim Davidson
Photography by Lynn Johnson*

On the way to The Andy Warhol Museum to see the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit of lynching postcards and photographs, 15-year-old Matt Mayger was thinking about his family history in Georgia three generations ago. He knew his great-grandfather had been a Baptist minister and a pillar of the community in Athens, Savannah and Marietta. That much was apparent from the old photographs that had been passed down through the family. There was also talk that the Rev. Oscar Nash had been a grand wizard in the Ku Klux Klan in the 1910s—or so said Mayger's grandmother, the youngest of 14 children in the family. Before her death a few years ago, she had talked about witnessing a lynching as a little girl, and about her father's role in the Klan.

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Two high school students are transfixed by a graphic picture of a lynching victim, one of 98 postcard photographs in *Without Sanctuary*, an exhibit at Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum. A museum record 31,400 viewed the unflinching history of racial violence in America.

On that morning in October, Mayger was just one of the 60 students from Greater Latrobe Senior High School visiting the Warhol because they had volunteered to work on a project to combat racism. With the faces of his grandmother and great-grandfather imprinted on his mind, Mayger set about looking for evidence that the family stories were true.

Mayger walked solemnly past 98 postcard images showing the grisly spectacle of human beings who were whipped, beaten, stoned, stripped, gouged, burned, mutilated, shot and then hanged by their necks from trees, from lampposts, from bridge railings.

The great majority of the victims in the postcards are black men, their faces and bodies contorted in death. All around them, in many cases, are the beaming faces of white men and the occasional child, grinning at the camera to proclaim baldly the carnival atmosphere that so often accompanies the mob murders. Mayger examined one photograph after another until finally coming to the last postcard, where a familiar face stared back.

There, just above white block letters proclaiming “The End of Leo Frank, Hung by a Mob at Marietta, Ga., Aug 17, 1915,” was a square-jawed man with a brush mustache and fedora, standing nearly a head taller than the four other men gathered around Frank’s manacled and lifeless body. “He just kind of stuck out,” Mayger says, explaining how he linked the man with a mustache to a family photograph that shows his grandmother as a girl no older than five. In that image, datable to the early 1920s, Mayger’s great-grandfather is a tall man with the same square jaw and the same brush mustache, only a shade grayer than the one he wore the night Leo Frank was killed.

On that morning at the Warhol, Mayger and about 15 classmates filed into an adjoining room for a “dialogue” with two artist-educators trained by the Warhol to help viewers digest the exhibit. For nearly a half an hour he sat quietly as

others vented shock and other feelings they couldn’t begin to name. Finally, Mayger spoke up and began peeling the family onion, telling not only about his grandfather’s grand wizardry, but also about his father who “woke up” to the reality of racism while serving in Vietnam and afterward, moving to California where people mixed more freely with one another. His father had learned to respect all people, rejecting much of his Southern upbringing, and he had taught his son to do the same, Mayger explained.

And there it was. More than 86 years after the fact, a polite, cheerful teenager from Pennsylvania was implicating his great-grandfather in the killing of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory owner who had been railroaded and lynched following the killing of a young woman worker.

Mayger’s discovery—and the ongoing discussion that followed—was likely the most dramatic episode during the exhibit, yet it was not the only occasion for tears of anger and regret as dozens of school groups and thousands of visitors filed past the photographs. *Without Sanctuary* sparked a lot of candid discussion on the taboo subject of racial violence, and played a significant role in keeping the history alive.

For four months—September 22 through Martin Luther King Day, including a three-week extension—*Without Sanctuary* haunted the sixth-floor gallery of the North Side museum, breaking attendance records and broadening public perception of the Warhol’s mission as a contemporary art museum that does not shrink from heavy issues and hard questions. With broad support from foundations, agencies, schools, community groups and individual artists, *Without Sanctuary* served as a catalyst for a civic dialogue about race in a setting that was civil and even—some sophisticated museum-goers might say—artistic. The horrific images prompted the kind of talk usually reserved for front porches in segregated neighborhoods. *Without Sanctuary* trampled the polite boundaries of public discourse on race. On its good days—and there were many—the exhibit provoked some heart-to-heart talks, most of them long overdue.



