

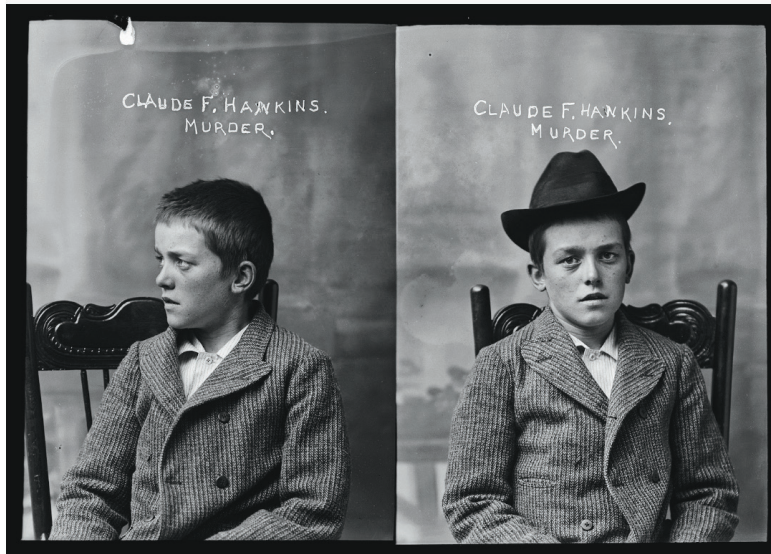
JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

The Criminal Type

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Arne Svenson, Claude F. Hankins from the series Prisoners, 1997/2019, Digital reproduction of glass plate negatives from early 20th c

What does a criminal look like? Taking shape around the mid-19th century, the field of positivist criminology sought to satisfy this widespread preoccupation, putting the new medium of photography to work in service of various systems for classifying and predicting the so-called "criminal type." The work of foundational figures in the field like Cesare Lombroso and Francis Galton shows early criminology's reliance on a series of reductive and self-reinforcing categories, born from contemporaneous theories of biological and moral superiority. These insidious roots linger on in the notion of criminality as a permanent state, an idea that continues to discreetly influence existing social and juridical structures. We see this in the present-day use of algorithms to inform such decisions as bail eligibility and prison sentencing, and in the familiar form of the mugshot, which from its earliest incarnations has served as a punishment in its own right.

The Criminal Type at apexart, curated by Elizabeth Breiner, traces the continuity between 19th century American rogues' galleries, which police precincts assembled to catalogue and display mugshot portraits of accused criminals, and modern websites like Mugshots.com, part of a larger industry that profits off the humiliation and degradation of those who can often least afford it. In both cases, the mugshot's function as a criminological resource has been tainted by its double-life as a form of public entertainment.

Despite the highly damaging stigma of guilt the mugshot carries both in the courtroom and in the court of public opinion, American efforts to regulate its dissemination have been uniquely lax, raising questions about our unwillingness to acknowledge the relation between justice and privacy. For how long should individuals be branded as criminals after serving their time? How should we contend with this new form of digital punishment that indiscriminately and permanently marks the accused and convicted alike? Does the dissemination of mugshots undermine the presumption of innocence upon which our criminal justice system is based?

Work by contemporary artists responding to these and related questions will be shown alongside photographs and other materials illustrating the key criminological theories of the 19th century and the entwined history of the mugshot.

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The story starts back in the 19th century, with the broad efforts to apply scientific observation to the prediction of criminality. Two silhouettes (one male, one female) from the collection of the British eugenicist Francis Galton mark the beginning of using "objective" portraiture to predict criminal behavior or "inferior" types. The Italian physician Cesare Lombroso took this idea further, making precise (and strangely surreal) measurements of the faces of criminals, looking for evidence of biological inferiority. And the Parisian police officer Alphonse Bertillon then expanded and codified these principles into a standard system in the 1890s, where the mug shot (front and side views) became the critical tool for assessing offenders. The show includes a densely illustrated poster with categories of eyes, noses, ears, contours of heads, and general hairiness that might be a match for criminal behavior.

One of the indirect consequences of this push toward formalization and standardized record keeping was that the mug shot became ubiquitous in the criminal justice system. An 1890s image from Jacob Riis shows the mug shot collection at New York City police headquarters – the so-called "rogue's gallery" of the convicted – and this public display soon evolved to include the accused and "most wanted". Fast forward to the present, and the digital mugshot has taken on an unwieldy life of its own. Paolo Cirio's *Obscurity* project tracks the problem, finding that Internet websites are scraping police precinct records, publishing the images, and then charging those implicated for the removal of the photographs. His installation blurs an array of mug shots (thereby returning a sense of privacy to those depicted) and exposes the rights infractions and scams taking place. With images effectively circulating forever on the Internet, the mug shots have become a form of never-ending punishment (regardless of whether the accused was guilty or not) – there is seemingly no escape or recourse from the negative exposure.

Two other recent artistic projects seek to get behind the physical facade of the mug shot. Eric Etheridge matches mug shots of the 1960s Freedom Riders with new portraits of the same people, adding in interview snippets that update their personal stories. The pairings unpack the idea of permanent criminality, showing how these activists went on to lead lives of purpose and accomplishment. And Arne Svenson approaches the legacy of the mug shot from a different angle, seeing aesthetic sensitivity in a group of early 1900s mugshots from California made by a local studio photographer. Enlarged and re-presented more as artworks, the faces of those marked as murderers or thieves are seen with attentive compassion, recalibrating our perception of their humanity.

The last work in the show most fully brings us into the uneven reality of an AI-controlled contemporary world. Joy Buolamwini's video *AI, Ain't I a Woman?* tests AI software with various images of famous black women: Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Serena Williams, and others, even a vintage portrait of Sojourner Truth. The software repeatedly identifies these easily-recognized women as male, exposing the biases of race and gender that have inadvertently been baked into the algorithms. And in a sense, we thus come full circle back to the problems of the mug shot and the so-called scientific profiling of people in photographs – the technologies may have radically changed, but foundation flaws with categorizing people based on their resemblance to (or adherence to) some abstract model are largely the same.

This small exhibit does a terrific job of succinctly connecting the dots between past and present, seeing the echoes of 19th century failures reproduced in the futuristic tools of today. It smartly reminds us of the limits of what a rigid photograph like a mug shot can actually tell us, and of the perils we face when we collectively use such photographs without enough nuance and understanding.

Collector's POV: Since this is effectively a museum show, there are of course no posted prices, and given the group show format, we will forgo our usual discussion of gallery representation relationships and secondary market histories.



Read more about: [Arne Svenson](#), [Eric Etheridge](#), [Jacob Riis](#), [Paolo Cirio](#), [Zora J. Murff](#), [Apexart](#)

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