

Hart Island by Melinda Hunt and Joel Sternfeld: Suspending a Sepulchral Timeline

Helena Lamouliatte-Schmitt

Introduction

New York-based photographer, Joel Sternfeld,¹ and, visual artist, Melinda Hunt, began working on Hart Island in 1991, and collaborated on a book documenting the site, simply entitled *Hart Island*, published in 1998.²

Hart Island is located in the Bronx, in the Long Island Sound.³ Its function as a burial ground started during the American Civil War, when twenty Union Army soldiers were inhumated there (see the plate *A wall made of river stones, Cemetery for Union Soldiers, November 1991*). The island was bought by New York City in 1869, and approximately half of the island's surface became a 'potter's field' or public burial ground.⁴ Over a century and a half, more than one million people (New Yorkers who were too poor to afford a private burial or whose bodies were unidentified or unclaimed at the time of death⁵) have been buried in unmarked graves on the island. These deaths were caused by past epidemics like tuberculosis, the 1918 flu⁶ and the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s and 1990s, which killed more than 100,000 people in New York. It is the largest mass grave in the United States. At least 1,000 bodies are buried on the island a year.

For decades, the New York City Department of Correction (DoC) has managed the island and brought incarcerated workers from Rikers Island to carry out public burials.⁷ The site isn't open

¹ See [Joel Sternfeld's website](#).

² Excerpts from the book can be accessed through the Media Gallery photography page of the [Hart Island Project](#) website or on the artist's website.

³ The island is estimated to be between 101 acres (41 ha) and 131 acres (53 ha), according to various sources.

⁴ It has also been used as an ecclesiastical jurisdiction, a hospital for women, an insane asylum, a jail, a boys' reformatory, a rehab center and even a Nike missile silo (a Cold war anti-aircraft missile system).

⁵ For further information, see "The Transformation of Hart Island" by Daniel A. Gross.

⁶ During the 1918 flu, over 30,000 deaths were recorded in the city.

⁷ Under a 2019 law, the D.O.C. must hand over control of the island to the Parks Department by July, 2021. Although it continues to manage the island and the burials that take place there, the D.O.C. stopped using incarcerated workers to bury the dead.

to the public, but the island can be accessed by scheduling a visit organized by the DoC. It is estimated that one million people are interred across the island's hundred-plus acres (nationalgeographic.com), among whom deceased newborns and infants (newyorker.com).

The coronavirus epidemic once again shed light on this bleak and forlorn place which is "like a shadow of New York City," according to Justin von Bujdoss, the cemetery's chaplain (Hennigan time.com). As many as one-tenth of the 30,793 coronavirus victims recorded in the city as of 9 June 2021 may be buried on Hart Island, according to a *New York Times* database (nytimes.com).

Throughout the project, both artists invite viewers to question their relationship to death and memory, as well as time perception. Stanley Cavell underlines the eerie hold that the photographic medium has on our consciousness, when we're in the position of Roland Barthes's "spectators":

We might say that we do not know how to think of the connection between a photograph and what it is a photograph of. The image is not a likeness, it is not exactly a replica, or a relic, or a shadow, or an apparition either, though all of these natural candidates share a striking feature with photographs—an aura or history of magic surrounding them (17-18).

Melinda Hunt's and Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* ambitious collaborative artwork shows how the interplay between photography and sculptural installations can further Cavell's interrogations about the nature and functions of the photographic image. The artists chose two different yet complementary perspectives in the Hart Island project. Hunt's installations combine extensive archival research material with a selection of Joel Sternfeld's photographs and explore the complex relationship between art, memory and history. Sternfeld's images, as is often the case with his published photographic series,⁸ are displayed with matter-of-fact titles (short description, location, date), thus giving more room to viewers' perception and personal interpretation of his complex poetic vision.

The Hart Island series, a project that was originally meant to shed light on the invisibilization of death in our contemporary societies raises two fundamental questions. Firstly, it seems necessary to examine the overtly social and political commitments of Hunt's installations in the light of Sternfeld's extremely sophisticated images based on lifelong aesthetic concerns. As a matter of fact, the photographer is known for referring to himself as a "landscapist,"⁹ and in *Landscapes after Ruskin*, he defines landscape as "a visualization of consciousness" (Gumpert

⁸ In *Oxbow Archive*, for example, the photographs have no titles, and only dates are indicated.

⁹ In her introduction to *Landscapes after Ruskin*, Lynn Gumpert stresses Sternfeld's interest for the genre, as well as his taste for nineteenth-century philosophy, art and literature (7).

13). We will thus wonder whether aesthetics can contribute or diminish the political impact of the Hart Island project.

Secondly, the project also raises fundamental questions about our relation to memory and time: the remembrance of the past through various visual media, the present and its overwhelming quantity of de-hierarchized, and sometimes instantly lost, visual information, and the future, uncoiling its fateful timeline. Contrary to John Berger's statement in "Uses of Photography," photographs don't "serve in the place" of memory in our contemporary societies (50), but rather deconstruct the process of remembrance, turning it into fragmented narratives. Hunt's and Sternfeld's Hart Island project would thus seem to epitomize the nonlinear and multi-faceted temporality of the Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*, or "time filled by the presence of the now" (*Illuminations* 205).

