



## LISA OPPENHEIM with Charles Schultz

Lisa Oppenheim's first one-person exhibition in an American museum took place this year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, Ohio. Her second one-person exhibition at the Tanya Bonakdar gallery, *A Durable Web*, is on view through October 21, 2017. Oppenheim's practice merges an emotional earnestness with great intellectual curiosity. Her photographic works investigate the technologies and histories of photography, primarily using analog processes, to create new connections amidst events and objects that may have otherwise been overlooked. In the lead up to her exhibition, Oppenheim visited the *Brooklyn Rail* HQ to meet Managing Editor, Charles Schultz, and discuss her new work incorporating Lewis Hine's photographs, the joy she gets out of research, and the importance of supporting your peers.

**Charles Schultz (RAIL):** Let's start by talking about your forthcoming show at Tanya Bonakdar. How's it coming together?

**Lisa Oppenheim:** The starting point for this show is a series of Lewis Hine photographs that I found in the Library of Congress. Lewis Hine is an important American photographer from the first part of the twentieth century who is best known for work that drew public attention to the plight of child workers in factories. I was interested in this historically because it was one of the earliest examples of how photography influenced real social change. As a result of Hine's photographs, laws against child labor (which were not enforced) became enforced, because of public outcry around these images. On a different level, I was talking to a friend who's an art historian and she told me that Lewis Hine taught at my high school.

**Rail:** Ethical Culture?

**Oppenheim:** Yea, I went to Fieldston, which is the upper school of the Ethical Culture School, it also was



Pencil Portrait of Lisa Oppenheim by Phong Bui

connected to the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Actually, I learned from her that a number of photographers came out of that school.

**Rail:** Who else?

**Oppenheim:** Diane Arbus and Paul Strand were students.

**Rail:** I knew that Paul Strand was a student there, because I knew Hine was his teacher. I didn't know Arbus was a student too.

**Oppenheim:** I didn't either! [Laughter] But I thought it was cool and interesting, and of course, the way that you sort of imagine yourself in a trajectory—that's a pretty great one.

**Rail:** I'd say you're in good company.

**Oppenheim:** [Laughing] Yeah that kind of made-up trajectory, just by this fluke; I mean, I had no idea at the time. I don't even think I took a photography class there. But there was something about the importance of social justice issues within the Ethical Culture Society and the school that make sense to me, now, and so I just kind of went down a rabbit hole looking at Lewis Hine images on the Library of Congress website, but I'm not really a photo historian. My engagement can sometimes be pretty surface-level, unfortunately, I have to admit...but I'm curious.

**Rail:** I think that's more important.

**Oppenheim:** So I was looking around and I saw these images that I found very arresting, going through these classical Hine images of you know— little kids in cotton mills and coal mines—and I came across these very strange images of the naked backs of young women, teenagers. They're posed sitting on stools or standing up and they're wearing skirts and little bibs to cover side-boob. You just see the back of their hair, and then there were titles that indicated their ages. So it would be something like, "Mildred Benjamin, age seventeen, right dorsal curvature." And then, "This work aggravates a severe spinal case." But the problems with their spines, though mentioned, were not very visible in the photographs, you know?

**Rail:** They're not hunchbacks.

**Oppenheim:** Right, but they had scoliosis, which can be subtle or it can be more extreme. What was interesting, to me, was that these girls had their bodies damaged by this physical labor or whatever scoliosis they were born with was exacerbated by it. So I could see what Hine was doing from a social justice angle, but they were also super sexualized images.

**Rail:** Yea, the images get stranger when you consider the circumstances. Here we have an older man asking young girls to partially undress and pose for his camera—from behind. Of course the given motivation was social justice, but there's also this sense of lurking that seems just beneath the surface.