Mayger had known his late grandmother, who lived on the family homestead in Latrobe during the last decades of her life. She told the family about lynchings she had seen as a little girl, so “it wouldn’t have been surprising to see her in the photographs. I knew she had witnessed them,” Mayger said. After her death, when the family thumbed through her papers, they wondered what they would find. But like most people in most families, his grandmother did not preserve any evidence, photographic or otherwise, of events later to be judged horrific and shameful. His own father didn’t go into much detail about the family’s history—“He wants to forget more than anyone,” Mayger says. As a result, he says, “I had never really given it much thought.”

The visit to the museum not only filled in missing details about the past, but brought the dilemma of racism into the present. Mayger, an easygoing student who can joke about his grades in sophomore English, was presented with an opportunity to hear a Jewish classmate and an African-American classmate—one of three or four at the high school—speak from the heart about racism. Mayger responded in kind.

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Janet Sarbaugh Director, Arts & Culture Program, The Heinz Endowments

“We talked about how you can stop it, even though there’s a pattern,” he remembers.

“We talked about how Matt was breaking a cycle,” remembers his English teacher, Allison Duda, who accompanied the students to the Warhol and also had helped to organize the anti-racism group, Activists for Community Tolerance. “He expressed ‘I’m not this way. I’m not like my great-grandfather.’” And that was the message, she says, that he carried 45 miles back to Latrobe and to the majority of his classmates who hadn’t joined the racism project and weren’t on the Warhol field trip.

The Warhol itself is in the refurbished Volkwein Music Building on Pittsburgh’s North Side, a few blocks from the scrap metal yard operated by the artist’s brother, Paul Warhola, under the authentic family name. In fact, the Warhol is positioned at an intersection of old and new. There are immigrant eastern European, Irish and African-American neighborhoods. And there is the exquisitely designed PNC Park opening up onto the Allegheny River, a North Shore Park, the new football stadium known as Heinz Field and The Carnegie Science

Many museum-goers were so concerned about their reaction to the grisly lynching photographs that they preferred to view the exhibit alone.



Center. The Warhol, competing in such grand company, gained some new heft by hosting *Without Sanctuary*. The museum already had captured the sense of adolescent whimsy that suffused Pop Art and Andy’s celebrated New York studio, the Factory. Among the permanent exhibits are such items as Warhol’s fanciful drawings of shoes that he completed in his early days as a graphic illustrator, and temporary exhibits that have chronicled the artist’s shopping sprees and the many permutations of celebrity culture, including the upcoming exhibit of artwork from record album covers.

Slapping *Without Sanctuary* on top of all the frivolity was like slapping stories of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the cover of Andy’s old celebrity-worshipping *Interview* magazine. There’s plenty of evidence to suggest *Without Sanctuary* would have made him uncomfortable if he had been running his own museum. While the exhibit certainly attained the shock value the artist was famous for, the lynching photographs carry historical weight he might have been afraid to shoulder. For all of his New York pretentiousness, Andy was a North Sider at the core: eyes-on-the-ground shy and slow to open up to strangers. *Without Sanctuary* came barreling into a neighborhood where generations—both black and white—embraced a “let’s not go there” policy in discussing race relations.