Project framework

Melinda Hunt¹⁰ is also the director of The Hart Island Project,¹¹ whose mission is to provide visibility and access to New York City's public cemetery including current burial records and maps obtained through New York State Freedom of Information Law. The Project maintains a database of public burial records from 1980 to the present¹².

Melinda Hunt and Joel Sternfeld's collaboration started in 1991¹³ on the centennial of Jacob Riis's first photographs of the potter's field (Fig.1).

¹⁰ For more information on Melinda Hunt, see Keene (155).

¹¹ The Hart Island Project is a nonprofit organization identifying and tracking burials on the island.

¹² In 2019, as a direct result of efforts by [The Hart Island Project](#), the New York City Council transferred jurisdiction of Hart Island from the Department of Correction to the Department of Parks and Recreation.

In 2021, The Hart Island Project launched a campaign to designate Hart Island a National Monument along with a COVID-19 Initiative that includes new tools added to Traveling Cloud Museum for location-based storytelling about people buried during the epidemic in New York City.

¹³ Their work led to several exhibitions and public art projects in New York and Europe, a dance and theater production at Lincoln Center, as well as the book of photographs, *Hart Island*, published in 1998.



Fig.1. Jacob A. Riis, 'The Potter's Field, the Common Trench' (1890), albumen print. Museum of the City of New York.

Riis was one of the first American photographers to use the photographic image as a form of social documentary and as an instrument for social change¹⁴ (Orvell 73). While a political agenda is certainly one of the underlying elements of Hunt and Sternfeld's project, their joint artistic contribution goes far beyond documentary photography—whose main objective is to capture and preserve elements of history, life, and culture in a given place and time—and raises ontological questions. In "The Nature of Hart Island," Melinda Hunt shares her feelings about the project: "From November 1991 to December 1993, Joel and I traveled with the prisoners and the morgue truck on a small ferry from City Island to Hart Island. We made the journey once or twice each month to capture the seasonal changes. Each time, it seemed like we were crossing the river Styx" (25).

The Hart Island Project's exhibitions showed an interplay of photography and sculptural installations accompanied by Melinda Hunt's extensive research material. This visual framework is reproduced in the book, which falls into two parts. In the first part, we can see

¹⁴ Orvell also points out the fact that Jacob Riis's works may seem problematic today and cannot be separated from a time when "inherent assumptions of moral and aesthetic superiority" (73) prevailed.

reproductions of Hunt's installations, while Sternfeld's color photographs are displayed in the second part.

Melinda Hunt's artistic installations frame ten color photographs among Sternfeld's forty-eight images of the site, with newspaper clippings, burial records, historical prison documents, visitors' statements, copies of death certificates, and handwritten notes of the prisoners who had to bury the unknown dead. Thanks to the preface of *Hart Island*, we can grasp the fact that Hunt used her artwork as a form of catharsis to express her uneasiness about the place: "Perhaps it is the abstraction of human lives into trench numbers and statistics that is most disturbing about the potter's field" (25).

The second part of the book displays forty-eight meticulously composed color photographs by Sternfeld. As often with Sternfeld's published photographic series, the layout follows a very specific pattern to compensate for the fact that the peritext is pared down to titles (in *Oxbow Archive* there are even no titles, only dates). To begin with, the images are set in context. First, we can see an establishing shot, a view from the south of the island towards City Island and Manhattan, followed by a double-page photograph of the shoreline facing Long Island Sound (Fig.2).



Fig.2. Joel Sternfeld. *Shoreline of Hart Island facing Long Island Sound*, November 1991.
© Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

Then thematic content unfolds, the two main subjects being inmates and burials. The work camp in the third photograph evokes the "offenders", while the fourth image shows a burial (Fig.3).



Fig.3. Joel Sternfeld. *A burial, December 1991*. © Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

After giving a broad overview of the themes, the book delves into subject specific images. It ends with the second double-page photograph in the volume, an extreme long shot, entitled *Vandalized grave markers, the Carriage House is seen in the distance, November 1992* (Fig.4), broadening format and perspective, like a visual epilogue.



Fig.4. Joel Sternfeld. *Vandalized grave markers, the Carriage House is seen in the distance, November 1992*. © Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

The endless cycles of nature

The topos of cycles in nature is paramount in Sternfeld's work. As mentioned earlier, the photographs were taken over the course of two years (between October 1991 and November 1992)—except for two of them, *Ruins of the warden's house* taken in May 1993 and the picture of Vicky Pavia next to her baby's grave taken much later, during a special visit in March 1994. However, the book layout doesn't follow a strict chronological order. The first picture, *Looking South Towards City Island and Manhattan from Hart Island, November 1992*, and the last one, *Vandalized grave markers, the Carriage House is seen in the distance, November 1992* (Fig.4), were both taken in November 1992.

The photographs are organized according to seasonal cycles and not chronology: pictures 1-21 were all taken between the months of September and December (autumn), pictures 22-33, between February and March (winter), pictures 34-44, between April and June (spring). Let us add that in each sub-series, the pictures date back indifferently to 1991 or 1992.