**Oppenheim:** Yeah, that was the sort of discomfort I felt too. So I did some research to find out if anyone had written about these pictures, but I couldn't find anything. So I thought, "Oh, this is sort of my territory now," and I used these images as a jumping off point. I had them pinned up in my studio for a while, trying to figure out what to do with them, and then I just made a very simple intervention where I made a kind of slit, or slice, right down the image. I was thinking about this relationship between bisecting an image and creating this sort of straight spine, drawing attention to the curved spine of the girls. People have asked me, is this sort of "corrective" in a way? But I don't mean it to be "corrective" in a bodily way; the cut is meant to create a kind of opposition—the straightness of the cut, the bisecting of the image.

**Rail:** Creating a rupture.

**Oppenheim:** Yeah, and thinking about the effect of labor on these girls' lives.

**Rail:** I'm curious about your choice of material for those pieces, the aluminum. What compelled you to print on aluminum?

**Oppenheim:** That's a good question. When I'm working with archival images in a very direct way like this, I'm always thinking about how to repurpose images in a way that makes sense for a particular project. For the Hine images I really felt, because they were so much about the body, that they needed to exist in relationship *to* the body. I didn't want them to be framed; I wanted there to be a direct relationship between the viewer's own body, and the bodies of these girls. Printing on the aluminum was sort of the least "fussy" way that I could make these images into objects. I didn't want the works to register as *images* of the girls, but rather a material and physical representation of them.

**Rail:** You also enlarged them to a life size. So the experience is seeing something that is on your scale.

**Oppenheim:** Exactly.

**Rail:** I really liked how they were presented in your exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), in relation with the tree-slice contact prints and the weavings made with the Jacquard looms—are any of the weavings going to be in the show?

**Oppenheim:** Yes. So thinking about these girls—thinking about what they would have been making—it led me to wonder whatever happened to the textiles they made. I've worked a lot with textiles in the past, and a lot of the historical textiles that were kept were the ones that are considered



Lisa Oppenheim, *Incorrect sitting position for postural deformity and dorsal curvature cases. Scoliosis. Work in this position is harmful.* 2017. dye-sublimation print mounted to aluminum. 39 × 56 3/8 inches; 99.1 × 143.2 cm (overall) 39 × 44 inches; 99.1 × 111.8 cm (left panel) 39 × 12 3/8 inches; 99.1 × 31.4 cm (right panel) Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

“important” for whatever reason. These girls were probably just making shirts or whatever, and no one thinks to keep a work shirt from the 1920s. So I looked on eBay for “New England textiles, 1920,” and I got listings for fabric scraps for people who wanted to incorporate historical fabrics in their quilts. This fabric has a life in today’s economy as a scrap for quilters—that’s interesting to me. So I just ordered tons of this stuff. It’s all pre-cut, and in weird shapes, and then I used those scraps as negatives in the traditional color enlarger. So I would put a little 3 inch by 3 inch square piece or an oddly shaped scrap in the negative carrier and enlarge them.

**Rail:** The light was able to pass through the textile?

**Oppenheim:** Yes, because they’re cotton, they’re pretty thin. And so that’s the work on the bottom floor of the gallery. These photographs using textile negatives that *could have* been made by these girls in the Hine images will be on view in the upstairs space. But then I was also interested in bringing the images of textiles *back* to textiles, so I made cotton Jacquard weaves that were inversions of the photographs. In the past couple of years I’ve become interested in the relationship between the technological apparatuses that produce textiles and the technological apparatuses that produce photographs, and how they emerged around the same time. So that translation from textile scrap to photograph and back to textile, being mediated first through the enlarger and then through this Jacquard loom, was something that interested me.

**Rail:** One of the things that I find really compelling—not just about your individual bodies of work, but the way you present them—is the networking of ideas. Each body of work seems to be enlarged or enriched or expanded in the context of your other bodies of work. It seems like there are many various elements that tie them together, in ways that I imagine you could have never foreseen when you were starting off on any of these bodies of work.

**Oppenheim:** That’s very true. Each project starts its own conversation around itself. Sometimes I’ll even start two things at the same time, and not realize how they’re connected, and then this connection just emerges, because it’s all coming from the same place.

