PHOTO ESSAY

Killed Negatives: Depicting Poverty, Staging Prosperity

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Arthur Rothenstein (1915–1985), Untitled

A famous photographic commissioning project that took place in the US in the 1930s was revisited, and thus a new aspect of it was revealed, through a curatorial initiative at Whitechapel Gallery's Archive Gallery in 2018. The exhibition *Killed Negatives: Unseen Images of America in the 1930s*, which took place from 16 May to 26 August 2018, presented to the public, for the first time, a surprising reality.

https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/killed-negatives-unseen-images-1930s-america/

The original commissioning project, known as the "FSA Commissions", was part of the New Deal (the immense funding programme involving many strands across the US economy). The New Deal started during the Franklin Roosevelt administration, after the dramatic American financial crash of 1929. Running from 1933 to 1939 it aimed to create safeguards with respect to the banking industry and to reflate the economy.

The original FSA Commissions project is renowned for marking an important moment in the history of photography, and the history of America in general, as well as constituting a celebrated moment of photojournalism.

The focus of this short photo essay, which is in essence a long caption to the photographs presented, is the selection process (a process of censorship in essence) that was deployed in order for the project to be delivered to government officials and the American public successfully, and thus for this new history to be created.

One of the state bodies involved in delivering the New Deal was the Farm Security Administration, which took on the responsibility for drawing up records of farmland and administering financial support to farmers.

Poverty, a state previously imagined as a result of weakness of the individual or an organisation and mainly occurring in the urban centres, now had to be re-framed. For the first time, there was a social recognition of widespread rural poverty and, hence, the need for the New Deal. Seventy-eight percent of the US rural population was experiencing poverty. While those who were poor before the crash (i.e. the chronically poor) were considered immoral, dangerous, and personally weak, now the population of the deserving poor became the face of the FSA.

There was a huge financial investment in the project, which lasted several years. For the government officials, though, the support given to the farmers was not enough on its own; the aid process had to be recorded and proven, and consequently widely disseminated to the public.

Deserving poor families had to apply and when accepted they could become "clients" of the FSA. The business-driven word "client" is used frequently in all the documentation, instead of "farmer", "family" or "individual". The criteria for accepting a farmer onto the programme is not clear. We only know that this was decided after interviews conducted by FSA's local administrators, sometime on site, where people lived. Some studies report that black families were found "unfit" more frequently than white families; as a result, black families had to be uprooted rather than helped to stay.

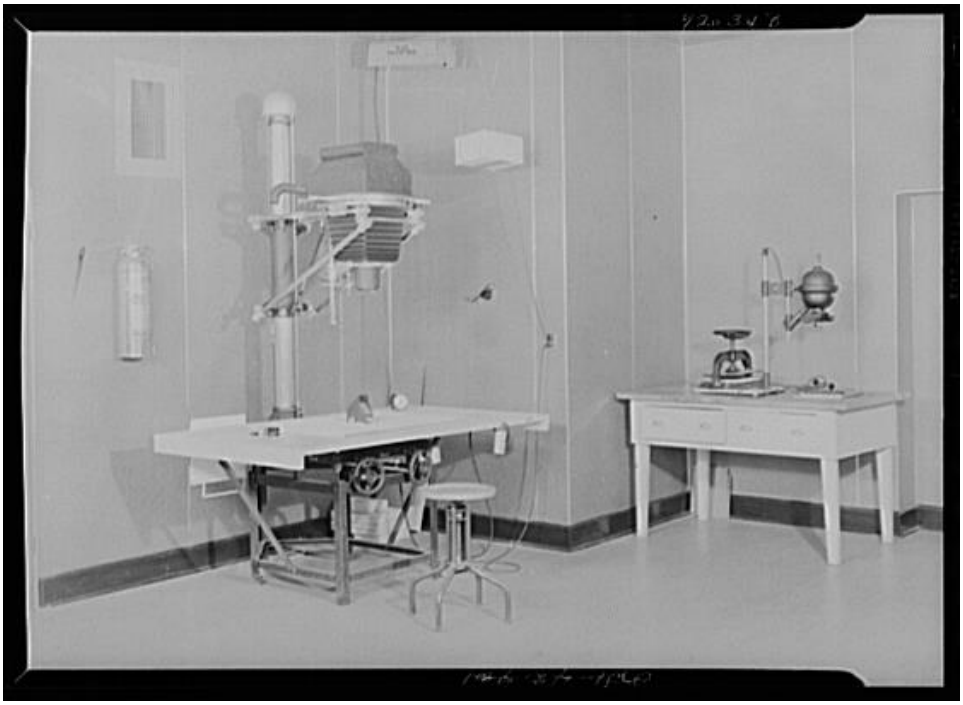
People appear in those images locked in dire poverty, living in the humblest of circumstances, often as sharecroppers performing backbreaking work, picking crops, planting trees, etc. Sometimes, people who are struggling are juxtaposed near others who are more comfortable and living in better conditions. What we see is working people, calloused hands, domestic labour,