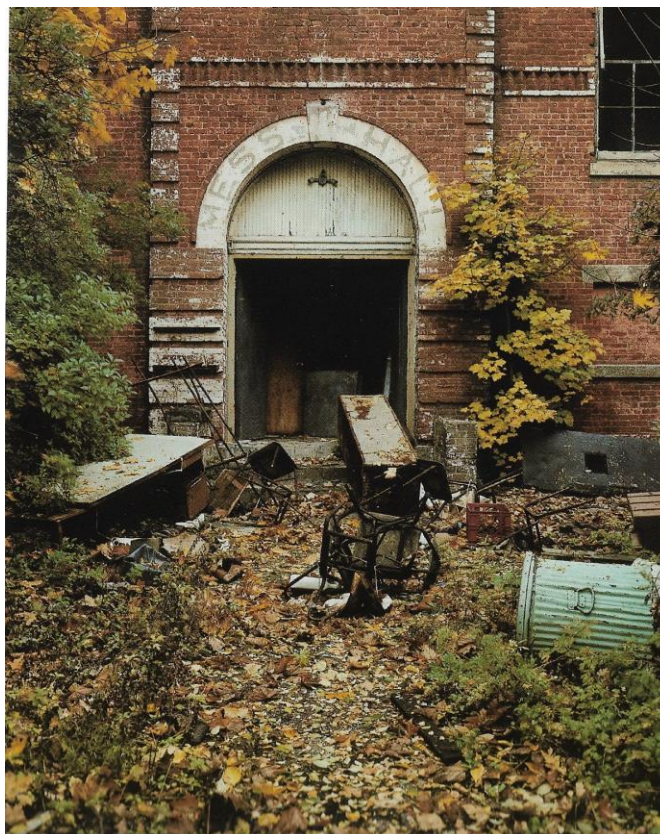


Fig.5. Joel Sternfeld. *Mess Hall, Boys' Workhouse*, October 1991. © Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

The first 20 pictures were all taken in autumn, when nature's cycles slow down. From a metaphorical perspective, it evokes a melancholy time of the year, which is translated visually in the first four pictures (see Fig.2 and Fig.4) through the yellowing leaves on trees, brownish hues, muddy grounds, a grey sky and sometimes foggy atmosphere. The bleak mood is further emphasized by the choice of subject matter: dilapidated buildings (*Butcher shop, Boy's Workhouse, November 1992*), threatening rusty old tools (*Receptacles for knives, butcher shop, Boy's Workhouse, November 1992*), useless junk scattered on the ground (Fig.5. *Mess Hall, Boys' Workhouse, October 1991*) burial implements (*Burial implements being stored in the workhouse shower room, November 1992*) or religious artefacts (*A statue with offerings left by prisoners, December 1991*). Subject matter echoes the passing of time (months and dates) from a visual perspective (rust, decay, dereliction), and a symbolic perspective with multiple metonymic references to death (knives, objects associated with burials, and actual graves and coffins). We can sense Sternfeld's lifelong interest in transcendentalism, which was made manifest in another photographic series, *Oxbow Archive* (2008),¹⁵ in which he quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson: "To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again" (Sternfeld, *Oxbow*).

Sternfeld's elaborate aesthetic framework, combined with the serial mode of representation emphasizes the transience of human presence on earth, of which only traces are left. All the images show the resilience of nature as opposed to the fleeting moments that we call our human lives. Sternfeld's images help us experience the steady but unrelenting flow of natural seasons and cycles. We can also notice how the vital energy of spring transcends the traces of human death that have been left behind. *Geese nesting on Cemetery Hill, April 1992* shows Egyptian geese nesting among grave markers and tender green foliage, grass and plants sprouting after the snow depicted in *Looking northeast from Cemetery Hill toward Long Island Sound after a snowfall, February 1993* has melted away.

Nature seems to be depicted in the process of reclaiming the dead and appropriating the few scattered remnants of their bodies and their past lives. We can see bones resurfacing in *Erosion reveals ancient graves on the beach of Cemetery Hill, June 1992*, old shoes scattered on the ground in *Shoes manufactured on Hart Island during the Phoenix House period, November 1991*, disused bleachers in *Bleachers from Ebbets Field donated to the Hart Island Wildcats*

¹⁵ Between July 2005 and March 2007, Joel Sternfeld took a series of 77 photographs of a place called the East Meadows, located on the East side of the bend of the Connecticut River, called "The Oxbow," which were reproduced in a book entitled *Oxbow Archive*, published in 2008. For more information on this other project, see Lamouliatte-Schmitt, "The American Landscape: from an Ideological to an Ecological Object in Oxbow Archive by Joel Sternfeld."

in 1960, November 1991, and also grave markers on seven photographs.¹⁶ The online exhibition archive of the Museum for Sepulchral Culture points out that: “The photographs, carefully composed by Sternfeld, show how nature threatens to swallow up the past” (sepulkralmuseum.de).