Given its history and surroundings, the Warhol could not have made the leap to a *Without Sanctuary* without strong public support. Some of that came with civic foundation imprimaturs, from The Ford Foundation’s Animating Democracy Initiative, The Heinz Endowments, and the Jewish Healthcare, Lannan, Grable, and Three Rivers Community Foundations. About \$2.5 million in Heinz Endowments support went

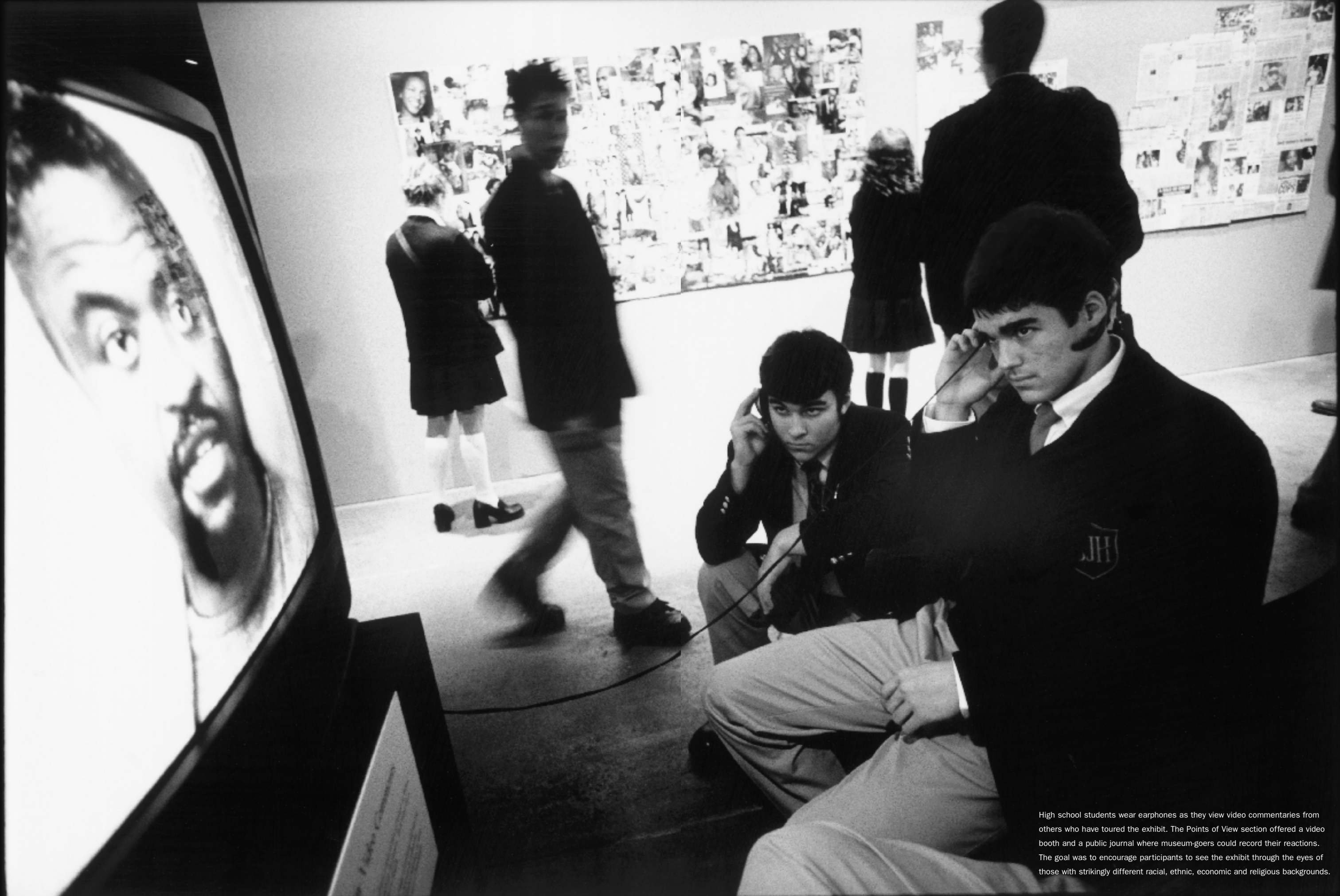
into the creation of the Warhol from 1992 through 1994, and the Heinz philanthropies have continued to support the mission of the museum. A \$25,000 grant from the Vira I. Heinz Endowment enabled the Warhol to document all aspects of the exhibit, and partially underwrote the cost of free Tuesday

admissions during the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit. The Warhol staff showed bold initiative, too, in knocking on the doors of African-American and white power centers and coaxing their participation.

