To bear witness using photography is a familiar conceit: it invokes the photographer's responsibility to observe the lives of others or to gather evidence of suffering, injustice, or war. The photographs in this exhibition, drawn from the MCA's collection, relate to the act of witnessing in more unconventional ways. As the artists weigh the implications of photographing other people, they put pressure on common understandings of this role.

Witness begins with photographs from the 1940s by Walker Evans, which covertly document riders on the subway, and it culminates with a large-scale installation by Alfredo Jaar made in 2006. The works in between variously record or perform different kinds of encounters between the artists and their subjects. Rather than presuming that their subjects exist simply to be seen, these artists tend to approach photography as a dynamic exchange between multiple participants. Often the viewer is implicated, too.

The role of concerned observer has been reinforced by traditions of photojournalism and documentary photography. In recent years, the rise of cell phone videos and social media have introduced new forms of this role and a renewed urgency to this public act. Looking to works from the not-so-distant past, the exhibition poses a series of fundamental questions: Who contributes to a photograph's meaning? What are the photographer's ethical obligations? Who is depicted, and how? And, how do artists reckon with historic events, social conditions, or the limits of what a photograph can show?

This exhibition is organized by Karsten Lund, former Curatorial Assistant.

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