The photograph as (re)constructed memory

For Melinda Hunt, who was born in Canada, working with Sternfeld was a way to access more specific elements of American culture that she felt she might lack: “To balance my perspective as an outsider, I invited Joel Sternfeld to collaborate bringing his deep understanding of the American landscape and its people” (20). The way Melinda Hunt juxtaposes Sternfeld’s hypnotic photographs with archival material in her installations is a way to unearth the radical context of his images and reveal their political subtext. For instance, she chose to frame Sternfeld’s *Laundry building of the Boys’ Workhouse, 1991* with historic newspapers articles about Hart Island (in *Laundry building from the Hart Island Reformatory, 1992*).¹⁷

When taken on its own, without the clippings, *Laundry building of the Boys’ Workhouse, 1991* carries on with the tradition of architectural paintings and photographs, reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s *House by the Railroad, 1925* or Charles Sheeler’s *Bucks County Barn, 1915*. In the three instances, the main focus is the architectural object, whose massive silhouette standing out from a rather neutral background—a whitish sky for both Sternfeld and Sheeler, and a more romantic early morning or late afternoon glow for Hopper—is magnified by foreground elements (grass and bushes or the railroad itself) creating a visual barrier that deepens perspective. The photographs and the painting use high contrast between dark and light tones, black windows strongly contrasting with overexposed white facades in Sheeler’s photograph or faded reddish brick walls in Sternfeld’s, while Hopper’s house shows windows with yellowish drawn shades or half-drawn shades opening onto dark holes, slightly softened

¹⁶ See for instance: Grave of the first New York City child to die of AIDS and be buried on Hart Island, March 1992, or Looking northeast from Cemetery Hill toward Long Island Sound after a snowfall, February 1993, or Fragment of a grave marker near Potter’s Field, June 1992, or Cemetery Hill, June 1992.

¹⁷ During the Civil War, a carriage house was built close to the beach (Fig.4), where supplies were stocked for Union and Confederate troops. This building (the original one was rebuilt in 1910) was later used as a morgue.¹⁷ Then, in the late 19th century, Hart Island became the location of a boys’ workhouse (Fig.5), which was an extension of the prison and almshouse on Blackwell Island.¹⁷ In 1905, Hart Island housed a reformatory for “vicious boys”¹⁷ (nationalgeographic.co.uk). Finally, the New York City Department of Correction (which still runs the island) reopened Hart Island as a prison from the end of the Second World War¹⁷ to 1966. After the prison closed in 1967, the buildings were turned into a drug rehabilitation center (called Phoenix House) which grew into a settlement of 350 residents.

by stucco moldings. The gaping or curtained windows block the viewer's gaze, which strengthens the emphasis on architectural shapes and prevents all attempts to construct a narrative about past or present inhabitants. The historic news clippings provided by Hunt both frame and expand potential narrative threads about the building's former functions.

Hunt uses the same strategy in another series of installations through which she creates interactions between different eras (past buildings, objects or places and documents associated with Sternfeld's more recent photographs). For example, the quite abstract picture entitled *Shoes manufactured on Hart Island during the Phoenix House period, November 1991* is also framed with newspapers articles about Hart Island from the end of the 1960s, thus providing background information that most viewers aren't familiar with. Sternfeld's image is a close-up of old-fashioned worn shoes, scattered on the ground, on a bed of yellowish and brownish decaying autumn leaves, reminiscent of *vanitas* paintings, which must include symbols of terrestrial life (shoes) and of the transience of things (autumnal leaf drop).¹⁸ The photograph is both intriguing and visually appealing thanks to the colorful pattern of leaves which covers the entire surface of the image, like an all-over painting. Even if the shoes are in the middle of the composition, they are difficult to notice at first glance, since they fit perfectly in the overall color scheme of green and brown shades.

In Hunt's *Phoenix House shoes left by vandals with contemporary newspaper articles about Hart Island, 1992*, the headline on the left of the picture, "City to Set Up Island Work Camps," is self-explanatory and enables viewers to move from object (old shoes scattered on the ground) to subject (shoes manufactured by prisoners sentenced to labor). Hunt may have tried to counterbalance the aesthetic appeal of Sternfeld's intrinsically beautiful, yet opaque photograph, with more politically overt historical and social clues. This is the function she assigned to these narratives: providing context for these somehow indecipherable images to contemporary viewers who may miss their importance or only focus on their aesthetic qualities.¹⁹ Martin A. Berger aptly stresses this crucial point: "We cannot hope to recuperate history through photographs without first re-creating the social lens through which the makers and consumers of these images viewed their world" (3). In the foreword to *On This Site*, Sternfeld explains that he is perfectly aware of this issue: "Experience has taught me again and

¹⁸ In *Dutch Still-Life Painting of the Seventeenth Century*, Ingvar Bergstrom defines the canons of the genre, which requires: "the presence of three specific categories of objects: symbols of terrestrial life, symbols of the transience of things and/or death, and references to an afterlife or resurrection" (154).

¹⁹ In the same article, Berger explains that until recently photography was too closely associated with art history in the United States, and as a consequence the link between photography and history was weakened by aesthetic approaches: "twentieth-century U.S. photographic history grew out of the discipline of American art history, whose image-centric approaches remained tethered to iconography, connoisseurship, and formalism" (3).

again that you can never know what lies beneath a surface or behind a facade. Our sense of place, our understanding of photographs of the landscape is inevitably limited and fraught with misreading” (joelsternfeld.net).