“The Warhol Museum does what cultural institutions are supposed to do,” says Janet Sarbaugh, director of The Heinz Endowments’ Arts & Culture Program. “It challenges us and makes us think. It evokes all sorts of conflicting emotions and gives us a safe place to discuss all sorts of complex issues.”

Sarbaugh calls the Warhol “a 20th- and 21st-century iteration of the Heinz family’s long-standing support of the Carnegie Museums,” which dates back to the 1890s. Senator John Heinz and Teresa Heinz “championed the idea of bringing the Warhol to Pittsburgh and of associating it with the Carnegie,” Sarbaugh says. “They grasped intuitively why it was important on so many levels. It was right in terms of the Andy Warhol connection to Pittsburgh. It was right in terms of economic development and tourism. It was right in terms of the North Side neighborhood and it was right in terms of an institution that represented not only Andy Warhol but also American pop culture. I believe that Teresa Heinz still sees that as one of the most important functions of the Warhol—representing popular culture and interpreting it expansively and creatively.”

Sarbaugh acknowledges that a Pittsburgh museum devoted to one artist seemed risky in the early 1990s. With arts dollars stretched tight, there were voices saying the city didn’t need another major cultural institution. But Senator Heinz, she says, “saw the value and stuck with it,” and that decision has been vindicated under director Tom Sokolowski.



High school students wear earphones as they view video commentaries from others who have toured the exhibit. The Points of View section offered a video booth and a public journal where museum-goers could record their reactions. The goal was to encourage participants to see the exhibit through the eyes of those with strikingly different racial, ethnic, economic and religious backgrounds.

Top: Students listen to a classmate's emotional reaction to the exhibit.
Below: Greater Latrobe High School student Matt Mayger becomes a lightning rod for class discussions after discovering his great-grandfather posing proudly next to the body of a lynching victim in one of the photographs. For the 15-year-old Mayger, the historical record has become part of his family record.



often with smiles on their faces. “Lynching is not a tale of spontaneous rage or lower-class criminality or night riders,” Allen said. “It’s always, and most clearly and simply, savage murder on a savage’s level.” In some photographs, children take their lead from the adult men around them and pose proudly. Women are prominent in photographs from such places as Marion, Indiana; Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and Okemah, Oklahoma. The Okemah image shows dozens of men and women standing on the bridge from which Laura Nelson and her 14-year-old son, L.W. Nelson, have been hanged.

CAPTURING THE EXHIBIT

Last year, Sokolowski explained to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that *Without Sanctuary* was arriving in the right place at the right time. “It’s a good way to bring heightened awareness of race to Pittsburgh, where race issues have not been so openly discussed.”

“The programming has been exactly right, and it will continue to put the museum on the map,” Sarbaugh says. “*Without Sanctuary* shows they can take on controversial subjects with sensitivity and without pulling punches. This gives them permission to attempt even more as they continue to explore popular culture.”

James Allen, the Atlanta antiques dealer and self-described “picker” who combed flea markets and ephemera auctions to purchase the *Without Sanctuary* postcards, said at the Warhol opening on September 22 that he was “thrilled to see what is happening here,” with an exhibit that is patently too controversial or too disturbing for most museums to consider mounting. The Warhol is the third place it has been shown, following exhibits last year at the tiny Roth Horowitz Gallery in Manhattan and then at the New York Historical Society. *Without Sanctuary* will open this spring at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Atlanta, a downtown facility maintained by the National Park Service, but to date there have been no other engagements.

The core of *Without Sanctuary* is the picture postcard collection by Allen, who is white. “This was an American story that needed to be told,” he said at the Warhol opening, recalling how the mother of 14-year-old Emmett Till had, in 1955, demanded an open casket for her son, “putting a face on race hatred and race murder for all to see.”

