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HYPERALLERGIC

AN ANNUAL COMPENDIUM OF BLACK PHOTOGRAPHY THAT WAS A
REVOLUTIONARY ACT

By John Edwin Mason, August 3, 2017



RICHMOND — In 1973, a small band of black artists published a book that changed the history of photography in America. The Black Photographers Annual [BPA], Volume I, presented the work of nearly 50 distinguished African-American photographers, past and present. It was a revolutionary act. The worlds of art and photojournalism had largely ignored black photographers, despite the thousands of important images they had made ever since daguerreotypist Jules Lion opened his New Orleans studio in 1840. The first volume of the BPA and the three that followed over the next seven years showcased the work of scores of contemporary black photographers and brought the history of their predecessors to the fore.

All of the BPA photographers were part of what Leigh Raiford calls photography's "critical black consciousness." For a century and a half, African-American photographers had been creating a counternarrative of style and purpose that challenged conventional ideas about what photographs could look like and what work they could do in the world. Frederick Douglass, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, was the first to identify the ways in which photography's black consciousness challenged racism and other forms of inequality. He believed that photographers, like poets, were prophets of justice, who saw "what ought to be by their reflections of what is, and endeavor[ed] to remove the contradiction." The BPA compellingly illustrated the extent to which standard histories of American photography, as well as exhibitions in galleries and museums, had evaded the challenge of this critical consciousness.

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The BPA's arrival marked a pivotal moment in American cultural history. In its pages, established artists, such as Roy DeCarava, rubbed shoulders with those like Dawoud Bey, who were just emerging. Toni Morrison and James Baldwin were among the writers who contributed essays assessing the place of African-American photography in American society. The annuals solidified the sense of community that had long been building among black photographers. At the same time they inspired new generations of African-American artists, such as Carrie Mae Weems, to extend the work of their elders. Scholars and curators, among whom Deborah Willis is only one of the most prominent, found fresh motivation to deepen our understanding of African-American photographers and their work. Yet BPA's short lifespan and the rarity of its surviving issues allowed it to fall into obscurity.

A Commitment to the Community: The Black Photographers Annual, Volume I, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, is both a celebration of the annual and an act of historical recovery. The first in a series of four back-to-back exhibitions (each devoted to one volume of the BPA), it has two parts: a museum installation of photographs by artists who were included in Volume 1 and a digitized collection of all four volumes freely accessible online. The installation draws on the VMFA's large and growing holdings in African-American photography. The digitization of the annuals makes them available to anyone with a computer and an internet connection. Because the full run of the annuals is hard to find — Volumes 2 and 3 are held by no more than 15 libraries worldwide, and Volume 4 in only three — the digital versions constitute tools that scholars and the public can use to change how the story of American photography is told.

The exhibition draws its title from Toni Morrison's assertion, in her foreword to Volume 1, that the annuals were "conceived as a commitment to the community of Black artists." Here she alludes to the energy and sense of mission that the editors drew from the Black Arts Movement and black cultural nationalism of the 1960s and '70s. The BPA reflected the spirit of "Do for Self," a common slogan of the era.

Most members of the editorial group were current or former members of Kamoinge ("those who work together" in the Kikuyu language), an artists' collective that New York-based black photographers founded in 1963. Its aims were both aesthetic and broadly political. One "essential purpose," as founding member Louis Draper once put it, was to challenge "one another to higher photographic attainment ... in the face of a largely hostile and at best indifferent photographic community." At the same time, members confronted an American visual culture that often employed demeaning or patronizing racial stereotypes in its depiction of African Americans. Kamoinge's members believed that their images offered a more complex and truthful portrait of black Americans and, in Draper's words, depicted "our lives as only we can." Kamoinge's aesthetic and political concerns were mutually reinforcing.