**Rail:** It seems like you have a lot of fun making these bodies of work, especially in the researching phase.

**Oppenheim:** That to me is sort of the most fun, because the thing that’s great about artistic research is that the stakes are so low. It’s not like science where if you mess up a formulation it could have real world consequences. With art it doesn’t really matter, so you might as well just roll with the things that don’t totally make sense and are just associative.

**Rail:** Your work invites viewers down a similar path. I mean, when I was thinking about your series



Lisa Oppenheim, *Jacquard Weave (Apple Blossoms)*, 2017. Jacquard woven cotton, mohair and linen textile in wood frame 32 × 47 inches; 81.3 × 119.4 cm (framed) 30 1/2 × 45 1/2 inches; 77.5 × 115.6 cm (unframed) Edition of 1; 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

of pictures of Polaroids developing, and the Crayola colors that are the subject of those pictures—it lead me to doing my own research on the history of Crayola. Wow. I wound up on a website that claimed to host the definitive history of Crayola colors. Turns out there is a group of people who are very serious about the history of Crayola colors.

**Oppenheim:** On the internet there are groups of people that take *lots* of stuff very seriously, stuff that you would never think of. [Laughter] It's great to be able to dabble in that.

**Rail:** I didn't realize Crayola has been around since 1903. It's kind of incredible to think about how many generations have grown up with Crayola crayons, and at a certain point their colors began to actively reflect choices in our society. It's an interesting, and peculiar little history.

**Oppenheim:** And that's something that's always interested me, how it seems like these things—like colors or the alphabet—seem very neutral, but really there's these hidden histories and hidden ideologies that you can get really deeply into. Sometimes though it's enough to just point out that they're there.

**Rail:** Yes, you just need to put up a sign-post. You have other works too that pay attention to lesser known histories, or the lesser known works of another photographer, like those partially nude Lewis Hine photos. But also, in your Walker Evans series, *Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans* (2007 – 09) you make use of the images Roy Stryker discarded. And in your *Art for the Public* (2009) series, you photographed images of artworks that were basically left to collect dust in storage.

**Oppenheim:** With really iconic images it's hard to see past their status as iconic images, whereas images that are somehow just a little marginalized for one reason or another, that don't carry that weight—there's just more to work with, because you don't have to deal with the fact that people already have very preconceived ideas of what those photos mean or have meant. There are more possibilities for producing different kinds of meaning, and meaning accrues over time. For instance, would those punched holes of Walker Evans have the same meaning if John Baldessari in the 70s had not done the stickers-on-images thing, or if Sherrie Levine hadn't worked with that material? Meaning is cumulative.

**Rail:** That's a good way to put it.

**Oppenheim:** I almost never *take pictures*. I have some cameras and I do Instagram; I can use a light meter and stuff like that, but that to me has never been the interesting part, it's more about how objects and images accumulate meaning over time. Even with the textile photographs, the fact that they got to me over eBay,



Lisa Oppenheim, *Killed Negatives, After Walker Evans*, 2015. digital c-prints 8 5/8 × 26 7/8 inches; 21.9 × 68.2

these pre-cut scraps sometimes 100 years after they were originally produced, is pretty amazing. What kind of lives did these textiles have before they landed in my mailbox?

cm (overall) 8 5/8 × 12 5/8 inches; 21.9 × 32.1 cm (each panel framed) Edition of 4, 2 APs Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

And there's also something very interesting in relation to women's labor. Traditionally, textile workers have predominately been women—it's this very mechanized task—but then the remnants of their work are being sold for quilt-making, which is another sort of practice of women, but a more handmade, non-industrial, leisure kind of activity. That really interested me. Both the Hine images and these fabric images contain within them two very different iterations of women's labor.