The postcards, Allen learned, were frequently disseminated as lynching mementos by photographers who set up portable studios at lynching sites. The postcards passed from hand to hand and were allowed in the U.S. mail until 1908. Allen found the photographs in obscure corners of white America, locked in trunks and thumbtacked to service station walls. The postcards show graphic images of hangings and other vigilante killings, all of which are considered lynchings. The postcards in the exhibit stretch across more than a half-century, from 1878 to 1935. The collection preserves images from lynchings in at least 18 states, including West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and California. Most of the apparent killers are not hooded vigilantes and Klansmen, but proud white men who are staring straight into the camera,

The same question arose repeatedly—“Why the Warhol?” Or, as Sokolowski remembers it, “What does the Warhol Museum have to do with issues of race?” His reply was direct: “Where else in town would it be done?” As a young museum, he explains, the Warhol could host an exhibit that did not automatically presume the curators knew more than the audience about the subject at hand.

In effect, the museum was repositioning itself. From the beginning, The Andy Warhol Museum has known who it was—a part of the Carnegie that happened to have a different focus and happened to be on the North Side, not in Oakland. Today Sokolowski is delighted that the wider Pittsburgh community grasped that *Without Sanctuary* was exactly what a contemporary art museum *should* be doing. “Once we showed people we were not doing this exhibit in a patriarchal way, telling them to take it or leave it, they responded. And now people are saying ‘Why *not* the Warhol?’”

Without Sanctuary opened the week after the World Trade Center attacks, hardly an opportune time for showing graphic

images of man’s inhumanity to man. Sokolowski feared the steady drumbeat of terrorist news would send museum patrons running for Monet waterlilies or Norman Rockwell family scenes, but that didn’t happen.

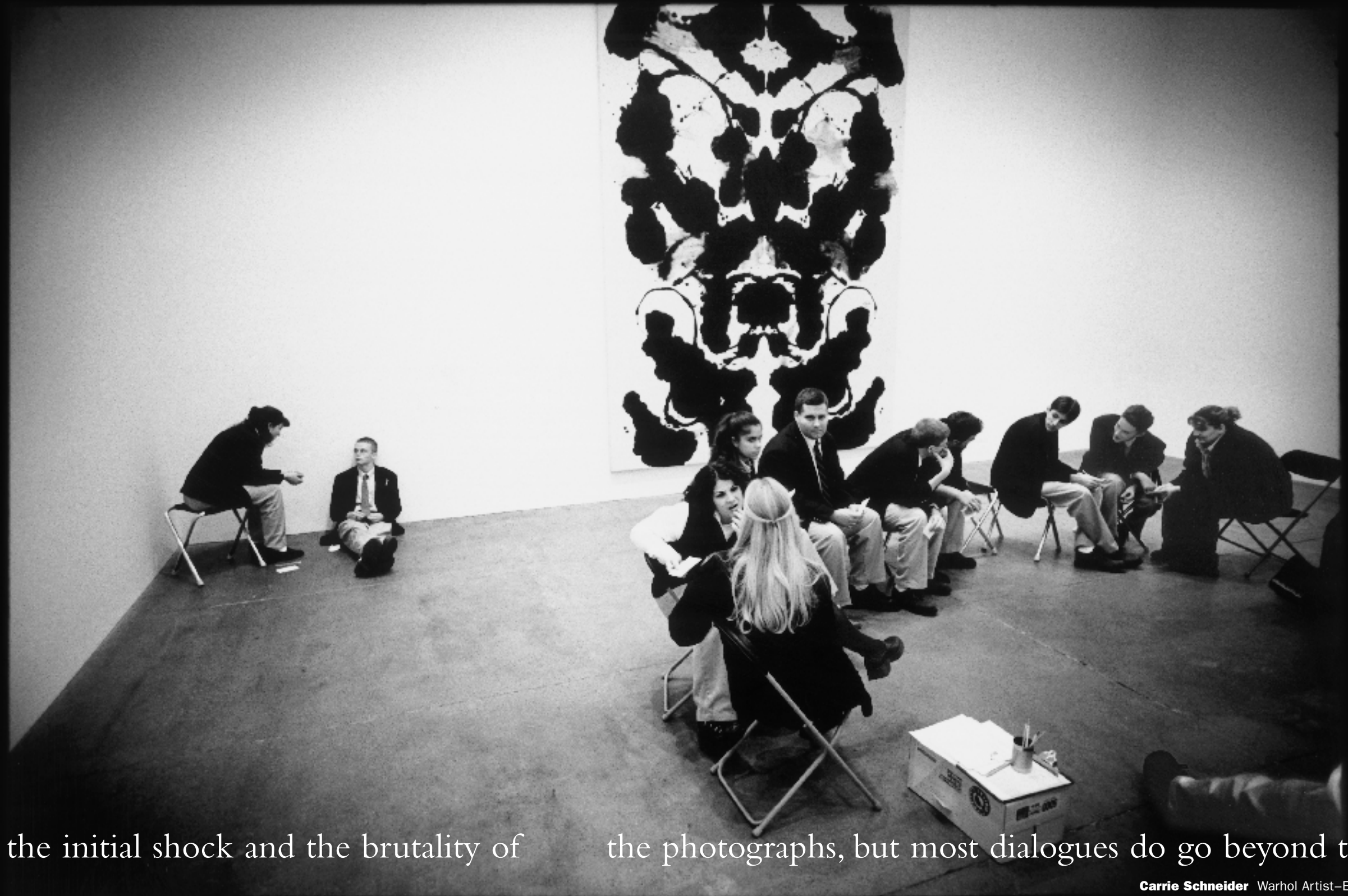
“Here’s a show that’s sober, that’s disturbing, that’s not a pleasant experience, and people come to it. One of the most gratifying things is to show that the public isn’t a bunch of dullards. People want to think. They don’t want pablum.”