and tired feet. This is hard work, making it clear to all viewers what it once meant to be "dirt poor".

During the FSA project famous photographers were commissioned by Roy Stryker, the director of the programme. Some are among the most celebrated American street photographers of the 20th century—for example, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, and others.

The purpose of the original commission was twofold. Objectively, it was to record the farmland and farmers living there, and in essence to record the financial assistance offered to farmers by the FSA. However, a broader and more long-term goal was based on the fact that, by presenting the recovery of the farmers, these photographs could bring back hope to a country shattered by the financial crisis. Essentially, the brief was to photograph poverty but only so that it could eventually be staged, or "faked", as prosperity. How this was done will be explained below.

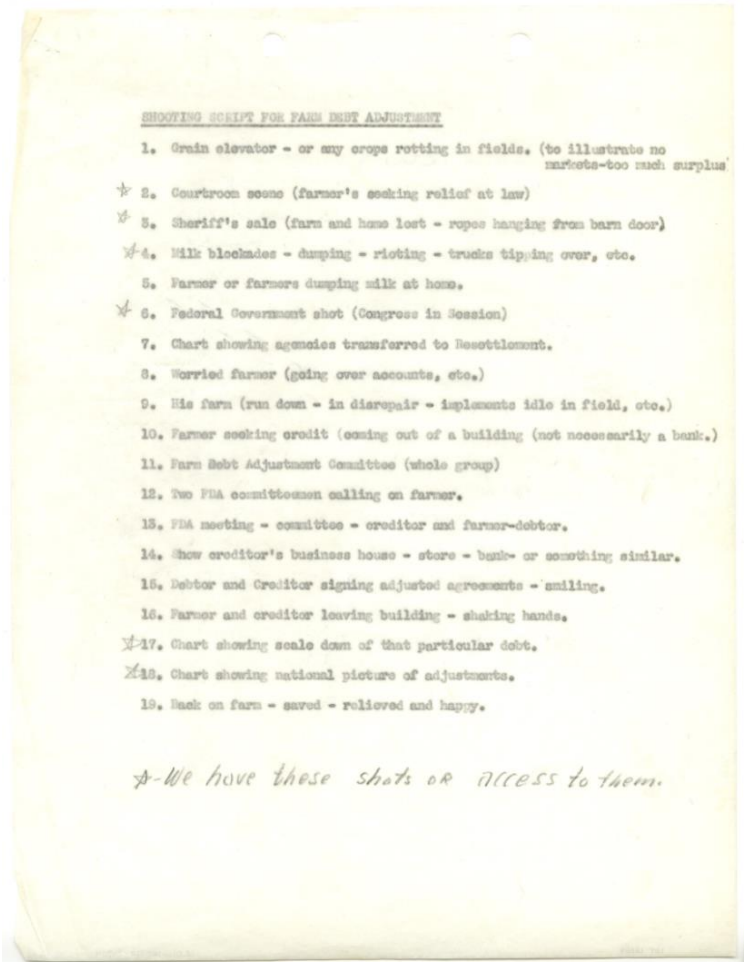
Roy Stryker was heading the photographic commissions for the FSA. Whilst he was approaching and inviting photographers to take on the commissions in different parts of the country, he was also funding state-of-the-art photographic darkrooms. These were equipped with the latest apparatus and had trained technicians in place. When the photographers sent in their films from the countryside to the FSA, the facilities enabled the FSA to process them quickly and progress to the selection and then the printing of the final photographs, which would be ready for publication in selected national press outlets, such as *Life Magazine* or *Picture Post*.