**Rail:** The theme of women's labor was something that really stuck out to me, mostly because Karen Archey did such a good job writing about it in the catalogues you've made together. One of the things she notes in the catalogue for the MOCA show is this point of being conscious and thoughtful about women's labor with the *Leisure Work* (2012) series, and then she moves to a different level to consider Hine, and *then* she turns her attention to the team of women who worked on your show at MOCA, as third kind of women's labor. I appreciate the way that you draw attention to women's labor without being didactic, but instead embody the politics in a more mindful way.

**Oppenheim:** Thank you for noticing that. That part is very important to me, because it's not just what you make work about, it's how you try to produce the kind of parity or fairness in the world—how do you enact your politics in a direct way? There have always been more women in art school, but when you look at gallery rosters, it looks very different. Maybe what I can do is just work on enacting what I see as reversal of that tendency my own practice, and in my own life. And one thing is just to work with women—you can't choose this stuff all the time, but when I can, that's important to me. The majority of the people who I collaborate with are women. Partially because they're also my friends. Karen is a very close friend; Maika Pollack is a very close friend.



Lisa Oppenheim, *Leisure Work (Version IV)*, 2012. suite of 5 silver gelatin photographs 25 × 133 inches; 63.5 × 337.8 cm (overall) 25 × 21 inches; 63.5 × 53.3 cm (each framed) 24 × 20 inches; 61 × 50.8 cm (each unframed) Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

**Rail:** I saw how Pollack stood up for you, against Ken Johnson, after your participation in the New Photography show at MoMA in 2013. Johnson was such ungenerous reader of your work, and she went on record disputing him.

**Oppenheim:** What was actually really funny was that I met Maika the night she wrote that article, before it was published. We met at a dinner party. And so our friendship actually in some way postdates that, but only just by a dinner. [Laughter]

**Rail:** I don't find it too surprising given the amount of serendipity that seems to occur in your art practice.

**Oppenheim:** That's why it's important to keep yourself open. The next person who you meet at an opening or a dinner could be your next collaborator. This idea of networking is very crucial to me. It

doesn't have to do with any kind of official channel, it can be more informal. Which is why, for instance, you'll say, "Hey, I'm interested in this poet. I'm looking for a poet who writes around these ideas." And you meet a friend, who has another friend, and all of a sudden that opens up your world. That kind of respect for and reliance on the knowledge and talents of your peers, and creating a peer group for yourself, makes being an artist—and more specifically being a woman artist—more sustainable long-term, because you create a support structure.

**Rail:** Earlier you mentioned Baldessari, and I want to circle back to him. I get the sense that he might be an important figure for you. You seem to engage in similar, can I say, artistic strategies? Like the foregrounding of a conceptual gesture in a series of photos. The idea really hit home when I was thinking about your work *The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else* (2006). It reminded me of Baldessarri's piece, *Goodbye to Boats (Sailing Out)* (1972 – 73). It's the piece where he is on some kind of embankment, waving to random boats in the harbor. The genesis of that work was an old photo he found of his Dad waving to his mother, who was departing on a boat. When you put these two bodies of work side by side, not only is there a visual parallel with the way you both frame a body of water, but you are both also corresponding with anonymous figures who really don't know anything about what you're doing. For you it was the soldiers, for him it was the boaters. Both of your works essentially began with the discovery of a photo that you didn't take.

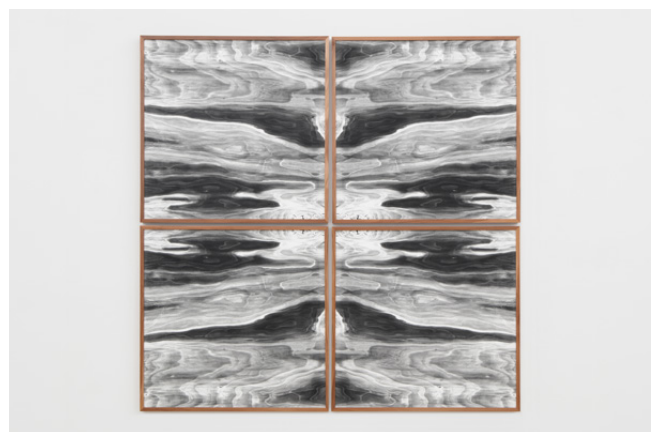
**Oppenheim:** You know, it's funny—he's not an artist I've put a ton of thought into, but of course now, hearing you speak, and thinking more broadly—of course he's a big influence. A lot of those Baldessari works were the first kind of conceptual artworks I connected with in a meaningful way. There's an emotional quality to that work, especially, that I am very much drawn too. And to Baldessari's humor. I mean, his work is a lot funnier than mine. [Laughter]