Sokolowski adds, “People really have used the experience in an expansive way to talk about other events.”

OPENING HEARTS AND MINDS

Weeks before the exhibit came to town, the Warhol’s outreach education staff worked to enlist community support for *Without Sanctuary*, partly through formation of a broad-based community advisory committee. The work paid off on opening day—Saturday, September 22—when as many as a thousand

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“It’s hard to get past the initial shock and the brutality of the photographs, but most dialogues do go beyond that.”

Carrie Schneider Warhol Artist-Educator

Students break into pairs to discuss their thoughts on racism as part of a dialogue session connected to the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit. Activities in the sessions included writing out phrases connected to racist behavior. Students also challenge one another in developing practical solutions to acts of racism.



Warhol Museum artist-educator Sarah Williams, center, and Latrobe Area High School students listen as a classmate makes a point about generational inheritance of racist behaviors and how family experiences prove that it can be stopped.

visitors circulated through a morning-to-night shindig that rocked the rafters for as long as the voices of the Warhol Choir filled the entrance lounge.

“For me, the most telling reaction was from young people,” says Lavera Brown, executive director of the Pittsburgh NAACP. The “gray hairs” in her generation, she says, heard stories about lynching and racial violence from their extended families, but her own children, raised in a more mobile society, have not heard the same stories from their grandparents.

Still, Brown says, some African-Americans initially questioned the wisdom of an exhibit about lynching. “Some people were there when the hoses and dogs were out, and they said, ‘Do I have to put myself through this pain again?’ I read them the letter I sent, commending the Warhol for putting this on. I’m of the firm belief that change will not occur if we do not have white allies along with people of color.”

Brown concluded that the Warhol was the right place to broach the subject. “I probably would not have supported the exhibit as strongly as I did if it had been in an African-American museum.” It’s necessary, she says, for the discussion to take place not in a white neighborhood or a black neighborhood, but in a place where all will feel welcome.