Ben Shahn (1898–1969), Untitled photo, possibly related to: Resident at Amite City, Louisiana

What the exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery revealed for the first time to the public was the methodology deployed in selecting the final images and thus in creating this famous history: both the commission briefs as well as the selection methods that Roy Stryker put into action were ruthless. Photographers were paid a good salary to travel and take their pictures, and were obliged by strict

contracts to send all of their rolls of films on a weekly basis back to the FSA. The careful staging started from the brief they would give out to the photographers, followed by specific shooting scripts. The brief was very specific, and the "shooting scripts" were sent to them for every project they were undertaking. These scripts were written carefully, instructing the photographers to return the shots, and always following the same pattern, which created a narrative of progress and improvement. The first instruction was to depict the situation as a harsh condition (instructions include descriptions such as “take photographs of animals with parched tongues” or “position families in order of age”); as the instructions continued from 1 to 10, the photographer was told to follow specific guidelines and to progressively show how the farmers were becoming "happier", "more well-off" and all-in-all contented, due to FSA funding.



SHOOTING SCRIPT FOR FARM DEBT ADJUSTMENT

1. Grain elevator - or any crops rotting in fields. (to illustrate no markets-too much surplus)
2. Courtroom scene (farmer's seeking relief at law)
3. Sheriff's sale (farm and home lost - ropes hanging from barn door)
4. Milk blockades - dumping - rioting - trucks tipping over, etc.
5. Farmer or farmers dumping milk at home.
6. Federal Government shot (Congress in Session)
7. Chart showing agencies transferred to Resettlement.
8. Worried farmer (going over accounts, etc.)
9. His farm (run down - in disrepair - implements idle in field, etc.)
10. Farmer seeking credit (coming out of a building (not necessarily a bank.)
11. Farm Debt Adjustment Committee (whole group)
12. Two FDA committeemen calling on farmer.
13. FDA meeting - committee - creditor and farmer-debtor.
14. Show creditor's business house - store - bank- or something similar.
15. Debtor and Creditor signing adjusted agreements - smiling.
16. Farmer and creditor leaving building - shaking hands.
17. Chart showing scale down of that particular debt.
18. Chart showing national picture of adjustments.
19. Back on farm - saved - relieved and happy.

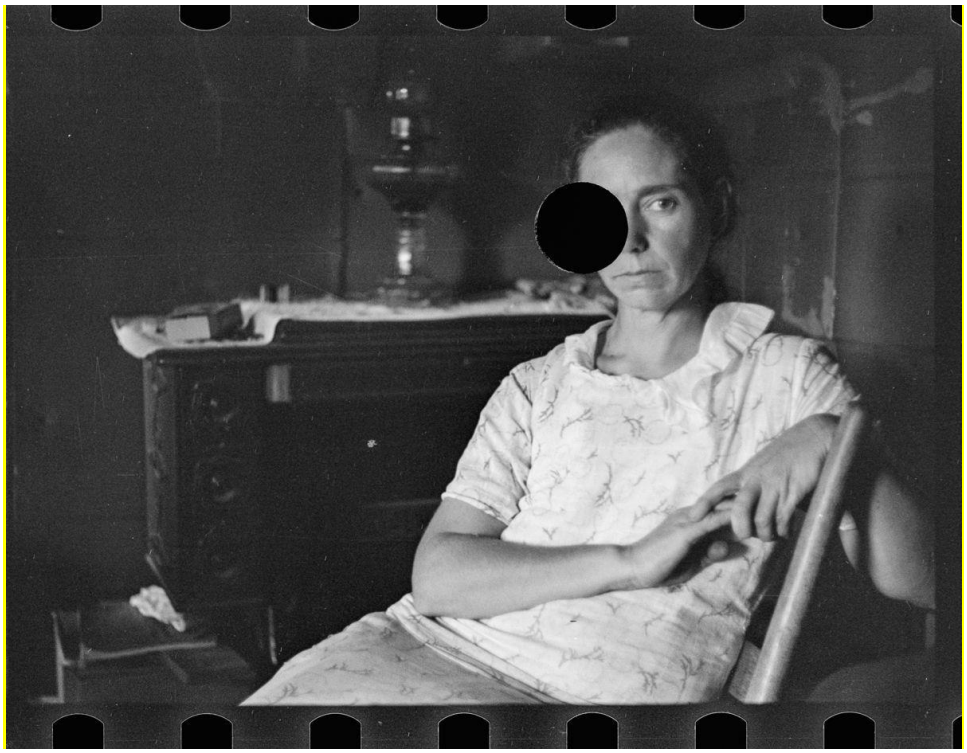
*-We have these shots or access to them.