Kamoinge's claim that black photographers could see black people more clearly than photographers who were outsiders was well founded. Black photographers had not absorbed the racist ideologies that inevitably shaped the ways that other ethnicities imagined and pictured black people. Black photographers also understood black culture implicitly: getting the jokes, recognizing the body language, hearing the words that were left unspoken. Most importantly, they lived with the burdens and pleasures of moving through America in a black body, and they put this knowledge on film. As a result, their photographs defy conventional representations of black people. In the annuals, none of the hundreds of portraits of black people is meant to represent the race or "the Negro Problem." Lazy, lying, clownish, and criminal black people are nowhere to be seen. Well-meaning clichés, such as patient victims and righteous heroes, are absent as well.

The VMFA's installation of 20 photographs by seven photographers, all of whom were represented in Volume 1, reflects the diversity of work in the annual, even though space permits only a fraction of the photographers in the volume to be represented.

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Two photographs by Roy DeCarava, the best known of the photographers whose work appears in the first volume, are at the center of the installation. A generation older than the photographers who edited the annuals, and a winner of a Guggenheim fellowship for photography, DeCarava was both a mentor and role model to many of them. He had earned their respect as much by his insistence on speaking out against the racism that he encountered in the art world as by the success he had achieved within it. Although the photographs in the installation were not published in the annual, they are examples of the work that inspired younger photographers. For instance, "David," an informal portrait from 1952 of a small black boy, shows him leaning against a traffic signal post on a New York street corner. On what appears to be a hot summer's day his face glistens with sweat, and he seems to scowl (perhaps at the sun shining into his eyes). He is aware of the photographer, regarding him calmly. He seems to be taking the measure of the viewer as well. In many ways, the image is an example of classic New York street photography, sharing the basics of style and subject matter with photographers such as Helen Levitt and Harold Feinstein. In the context of the exhibition and DeCarava's body of work, however, the black boy's steady gaze seems to challenge the viewer to see him as an individual and not a racial type.

The young man in Louis Draper's "Billy" (before 1974) might almost be an older David. He stands in the middle of a city street, wearing clothes that suggest it is again summer. The pavement is wet, perhaps from an open fire hydrant. Billy's expression is hard to read, but his level gaze asks the photographer and, by extension, the viewer to see him as an equal. Beuford Smith's portrait of a weary man, "Lower East Side," (1969) also shows traces of DeCarava's influence. The man's face is hidden, but his battered fedora, clasped hands, and cane give viewers a sense of his mood and circumstances. The photograph's dark tonalities resonate with much of DeCarava's work, as does its embrace of ambiguity.

However, DeCarava was no Svengali. Younger photographers revered him but nevertheless found their own paths. "Boy and H" (1961) is an example of Draper's career-long romance with the surrealism of city life and the geometric patterns that light and shadow imprint on film. A male figure, his frame twisted into a crude "S," crosses in front of the concrete wall of a handball court on which someone has painted an enigmatic "H." Similarly, Anthony Barboza's "NYC Self-Portrait," (ca. 1970–1979) shows the photographer at play, delighting in the patterns he creates with his body, the walls of an apartment, and the early morning light.

A Commitment to the Community turns decisively toward the politics of racial representation with Draper's portrait of Fannie Lou Hamer, a central figure in the struggle for black voting rights in Mississippi during the 1960s. He depicts her in ways that defy the too-easy readings that stereotypes encourage. Hamer's face is seen in close-up, emerging out of darkness, the image's framing emphasizing the deeply sculpted contours of the features indicative of her African ancestry. She looks directly into the camera's lens, her expression suggesting the strength and serenity of a woman who had confronted the Ku Klux Klan and the State of Mississippi and won.

Like Draper's photograph of Hamer, Ming Smith's portrait of two anonymous, middle-aged black women takes part in the collective effort to visually reimagine black people. Smith was one of several female photographers included in the annual, but the only one who is represented in the installation. The women, especially the central figure, look into the camera's lens with the same calm self-possession as Hamer. Elegantly attired, they seem to be dressed for church, as Ming's title, "Amen Corner Sisters," (ca. 1976) confirms. Wearing their hats like crowns, they hold themselves with the bearing of a queen and her lady-in-waiting, an impression that the word "Regal," seen on a building across the street behind them, reinforces.