Terry Miller, deputy director of the Institute of Politics at the University of Pittsburgh, worked hard to organize a dialogue that was to involve political, corporate and religious leaders. But with only one commitment from the leader of a major institution—Bishop Donald Wuerl of the Catholic Diocese—the Warhol had to call off the event. “I’m sorry it didn’t happen,” Miller says, “but that doesn’t mean it’s off the table.”

Brown served on the community advisory committee that was largely thwarted in its efforts to bring elected officials and corporate movers and shakers to the exhibit. “It would be criminal if this exhibit went away and left no continuing impact in this community,” she says. Mentioning the YWCA’s study circles about race as well as programs of the National Council of Christians and Jews, Brown says, “In terms of follow-up plans, we need to strongly encourage faith-based organizations to have continuing discussions.”

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

“**W**hat you’re doing is hard. You’re facilitating a dialogue on race,” Sherry Cottom is telling the group. Cottom has a long title—trainer/facilitator at the Center for Race Relations and Anti-Racism Training at the YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh—and on this Friday morning she’s sitting at a table in a windowless room at the Warhol, bringing a measure of good sense and comfort to about 15 artist-educators. A mixture of staff and contract workers, all with backgrounds as artists, they are the front-line troops of the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit. They run the “dialogues”—the 45-minute groups in which students or ordinary visitors have an opportunity to discuss the devastating images they’ve just seen.

The hitch is that the images are devastating for the artist-educators, too, and keeping the dialogue on track is doubly difficult. There are ground rules to enforce, known officially as the “dialogue agreement.” Participants are asked to use “I” statements and speak from their own perspectives; to respect one another’s experiences, feelings and points of view; to share airtime; and to listen to one another. But there’s no rule about keeping the artist-educator from feeling the pain that goes with this particular territory. “I don’t know if I can do this,” one artist-educator tells the group. “In a professional environment, you can’t sob in your office. But I have.” Another talks about fears the show is taking over her life and her head, and yet another says, “I don’t want to go into the gallery and start wailing my head off.”

Cottom has led some of the *Without Sanctuary* dialogue sessions, so she knows whereof she speaks. On this Friday morning she praises the artist-educators for the good work they’re doing. She reassures them about feeling upset. She delivers practical advice about keeping the dialogues on track, and for dealing with 15-year-olds who make insensitive statements about the ever-hazardous topic of race, confidently assuming they know what “some people” or “those people”

think. To explain issues of racism to a young white audience, Cottom suggests using the analogy of left-handed people trying to cope with a right-handed world. “As a right-handed person,” she explains, “you don’t know there’s a problem.”

Sarah Williams, an artist–educator who graduated from Seton Hill College in 2000, has been moved and surprised by what people have said. The best dialogues, she says, happen when people seem to forget where they are. “They drop ‘I’m-in-a-museum’ and start telling stories about their experiences with racism.” Williams has heard stories about segregated buses, and she’s heard children talking about their parents’ interracial marriages. “For some people, the dialogue has become a forum for their storytelling. When that happens, it’s an incredible thing.”

Cottom has been drawn to the work from the painful lynching stories passed down from generation to generation in her family. But at the exhibit’s halfway point, she had yet to view it. “I’m not ready or willing to let the public see my emotions, and they’re not going to close down the exhibit just so I can walk through it myself,” she said in mid-December.

SINKING IN

After Matt Mayger discovered his great-grandfather’s photograph in *Without Sanctuary*, many of his classmates were shocked and openly skeptical about his disclosure. “They were just kind of like, whoa—they didn’t expect something like that,” Mayger remembers. Suddenly lynching was not just something abstract and distant. Its heritage reached even into a predominantly white suburban community many miles from the real horrors inflicted upon African-Americans. On that October morning at the museum, Mayger spoke of his own shame about his family’s racist past—a point he amplified in a story in the high school

magazine, *Serendipity*—while an African-American student said she felt proud that her people had survived the decades of lynching. The word quickly spread through the group from Latrobe. “By the end of the day, it had gotten around to all 60 kids,” Mayger said. “It got distorted. By the end of the day, it was my dad in the picture.”