Shooting Script for Farm Debt Adjustment, Library of Congress

The situation was very contrived and it is very difficult to see how the photographers could use the camera as a political tool and express what they were thinking about the situation they were witnessing. The worst part is, when it came to select what was to be kept, Stryker and his assistants would select the images they felt were true to their brief, while all the other images were punctured through with a hole puncher, and rendered unusable for the future. In

the exhibition we included approximately 70 images of the thousands of "killed" negatives (as they called them) that exist, as well as important documents from the FSA that attest to the nature of the commission, which was to a certain extent extremely controlling.

Russell Lee (1903–1986), Untitled photo, possibly related to: Mr. Tronson, farmer near Wheelock, North Dakota, 1937

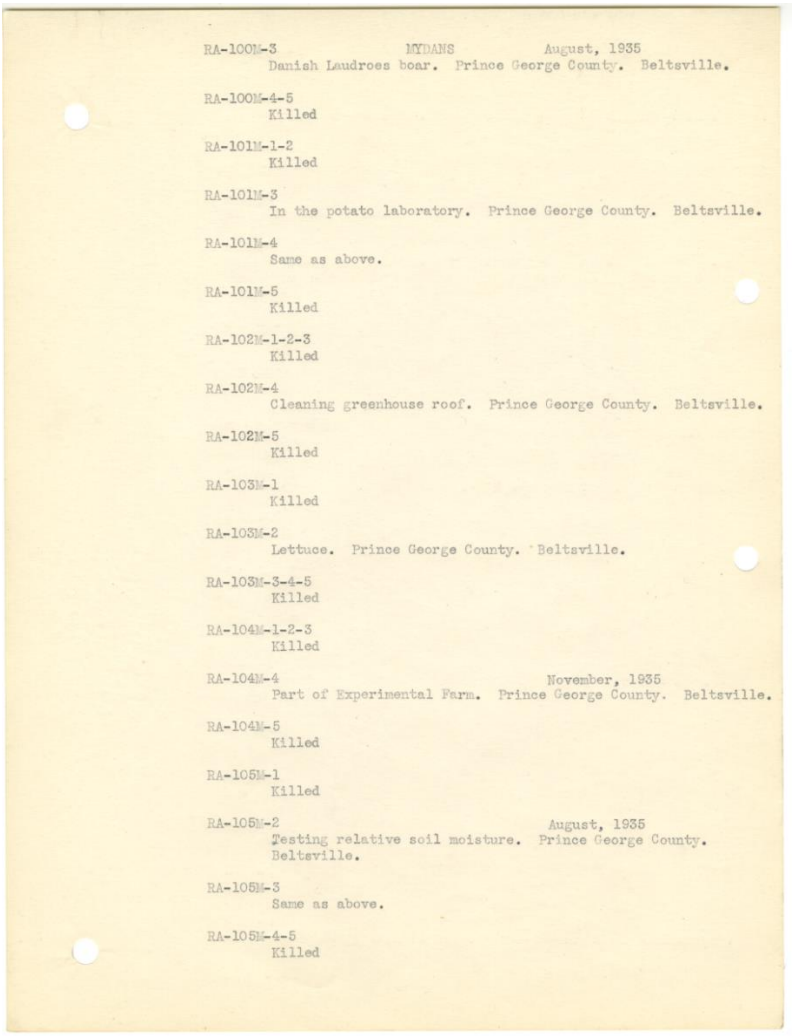


Ben Shahn (1898–1969), Untitled photo, possibly related to: Family of rehabilitation client, Boone County, Arkansas, 1935