In her installations, Hunt re frames the photographs with more personal written material, such as visitors’ comments (*Discarded mass grave marker from 1970 with visitors’ statements, 1998* and *Prisoners pause during maintenance duty with visitors’ statements, 1998*) or inmates’ writings (*Young prisoner during a mass burial with writings by inmates working on Hart Island, 1992* and *Madonna with orange with writings by prisoners working on Hart Island, 1992*). Here the interpretation of relics or of contemporary scenes is influenced by narratives offering specific viewpoints or comments, contrary to the seemingly neutral archival documents. Dipti Desai and Jessica Hamlin, explain that this is a way for Hunt to “[expand] the parameters of archival documentation [...] and [to use] a different strategy of presentation in the Hart Island Project [...] [in which] documents are used as a framing device to present new contemporary narratives” (54). The archival material focuses viewers’ attention on historical dates, lists, and facts grounded in a foregone era while Sternfeld’s photographs record more recent scenes, which somehow reenact the past but are anchored in the photographer’s and the viewers’ present. Through the combination of miscellaneous temporal elements, viewers can (re)create their own interpretation and narrative about this forlorn place.

In the end, the twofold nature of Hunt’s installations underlines the reconstructed nature of both memory and historical evidence through the prism of the photographic image, while also, as Tucker says, emphasizing that: “the historical status of photography is deeply imbricated in its social, psychic, and material life as an object of memory” (3). However, Martin Golding insists on the crucial question of “what can be remembered in public,” and the dichotomy between private and public memories. Hunt’s installations combine both private memories (such as writings or comments) and public memories (newspaper clippings, official records and lists) so as to anchor Sternfeld’s photographs in public remembrance, by providing social and historical context, while, from a more aesthetic standpoint, Sternfeld keeps exploring the limits of representation. As Kate P. Albers puts it: “Sternfeld examines the temporal and indexical limits of a photographically produced narrative while still insisting on the affective power of the photograph to convey meaning” (113). Thus, Hunt’s and Sternfeld’s collaborative and interdisciplinary artworks weave text and image, like a complex tapestry bearing witness of things having existed beyond the photographic trace. In the preface to *Hart Island*, Hunt uses the metaphor of the quilt, a quintessentially American art form: “A journey to Hart Island reveals fragments of history that have never been woven into the fabric of American life. [...] It

is not a quilt under which anyone wants to be laid to rest” (28). Hunt’s insistence on the past as a nexus of jointed and disjointed fragments, as shown by the meticulous framing of each piece of archival document (clippings, excerpts, cutout pieces of paper, etc.) within the main frame evokes Mieke Bal’s comment on Louise Bourgeois’ *Spider* installation (1997), in which the artist used tapestry fragments. Bal says that: “[one such fragment] (...) is a scar of a multilayered past, of which the fragmented state of the entire piece of tapestry is the overwhelming metaphor” (16). When Barthes evokes Proust’s writing, he depicts it as a “circular memory” (*Plaisir* 36), and in a similar way, the Hart Island project reverberates the infinite revolution of a kaleidoscope of fragments of memories mirroring memory as a (re)constructed fragmented process.

“The real unreality of the photograph”²⁰

Another core feature of the Hart Island series is that the photographs jump backward and forward in time, without any clear timeline, to evoke the successive categories of people who were forced to live on the island, and to reveal the different burial grounds which were established there.²¹ Moreover, in most images, objects are used as metaphors of human beings or human past lives. The few portraits or group photographs are juxtaposed with pictures of landscape, buildings, tools, enabling a de-hierarchized perspective of the photographic object and a multi-faceted conception of subject.

Our perception of time and reality is challenged by the jumbled photographic timeline and the refusal to impose a definite narrative through the photographic series. Contemporary photographs of ancient sites, buildings and graves are shown along pictures of 1990s’ inmates, caskets and freshly dug burial trenches, which are in turn deciphered by viewers within his or her own temporality. It seems impossible not to quote Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, on this topic: “[the] testimony [of photograph] bears not on the object but on time” (89). Victor Burgin also insists on the specific relation between photography and time: “The photograph, like the fetish, is the result of a look which has, instantaneously and forever, isolated, ‘frozen’, a fragment of the spatio-temporal continuum” (190).

Two long-shot landscape photographs in which time seems indeed suspended exemplify Sternfeld’s aesthetics. The artist evokes the Japanese aesthetic of transparency, *toumeikan*, to

²⁰ Roland Barthes (*Image*, 44)

²¹ For more detailed information on these subjects, the *New York Times* published a very interesting portfolio of 18 pictures taken by Melinda Hunt entitled “[A History of Hart Island](#).”

describe this specific effect: “a moment when the doors of perception open and one engages in ‘clear seeing in a clear light’” (joelsternfeld.net).