Mayger’s vindication came a week later in Allison Duda’s sophomore English class. Mayger passed around the family photograph, along with a copy of the Frank lynching photograph that he had downloaded from the *Without Sanctuary* web site. “At first, no one really believed me. But when I brought in the picture, what can you say? I had photographic evidence,” Mayger said. Speaking to students who had not seen the exhibit and to a few who had, he again shared the story of his great-grandfather’s Klan activity and held up his father as an example of “how you can stop it.” His father was willing to break with his own family to break the cycle, Mayger said. Now, he told his classmates, here he is, a member of the Mayger clan, moving in the opposite direction and helping to found Activists for Community Tolerance.

“I remember getting chills at that moment in the class,” Duda recalls. “The other students respected him for what he was saying.”

When Mayger was finished, one of his friends started clapping. It was an awkward situation at first, the sound of one person clapping from the back of the room. For a moment, he was alone. Then another started up and then another until the room was filled with the powerful, celebratory sound of a classroom full of students thunderously clapping. *h*

From the collection of James Allen



The great-grandfather of Latrobe Area High School student Matt Mayger, far right, mustached and sporting a wide-brimmed hat, poses prominently near the body of lynching victim Leo Frank in this 1915 photograph.

At the Hands of Persons Unknown

The August 1915 lynching of Leo Frank carries its own local significance for a Latrobe family’s coming to terms with racist ancestors unearthed in The Andy Warhol Museum’s *Without Sanctuary* exhibit on lynching. But the death of Frank, a white, Jewish New Yorker, is viewed ironically as a pivotal case in the long history of brutal murders whose victims were overwhelmingly African-American.

In the recently published *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, a full and devastating history of lynching in America, author Philip Dray describes the Frank case as “...one of the great national criminal dramas, on a par with the Lizzie Borden trial, the Lindbergh kidnapping, and the O.J. Simpson case.” Frank, a Cornell graduate in mechanical engineering, sent to Atlanta to manage his uncle’s pencil manufacturing plant, was charged in the strangulation killing of Mary Phagan, a 13-year-old worker at the factory.

Frank was arrested on shoddy evidence and sloppy police work. He was eventually convicted in a trial influenced by unruly mobs of spectators. The case, writes Dray, “was like a powerful searchlight illuminating several themes then current in the life of the South—the resistance to change as represented by a Northern capitalist, a strain of anti-Semitism that had evolved out of the Populist distrust of the urban North and ... the continuing will to rely on sensationalism and mob intimidation, including lynching, to enforce regional codes of justice.”

The chief witness against Frank, a factory janitor named Jim Conley, also turned out to be the likely killer. Conley, an African-American, testified that Frank had killed Phagan and ordered Conley to help him burn the body and write two misleading notes about the crime. This played directly to the jury’s twin prejudices, Dray observes—that Frank, as a Yankee Jew, would be unable to resist taking advantage of the factory’s female workers ... and that Conley, as a black man, would be incapable of devising so sinister a plot without a white man’s guidance.”

The Frank case became a national cause celebre, with newspaper editorials, million-signature petitions and state resolutions demanding Frank’s release. The national uproar, Dray points out, angered many blacks, who “resented the ease with which the cause of an unjustly accused white man marshaled such tremendous public sympathy and concern.” It also proved to be a blunt lesson for black anti-lynching activists about the lack of federal government power in the South.

Less than two months after the courageous governor, John M. Slaton, judged the trial a travesty of justice and commuted Frank’s sentence, vigilantes calling themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan, stormed the jail, grabbed Frank and drove him to the outskirts of Marietta where he was hanged from a tree. That group spurred the reinvention of the Reconstruction-era nightriders as the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan who became famous for their white-hooded costumes, cross burnings and murderous violence through the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s and beyond.