Racial politics are front and center in Leroy Henderson's portrait of Rosa Parks. He shows her admiring a poster of Malcolm X that bears the legend "By Any Means Necessary," a reference to his dictum that no strategy should be ruled out in the African-American freedom struggle. Parks, whose refusal to move to the back of a transit bus to accommodate

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a white passenger was the catalyst for the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–56, became an exemplar of principled non-violence in the movement for racial justice. Yet, in this photograph, she admires a fallen black nationalist hero who refused to rule out armed struggle. Henderson is not suggesting that Parks was ready to pick up a gun. Instead his photograph is a succinct comment on ways in which the perceived tensions within the African American freedom struggle were often more ostensible than real.

Any full reckoning with the BPA requires an examination of the books themselves, something that the digital versions now allow anyone to do. The online portion of the exhibition reproduces each of the annuals page for page, capturing virtually all of the clarity and tonal richness of the original photographs. The texts, like the images, can be enlarged, making them easily readable. Still, the digital annuals cannot, of course, capture the experience of holding the physical books in one's hands. Large, thick, and almost square in shape, they have a physical heft that mirrored their cultural significance.

Each of the 118 photographs in Volume 1 is given a page to itself. Broad white borders surrounded the images, underscoring the artistic ambitions of the enterprise. The volume was divided into three parts: introductory essays, by Morrison and Clayton Riley, a middle section in which several dozen photographers were represented by one or two photographs each, and finally, 14 individual portfolios of four to seven images. All of the annuals followed this format, with only minor variations.

Volume 1, like the other annuals, shows photographers exploring the nature of photography as an art form while simultaneously engaging in the struggle over racial representation. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of black photography's critical consciousness has been the refusal to accept that art and political engagement are somehow at odds. The novelist John A. Williams, who wrote the introduction to Volume 4, sensed this dynamic, arguing that the photographs in the annuals were both "personal statements" and "documentation." "The two," he insisted, were "not by any means incompatible."

The BPA's photographers confronted racism in American visual culture, in part, through portraiture. Volume 1, for instance, opens with photographs by Morris Rogers of a young man and a girl, each regarding the camera and the viewer with the serene composure of people who understand their position within American society and are not afraid to challenge it. There are many others like them. The calm, self-confident gaze was almost a house style, and it featured as much in the annual's rare celebrity portraits as in images of ordinary people.

The BPA's initial exploration of the history of African-American photography was a portfolio of seven photographs by the portrait photographer James Van Der Zee, who was then in his 80s. He had opened his first studio in Harlem in 1916 and, over a long career, had made exquisite portraits of tens of thousands of now anonymous African Americans, as well as black notables — from Marcus Garvey to Jean-Michel Basquiat. Yet he was unknown outside of the black community until his work formed the centerpiece of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's controversial 1969 exhibition, *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*.

Among the images in Van Der Zee's portfolio, all from before World War II, are a formal portrait of an affluent, middle-aged woman sitting in a sumptuously appointed drawing room, and a genteel, nude young woman illuminated by the soft glow of a mock fireplace. The portfolio also includes Van Der Zee's best known photograph: a portrait of a stylish couple attired in expensive raccoon fur coats, posing on a Harlem street with an ornate 1932 Cadillac roadster. The man fills the passenger's seat; the woman stands at his shoulder beside the roadster's open door. An ostentatious display of wealth like this could easily have gotten them lynched in the South. And that is perhaps one of the points that the portrait was designed

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to make. It can be read as an act of resistance, a pointed rejoinder to a dominant culture that believed that no black person deserved such fine things.

Street photography, which was then in its heyday as a form of art photography, was as prominent in the annuals as portraiture. Many of the street photographers in Volume 1 developed styles that diverged from DeCarava's lyrical realism. The images in Herbert Randall's portfolio, for all of their urban grit, have a dream-like quality that sometimes incorporates Christian iconography, lending them an aura of spirituality. Ming Smith's and Anthony Barboza's portfolios show street photographers who are as concerned with line, shape, and light as they are with people and places. These images, at times, cross into abstraction.