Fig.7. Joel Sternfeld. *Looking northeast from Cemetery Hill toward Long Island Sound after a snowfall*, February 1993. © Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

The first one is entitled *Looking northeast from Cemetery Hill toward Long Island Sound after a snowfall*, February 1993. It depicts a snowy field near the river, noticeable in the distance. The main element in the foreground is a grave marker covered in snow and a few twigs sprouting through the white powdery surface. Two tree trunks represent the focal point in the middle of the image and create perspective by guiding the viewer's eye toward the background plane: groves of trees on the left, and on the right the river, delineated by the dark shape of Long Island in the distance. Two other white grave markers, one in front of the left tree trunk and a third one behind it, in the background, enhance the succession of picture planes. Even though subject matter is simple, the extremely structured composition conveys an impression of solemnity to the landscape. The use of overexposure strengthens the harsh winter light and creates the illusion of looking at an old black and white or sepia gelatin silver print. The photograph seems as meticulously composed as a landscape painting, which enhances further its highly sophisticated aesthetic appeal. Similarly, *Looking across an*

unnamed cove to the reformatory from Potter's Field, June 1992, hovering between landscape photography and painting, strikingly illustrates Sternfeld's incessant remediation of the American sublime.²² Martin Golding points out the specific relation to time that ultimately differentiates photography from painting:

'Who', or 'what' is never a *concrete* question before a painting. It is for these reason that one looks *at* a painting, but in the end always hopes to see *through* a photograph— at the experience which was there then, and only then, and which, unlike a painting, is the only thing there. (59)



Fig.8. Joel Sternfeld. *Looking across an unnamed cove to the reformatory from Potter's Field, June 1992*. © Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

The photograph is an extreme long shot, and the reed shoots in the foreground are slightly out of focus and blurry since the artist chose to emphasize background elements, the reformatory in the middle ground, on the right, and a brick chimney jutting out from a compact group of buildings on the left, used as a vanishing point in the image. We know that Sternfeld uses an

²² Sternfeld wrote a very interesting text on landscape painting and photography, "[The Calamitous Sublime](#)" available on his website, which demonstrates that he has a thorough art historical knowledge and that aesthetics is at the core of his artistic concerns.

8 x 10 view camera to create his landmark landscape photographs²³ that are easily recognizable for their crisp details combined with intense clarity and depth. In this photograph the subdued colors seem to have taken on the patina of time, blurring even further the thin line that often separates Sternfeld's images from paintings. Sternfeld's art seems to follow the principles of defamiliarization, a process which forces viewers to experience the ordinary in new ways, by creating a shift in the expected form of perception resulting from the distance created by artistic mediation. Sternfeld's process is twofold. First, he renders objects "unfamiliar," according to Victor Shklovsky's definition, and then, by prolonging the "length of perception," he finally opens the doors of perception wider.²⁴ As a consequence, the viewer is forced to see and envision reality from a different perspective. We could say that while Sternfeld: "addresses the disconnect between a series of terrible events and the relative tranquility of its site as it appears decades later" (Alpers 116), Hunt's installations reconnect the images to a past reality. Barthes reminds us that:

What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then. It is thus at the level of this denoted message or message without code that the real unreality of the photograph can be fully understood: its unreality is that of the here-now (...); its reality that of the having-been-there (...)" (Image 44).

The multiplicity of temporal, aesthetic and emotional experiences in the Hart Island series impacts viewers' perception of time and reality and exemplifies Barthes' paradox about the real unreality of the photograph.

Photography and death

Lastly, group photographs and portraits that represent a minority among Sternfeld's forty-eight photographs, but remain the subject of half of Hunt's ten installations, are a significant part of the Hart Island project. In total, there are only ten images by Sternfeld picturing inmates and correction officers at work on the island in 1991 and 1992 in the series. We can notice that the burial process hasn't changed much since the late 1800s. An 1890 photograph by Jacob Riis shows coffins being lowered into a trench by prisoners. In 1963, a very similar

²³ On the subject of view camera in another famous photographic series, *Oxbow Archive*, see Lamouliatte-Schmitt, "The American Landscape: from an Ideological to an Ecological Object in Oxbow Archive by Joel Sternfeld."

²⁴ See Victor Shklovsky's definition of the process in *Art as Technique*: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*" (16).

picture was taken by Arthur Schatz for *Life* magazine. Yet, Sternfeld's sophisticated and insightful photographs, combined with his serial approach, stand apart from traditional documentary photography.

At the beginning of the book, we can find an extreme long-shot, entitled *A burial, December 1991* (Fig.3) in which a barely distinguishable group of inmates is digging a trench in the background on the left. They are mere shapes that can be noticed thanks to the white gloves the inmates are wearing and the white badges on the officers' uniforms. This picture functions, as it is often the case in Sternfeld's series, as a general introduction to the topic of inmates on Hart Island, although they cannot be visually identified as the main subject. Then, after a succession of 16 photographs of landscapes and/or objects, the focus finally gets narrower in the full shot, *Correction officers and an inmate unloading the morgue truck, February 1992*, whose title is self-explanatory. Two group photographs and one portrait follow in a row. First, *Florence Leo, February 1992* shows inmates unloading a casket from a truck; the plain pine box bears the name Florence Leo, hastily written in black pencil marker.