**Rail:** You both seem to have fun making your work. I think that the action of the solarizing in the darkroom, lighting up a flare in that space—it must have been fun!

**Oppenheim:** I really do enjoy making art, and I enjoy these strange kinds of worlds that you encounter through just following your materials; just interesting people. You know? For example, when I was working on those wood pieces, nobody wanted to bother with me, but then I found this one guy...

**Rail:** I'm quite curious how you managed to get these thin slices of trees.

**Oppenheim:** Well, I called a bunch of companies, and they mostly responded saying, "How many pieces of wood are you looking for?" And I would say, "I don't know, six, seven?" They would basically just laugh me off the phone. But then I found this one guy in Michigan who was very helpful. I was not the usual client. And so I developed this relationship with him—we started working together on stuff, he would send me things, I would show him my test prints, and he thought it was kind of cool, and he had suggestions of other wood types.



Lisa Oppenheim, *Landscape Portraits (Apple)* (Version V)

And then he invited me to come to his warehouse in Michigan, to just look through and pick whatever I wanted. And so I went up there, and—I'm a nice Jewish girl from New York, with academic parents, very left-wing; my parents were '68ers, I grew up in a very particular kind of way—and then going to western Michigan...

2016. set of four silver gelatin photographs in apple frames. 49 × 49 inches; 124.5 × 124.5 cm (overall) 24 × 24 inches; 61 × 61 cm (each frame)

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

So I drive up to his property, and he wants to give me a tour in his Hummer. And there's Fox News constantly running, everywhere. And there are crosses everywhere, and he sort of speaks to me in that weird Bible-speak, and I'm like, "Oh my god, where did I land?" I was far from home. But I was from Mars too, from his perspective. He tried to convert me a couple of times, realized that wasn't going to work; and he asked me some vaguely anti-Semitic questions, which was somewhat of a shock.

**Rail:** But you stayed?

**Oppenheim:** Well, I needed stuff from him too, in all fairness, but I stopped working with him after the election. Before last November, I felt in a position, because he liked and trusted me, to try to maybe change his mind about a couple of things, especially some of the anti-Semitic stuff, you know? At least try. And I felt his views were marginal and therefore maybe less threatening. But then, after the election, I thought: enough is enough; these are the people in power now, and instead of speaking to some fringe guy, I'm doing business with someone who represents ideas similar to those of our current administration, which I despise.

**Rail:** I get that. But I don't want to get into Trump or the politics of his followers. So, how about that eclipse on Monday? I mean, the phenomenon of it was almost, to me, more interesting than the thing itself.

**Oppenheim:** Something I found really interesting about the eclipse was all the viewing devices people made, using things like cardboard boxes and tissue paper. Aesthetically, those things were kind of beautiful, and so shamelessly homemade and really charming. There was a kind of Mr. Wizard engagement level—like kid science. I think that in terms of producing curiosity, and working with the materials that you have around you, it's empowering to know how the technology in your hands works!

I mean, I don't have a background in computer science, but I can take a Bolex 16 mm film camera apart, and put it back together again. It's not that hard. And then you can really see how everything is working, and once you understand that, you can intervene on many different levels. And that to me is why I think working with these analog formats—I don't exclusively work with analogue formats, but mostly—is that they allow for that kind of intervention.

**Rail:** Ah yes, the Bolex. I'm glad you mentioned it because I wanted to ask about how you transitioned from making films to making still images.

