The Criminal Type
curated by Elizabeth Breiner
September 7 - October 26, 2019

What does a criminal look like? Spectatorship has been tied up with crime and punishment since the first public executions; but in no country has this question been given such continuous priority over other social problems as in the United States, where mugshot tabloids and true life crime shows coexist with open digital records and juried trials. Denying privacy to the accused—indeed, demanding their visibility—has long been a preemptively punitive feature of the American judicial system; the internet and new algorithm-based technology have only magnified the impact, yielding more multifaceted and discreet forms of digital punishment. This exhibition examines the historical exploitation of photography as a weapon of scientific criminology, side by side with the work of select contemporary artists who deploy the “criminal” portrait as a form of resistance against this repressive and deterministic usage.

Formal efforts to pin down the “criminal type” can be traced back to the 19th century classification craze, which saw scientific and criminological research harness the new medium of photography to chart and predict different observable traits and forms of aberrance, in everything from birds’ wingspans to human craniums. If the typical criminal could be positively defined, then not only could crime be prevented but the inherent difference and goodness of all other “normal” types assured. But who was establishing the parameters of the normal?

From its earliest incarnations, the field of criminology was rooted in notions of biological and moral superiority, reflecting widespread concerns in the late 1800s over the “degeneration” of the European races. A series of leading researchers in the new medium of photography to chart and predict different observable traits and forms of aberrance, in everything from birds’ wingspans to human craniums. If the typical criminal could be positively defined, then not only could crime be prevented but the inherent difference and goodness of all other “normal” types assured. But who was establishing the parameters of the normal?

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active, prevent juries from seeing suspects’ mugshots to avoid rogues’ gallery was “as much an indisputable indication of at first of only convicted offenders, and later of the accused in the preceding decades to catalogue and display portraits of criminal records combining physical measurements of Bertillon, who introduced the first standardized system of physical determinism was Parisian police officer Alphonse Finally formalizing the juridical application of these principles identified by particular features including hawk-like or flat noses, dark skin, and tattoos. If one possessed five or more characteristics from arrestee’s mugshots, they were deemed beyond criminal category without having even committed a crime. Finally, legally, the juridical application of these principles of physical determinism was Parisian police officer Alphonse Bertillon, who introduced the first standardized system of physical determinism was Parisian police officer Alphonse Bertillon, who introduced the first standardized system of physical determinism. Bertillon's system was based on the theory that each person has unique physical features that can be measured and recorded to identify individuals. However, this system was later proven to be unreliable, and its use as a means of identification was abandoned.

In its aesthetic evolution, the mugshot has come to increasingly function as a symbol of criminality, representing the face of the criminal.