Fig.8. Joel Sternfeld. *Florence Leo*, February 1992. © Joel Sternfeld courtesy PaceWildensteinMacGill

Next, the long-shot *James Smith, February 1992* shows inmates lowering caskets into a trench—the one in the foreground bearing the eponymous name—under the watchful eyes of

DOC officers. To finish this short series, the medium shot, *An inmate during the burial process, March 1992*, pictures a young man with a solemn expression, standing in front of a huge pile of rubble, a white towel thrown on his shoulder, looking down pensively toward the ground.²⁵



Fig.9. Melinda Hunt. *Young prisoner during a mass burial with writings by inmates working on Hart Island, 1992*. © Melinda Hunt

A few pages further, one of the most poignant images of the series, *Vicki Pavia, whose baby was buried on Hart Island on a specially arranged visit, March 1994*, shows the baby's mother, a sad and lonely figure in a desolate landscape standing in front of a small white gravestone adorned with a white plaster statue of the Virgin Mary. A bouquet of red and white flowers is placed on the ground, near the grave. On the left of the tombstone, Vicki Pavia's stiff

²⁵ In a 1998 *Guardian* article about Hart Island and the grim feelings of the Riker's Island prisoners, Michael Ellison quoted an inmate, Miguel Marrero, saying: "To me, Potter's Field is a sacred place, where hundreds of people are laid to rest, yet it is a very scary thought to be buried and have nobody know where you are or not care where you are. It makes me thank God that I still have a chance to change my life before I end up in Potter's Field" (guardian.com).

figure, averting her gaze, metaphorically expresses that the act of looking is impossible. Melinda Hunt has chosen to use these four images in her installations.²⁶



Fig.10. Melinda Hunt. *Vicki Pavia honoring the 40th birthday of her baby, Denise, on Hart Island with historic prison documents*, 1998. © Melinda Hunt

Prisoners watching geese in flight, Potter's Field, May 1992, a group photograph of prisoners holding shovels and digging holes near the shore inserted after another series of landscape and/or object photographs, is the last image picturing human beings included in one of Hunt's installations.

She certainly chose to include these distinctive photographs in half of her installations because human presence strengthens the emotional appeal of the artwork by establishing that life and death are two inseparable facets of human life: the living (the inmates) are burying the dead,

²⁶ We learn Vicki Pavia's story in the same Guardian article: "Melinda Hunt tells in her book, *Hart Island*, how she was contacted five years ago by a woman, then in her 60s, called Vicki Pavia. She had lost a baby when she was a teenager, four decades previously, and had been pressed by her mother-in-law to arrange a public burial to save money. 'She acquired a burial record indicating that her daughter's grave was on Hart Island. She called me to find out if I could help her to find the grave and get her baby back. I had the unfortunate answer to that question, which is: 'No, because the graves on Hart Island are re-excavated after 25 years and your child has been buried there longer than that.' Ms Pavia went to the island anyway, with 40 roses, one for each missed birthday" (Ellison guardian.com).

and both prisoners and viewers respond to what Peggy Phelan calls: “the ongoing temporality of the work of mourning” (979)—either in the Barthesian “here-now” or “there-then.” Following up with Barthes’ theories, she also closely links photography and death: “photography has been a crucial art in that it both serves as a witness to life and as a rehearsal for death” (979). Indeed, Barthes observes: “Photography may correspond to [...] a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print” (*Camera* 92). However, in Sternfeld’s art, the abruptness is replaced by a flowing continuum, picturing the endless cycle of death followed by the regeneration of life. The few group photographs and portraits are immersed in between long series of landscape and/or object photographs to emphasize the fact that human beings are intertwined and on a par with the environment in which they live, just like any biological organism. The second portrait, *An inmate pausing during yard work, May 1992*, shows an African American prisoner with an inscrutable expression on his face, still and solemn like a statue. His averted gaze doesn’t try to engage viewers, and he seems lost in his thoughts, like the young man in *An inmate during the burial process, March 1992*. These two portraits are a testament to the existence of these men, who were alive at the time the pictures were taken, but they also point out the ephemeral nature of human lives. Peggy Phelan notes that: “The that-has-been aspect of portrait photography reflects the heightened emotional recognition of the that-has-been that death produces in the mourner. Death and portrait photography, in other words, force us to confront the mortal limit of the human moment as such” (982). The Hart Island project makes viewers participate in the construct of a collective narrative about death “outside ritual” (*Camera* 92) or maybe more accurately, beyond ritual.

Conclusion

In *Hart Island*, the combination of Hunt’s installations and Sternfeld’s photograph puts on hold and into perspective viewers’ apprehension of death and the memorial process, represented as a complex dialectic intermingling past (time of death), present (time of perception of death), and future (time of remembrance). Indeed, Sternfeld explores visual techniques of defamiliarization by affecting viewers’ perception of time and reality, which are blurred further by Hunt’s installations projecting interpenetrating tenses of past, present, and future. In this case, the photographic image could be an illustration of Benjamin’s “materialistic historiography”, in which: “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but its arrest as well. When thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tension, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad” (*Illuminations* 207). By arresting time, photography ignites the past with the momentum of the present. Linda H. Rugg

further comments on this concept: “while Barthes proposes that photographs are analogues of reality, I would like to propose that they are that but not only that; I would argue that they are also analogues of memory, and consequently analogues of thought” (25).

Nevertheless, the Hart Island project doesn’t explore a dual perspective of time, divided between past and present. In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin explains that: “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill (*Arcades* 463 N3,1). *Hart Island* is a perfect representation of this atemporal constellation gathering the living and the dead, ancient times and the present moment. This immersive project invites viewers to engage in a collective memorial process through a form of ontological contemplation. Yet, as Katie Fry points out about W.G. Sebald’s book, *Austerlitz*: “While Austerlitz’s interaction with the past, mostly through photography but also through other means, seems to suggest an understanding of time very similar to Benjamin’s, it ultimately lacks the theological or redemptive element that is crucial to Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*” (133-4). Similarly, Hunt and Sternfeld both share a secular perspective, refusing to sacralize the Hart Island experience, while exploring: “the possibility of a collective American identity by documenting ordinary people and places throughout the country” (getty.edu).