Carl Mydans (1907–2004), Untitled photo, possibly related to: Transients clearing land. Prince George's County, Maryland, 1935

Arthur Rothstein (1915–1985), Untitled photo, possibly related to: Negro rehabilitation client, Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana, 1935

This meticulous documentation of the violent act of destroying the negatives, under the justification of "selection", was itself very carefully recorded. Perhaps this was part of the success of the civil servant senior administrator—not only to deliver but to show that he had prevented the public from seeing unfit images! The destruction of the negatives, of course, made it impossible for the images to be ever used again, either by the photographer, or the press, especially elements of the press which were critical of the Roosevelt administration.



RA-100M-3 MYDANS August, 1935
Danish Landrace boar. Prince George County. Beltsville.

RA-100M-4-5
Killed

RA-101M-1-2
Killed

RA-101M-3
In the potato laboratory. Prince George County. Beltsville.

RA-101M-4
Same as above.

RA-101M-5
Killed

RA-102M-1-2-3
Killed

RA-102M-4
Cleaning greenhouse roof. Prince George County. Beltsville.

RA-102M-5
Killed

RA-103M-1
Killed

RA-103M-2
Lettuce. Prince George County. Beltsville.

RA-103M-3-4-5
Killed

RA-104M-1-2-3
Killed

RA-104M-4 November, 1935
Part of Experimental Farm. Prince George County. Beltsville.

RA-104M-5
Killed

RA-105M-1
Killed

RA-105M-2 August, 1935
Testing relative soil moisture. Prince George County.
Beltsville.

RA-105M-3
Same as above.

RA-105M-4-5
Killed

Caption sheet for Carl Mydans's negatives, Library of Congress. It shows that the censored negatives were listed as "killed" and marked as such, one by one.

But why were the images censored? After considering all the documentation, the author and curator of the exhibition came to the conclusion that, apart from the very few occasions where there were obvious technical errors, the people shown in all the other cases—depictions of the human body in its environment—were either too poor or too healthy. Neither of these conditions was desirable, as the project wanted to reveal the *transformation* of the body, from a battered entity to a recovered entity. What was needed more than anything else was not to depict the body but to show the process of improvement. Perhaps slums where black

communities lived, ones that Carl Mydans photographed repeatedly, were too realistically poor; or the Mexican refugees that Dorothea Lange stayed with and recorded daily were somewhat too hopeless to make the case. The FSA wanted a particular type of photographer who would follow instructions and depict poverty and the poor body as something temporary, which can easily develop into something more prosperous. Dorothea Lange was sacked and rehired three times by Roy Stryker because she was not delivering what they wanted. At the same time, she was a good photographer and a feisty person, so she stuck to her guns and was always taken back.

John Vachon (1914–1975), Untitled photo, possibly related to: County supervisor talking with FSA client. Coffey County, Kansas

Carl Mydans (1907–2004), Untitled photo, possibly related to: Healthy white children, Washington, D.C.

Today, we have to ask: how do photographs which are testaments to censorship, and to limitations placed on the photographers' freedom of expression, become contemporary images? These are images which, seen today, inside a contemporary art gallery, have a twofold impact on the viewer: at first, they shock and alert us, but at the same time they attract us significantly. When *Killed Negatives* were brought inside the Whitechapel Gallery and viewed by art audiences, they became conceptual, abstract, and mesmerising, regardless of what we were actually witnessing and of the violence and censorship that was revealed concerning the method of their production.

Arthur Rothstein (1915–1985), Untitled

John Vachon (1914–1975), Untitled, possibly related to: Wife of a resettled farmer, Roanoke Farms, North Carolina