**Oppenheim:** Well, I studied as an undergraduate at Brown with Leslie Thornton, who's an amazing



experimental filmmaker. Actually, she's an artist whose primary medium is film. A lot of her early work that really influenced me, like *Adynata* (1983), were films that incorporated a lot of archival imagery. She kind of gave me this idea that you could be a filmmaker, and not actually shoot that much. And then I started looking at a lot of Hollis Frampton's work; many of his films—though I'm thinking particularly of *Zorn's Lemma* (1970) and *(nostalgia)* (1971)—engage with this relationship between photography and film. I mean, film is really just composed of a bunch of still images, in its classic 16 mm, or any kind of celluloid-based form.

**Rail:** Sequencing, in an almost cinematic or quasi-narrative way, seems to be an aesthetic choice you are drawn to. I'm thinking of the sequence of *Leisure Work*, but also *The Sun is Always Setting*, which I have not seen but understand to be a series of 35mm slides, so that the viewer's experience is literally watching a sun set. Of course the *Lunagrams* (2010) and *Heilograms* (2011) draw a certain strength from sequential nature of your efforts.

**Oppenheim:** I do think of my photographic work as time-based. And maybe that's articulated differently in different projects. There are all sorts of moments that are critical to how a photograph is both made and received—I don't think there isn't one "decisive moment" as Cartier-Bresson writes about. For instance, with the Walker Evans work, there's this interesting gap between the instance of Evans taking the picture, of Stryker punching a hole in the negative, and of me photographing something that could have been in that hole. It's this accumulation of time between certain instances that both makes the work and produces its meaning.

**Rail:** My favorite aspect of the *Killed Negatives* project is the inconsistency of attempts from one picture to the next. Sometimes you offer two possibilities, sometimes three, sometimes only one. What seems important is the gesture, the act of attempting to fill a gap. I like that there is a conceptual strategy in place, but it's flexible—it's not trying to be definitive. It's not like you're trying to "fix" the picture or anything.

**Oppenheim:** Art isn't providing answers to things. If it had been just one-to-one, all of them, that sort of creates this—

**Rail:** An "I solved it" type of feeling.

**Oppenheim:** Yeah, and in art there are really no problems. There are just questions. I'm drawn to work that points to questions, rather than work that tries to solve problems.

**Rail:** I'm not surprised. You are an artist who seems to enjoy a meandering process. I mean, one question leads to another question, which leads to another question. It's a lot more fun than trying to get from A to B as fast as possible. It's more like taking the scenic route.

**Oppenheim:**[Laughter] I take the scenic route whenever I can.

**Rail:** It really just comes down to a simple set of question: what type of experience do you want to have, and how are you going to create the conditions for that experience? When I go into an art gallery, I make a conscious decision to not read any gallery literature before I take in the artwork.

Otherwise I sort of short-circuit any opportunity to be creative or imaginative. The chance for discovery gets much slimmer when you allow yourself to be told what to look for in a photograph or a painting or whatever.

**Oppenheim:** I think it's also about going in and trying to create an emotional connection. The material I work with—I love being in the darkroom, I love doing all that stuff. It's so pleasurable for me. I have a real emotional relationship to that process. But even with those Lewis Hine photographs—my experience with those images maybe isn't pleasurable in the same way, but it's emotional. My great-grandparents were in the textile business. So I see those images and I think, this could be my great-grandmother. Immigrant textile workers, that's who I descend from; so I feel a certain connection to those images. And thinking about what kind of experience you want to make for a viewer—as a maker, if I have this sort of emotional engagement with the material—it's not something that's solely of interest in some kind of academic or intellectual way. I mean, there has to be that too, but if you don't have that intensity of feeling about the work, it's hard to get anyone else to care.

---

**CONTRIBUTOR**

**Charles Schultz**

Charles Schultz is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Get the *Rail* delivered to your doorstep.

**Start Your Subscription Today!**