The Hart Island project exemplifies how visual arts can engage viewers in a complex memorial and metaphysical journey through aesthetic experience. *Hart Island*’s photographic installations and photographs conjure up Barthes’ “Spectrum”, a word that was chosen by the philosopher because “[it] retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9).

Bibliography

Hart Island and The Hart Island Project

Ellison, Michael. “Only the lonely.” *The Guardian*, 5 June 1999, [theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/1999/jun/05/weekend.michaellellison](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/1999/jun/05/weekend.michaellellison)

“Giving Voice to the Legions Buried in a Potter’s Field”. *New York Times*, 30 Dec. 2011, [nytimes.com/2012/01/01/nyregion/the-hart-island-project-at-westchester-community-college-in-peekskill.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/nyregion/the-hart-island-project-at-westchester-community-college-in-peekskill.html)

Gross, Daniel A. “The Transformation of Hart Island.” *The New Yorker*, 10 April 2020,

[newyorker.com/news/our-local-correspondents/the-transformation-of-hart-island#rid=31dda158-23e5-4968-80e4-6c6ecd545eed&q=the+transformation+of+hart+island](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-local-correspondents/the-transformation-of-hart-island#rid=31dda158-23e5-4968-80e4-6c6ecd545eed&q=the+transformation+of+hart+island)

Hennigan, W.J. "Inside New York City's Mass Graveyard on Hart Island." *Time*, 19 Nov. 2020, time.com/5913151/hart-island-covid/

Hunt, Melinda. "The Nature of Hart Island." *Hart Island*. Scalo, 1998.

Hunt, Melinda and Joel Sternfeld. *Hart Island*. Scalo, 1998.

Keene. Michael T. *New York City's Hart Island: A Cemetery of Strangers*. History Press Library Editions, 2019.

"Melinda Hunt and Joel Sternfeld. Hart Island. 20 May – 10 September 2000." Museum for Sepulchral Culture, Exhibitions, Archive, 2000, sepulkralmuseum.de/EN/exhibitions/archive/hart-island--melinda-hunt-and-joel-sternfeld

"Pandemic victims are filling NYC's Hart Island. It isn't the first time." *National Geographic*, 14 April 2020, nationalgeographic.co.uk/photography/2020/04/pandemic-victims-are-filling-nycs-hart-island-it-isnt-first-time?image=12-hart-island

"'New York City's family tomb': The sad history of Hart Island." *The Washington Post*, 27 April 2020, [washingtonpost.com/history/2020/04/27/hart-island-mass-grave-coronavirus-burials/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/04/27/hart-island-mass-grave-coronavirus-burials/)

Works cited

Albers, Kate Palmer. "Joel Sternfeld's Empty Places," *Environmental History*, no. 20, 2015, p.113

Baker, John E. "Mourning and the transformation of object relationship." *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, vol.18, no.1, 2001, pp.55-73.

Bal, Mieke. "Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture." *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol.2, no.5, 2003, pp.5-32.

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. 1981. Vintage, 1993.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana Press, 1977.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller, Hill & Wan, 1975.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. 1968. Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.
- Berger, John. "Uses of Photography." *About Looking*. Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Berger, Martin A. "Photography, History, and the Historian." *American Art*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, pp. 2-5.
- Bergstrom, Ingvar. *Dutch Still-Life Painting of the Seventeenth Century*. Yoseloff, 1956.
- Burgin, Victor. "Photography, Phantasy, Function." *Thinking Photography*. Ed. Victor Burgin. Macmillan Press, 1982.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. 1971. Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Desai, Dipti and Jessica Hamlin. *History as Art, Art as History*. Taylor & Francis, 2009.
- Fry, Katie. "Lost Time and the Heterotopic Image in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 125-141.
- Getty Museum Collection. *Joel Sternfeld*, [getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KXT](https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KXT)
- Golding, Martin. "Photography, memory and survival." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2000, pp. 52-68.
- Gumpert, Lynn and Dale Jamieson, Joel Sternfeld, Christopher Wiley. *Landscapes after Ruskin. Redefining the Sublime*. Hirmer, 2018.
- Lamouliatte, Helena. "The American Landscape: from an Ideological to an Ecological Object in Oxbow Archive by Joel Sternfeld." *Transatlantica*, no. 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.17168>

- Laplanche, Jean. "Notes on Afterwardness." *Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton. Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992.
- Orvell, Miles. *American photography*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Phelan, Peggy. "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time." *Signs*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2002, pp. 979-1004.
- Rugg, Linda H. *Picturing ourselves*. The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Device." *Theory of Prose*. Translated by Benjamin Sher, Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.
- Sternfeld, Joel. "Color Interaction and the Color Photograph." *Writings*, 2020, joelsternfeld.net/writings/2020/5/28/color-interaction-and-the-color-photograph#group-3
- Sternfeld, Joel. *Oxbow Archive*. Steidl, 2008.
- Tucker, Jennifer. "Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry." *History and Theory*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2009, pp. 1-8.