Each of the three subsequent volumes contained similarly extraordinary work. In Volume 2, published in 1974, Shawn Walker's image of a child trick-or-treating, while costumed as a ghost, is deeply unsettling. Photographed at night on an unlit and seemingly deserted street, the white sheets that form the child's costume are illuminated only by the burst of Walker's flash. Decontextualized by the darkness that envelops them, the sheets resemble the robes of the Ku Klux Klan.

In the same volume, a portfolio of ten photographs by Prentice H. Polk continues the BPA's work of historical reclamation. Polk was little known outside of Tuskegee, Alabama, where he had maintained a studio since 1927, while teaching at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University). All but one of the photographs in the portfolio are portraits of elderly African-American women and men in settings that suggest rural poverty. Finely crafted and evocative of a disappearing time and place, they have more in common with the sympathetic character studies that white photographers, such as Doris Ulmann, made of African Americans than with the portraits of urban sophisticates created by Polk's contemporaries, such as Van Der Zee. Yet the BPA's editors knew that black viewers did not see "characters" in these portraits. They saw family.

Volume 3, which appeared in 1976, opens with a poem by Gordon Parks, whose career as a photographer, writer, and filmmaker had made him a celebrity. Echoing the ethos of the black arts movement, he praises African-American artists by asking rhetorically, "Who best to record us but you ... who best to measure our height — but you?" In the introduction that follows, Baldwin calls the BPA "a testimony," which "like all truthful witnessing ... is beautiful and frightening, devastating and ennobling."

A portfolio of five portraits of John Coltrane by Roy DeCarava brings together two of the most powerful creative forces of the mid-twentieth century. As with Coltrane's music, this is art that asks for its audience's undivided attention. DeCarava was a famously dark printer, who was known to hide significant details in deep shadow. And his penchant for slow shutter speeds in dimly lit nightclubs often lead to blurred images. The portraits require a willingness to abandon preconceptions of what a photograph should look like and embrace a singular creative vision.

Volume 4, from 1980, was the last of the annuals. It is also the slimmest volume, containing the work of two-thirds as many photographers as the other three, suggesting that financial problems may have contributed to the BPA's demise. Nevertheless, the portfolios are especially strong. They include the work of Hamilton S. Smith, a gifted amateur photographer whose carefully crafted, if conventional, snapshots depict scenes from middle-class black life in Boston at the turn of the twentieth century, and of Dawoud Bey, who was at the beginning of what has proven to be an illustrious career. Bey's portfolio is comprised of five images from Harlem, USA, his first significant body of work. Although the images lack the intimacy that is associated with his later photography, they nevertheless capture an insider's view of Harlem, showing the dignity and self-respect that was as much a part of the community as were poverty and segregation.

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Although plans were afoot to publish a fifth volume of the BPA, it never appeared. The cessation of publication, combined with the fire that destroyed most copies of Volume 4, allowed the annuals to fade from view. A Commitment to the Community, especially its online component, is an opportunity to reassess the BPA's place in American cultural history. In addition to being platforms for contemporary black photography, the annuals were an early salvo in the battle to make the history of photography more inclusive and therefore more accurate. They demonstrated that narratives which failed to come to grips with African-American photography and its critical consciousness were woefully inadequate. Four decades after their publication, the annuals themselves have become essential resources for writing better histories.

The BPA remains the most significant collective effort to answer the question that Williams asked in his introduction to Volume 4: "What is it that Black photographers see when they take photographs of Black people?" There was no single answer. The response instead was a multi-layered and nuanced portrait of a people. It was an aesthetic triumph, but it was not art for art's sake. As Baldwin wrote in his introduction to Volume 3, the annuals were also "a study of means, and styles, of confrontation — past, present, and, also, alas, to come."