Crowds are the temporary groups that strangers form. They take shape at baseball games and in subway stations, at patriotic parades and in angry riots. Fickle and ephemeral, crowds can be joyous, destructive, or somber.

“A World of Strangers: Crowds in American Art” explores how artists have represented these teeming and fluid masses from the early 20th century to today. This focused loan exhibition features 21 prints, photographs, and other works by artists such as George Bellows, Walker Evans, Armin Landeck, George Luks, Benton Murdoch Spruance, and Weegee. By rendering people as patterns of dots, murky silhouettes, or river-like currents of cars, these and other artists create a form of abstraction that erases individuality and tames the crowd’s restless energy.

This exhibition is supported by the Susan and Stephen Chandler Exhibition Endowment.

Armin Landeck
Manhattan Vista, 1934

Huntington Art Gallery | The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
We live in a world of strangers. Whether on the freeway, on airplanes, or at art galleries, the majority of people we encounter pass by us unnoticed. Crowds are the temporary groups of strangers formed at baseball games, parades, riots, or wherever people who do not know each other congregate. Ephemeral and fickle, they can be joyous, destructive, or somber. This exhibition’s subject is not crowds themselves, but the representational strategies artists use to depict them. Interestingly, even though the artists exhibited here are not typically associated with abstraction, their approaches tend to simplify and reduce. One could even argue that the crowd gave rise to abstraction in the first place.

Alfred Stieglitz’s *The Steerage* (1907), with its jagged shipboard architecture that shapes the crowd, opens the exhibition. Here we find human beings corralled and overshadowed by the machinery of an early 20th-century steamship. It may come as a surprise, then, that their centrality to the photograph has often gone unnoticed by most commentators, who choose to focus instead on the angular motif of its composition. One suspects that its zigzags charmed the cubist painter Pablo Picasso, who reportedly admired *The Steerage*, saying, “This photographer is working in the same spirit as I am.”

However, for all the subsequent attention given to its sharp angles and role as a marker of Stieglitz’s transition from a moody pictorialist style of photography to a sharp-focused documentary one, it was the steerage passengers themselves that spurred Stieglitz to take the picture in the first place, an elision recently noted by photography historians Jason Francisco and Elizabeth Anne McCauley. In the 1940s, Stieglitz recounted the picture’s genesis during a trip from New York to Bremen, Germany. Fed up with the grating “nouveaux riches” in his first-class cabin, he wandered to the steerage passengers’ deck area, where, upon seeing them, he had an epiphany: “I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life.” He rushed back to his cabin to retrieve his bulky camera and exposed the plate.

Curiously, Stieglitz’s description is generic. It could be any photograph. (Most photographs have shapes after all.) His language partially suppresses the social content—the crowd on deck—and speaks only of the photograph’s formal qualities. Human beings have been reduced to “shapes related to each other.” Yet shipboard conditions, as Stieglitz surely knew, were disgusting. In 1909, the *New York Times* ran an exposé under the lurid headline “Women in Steerage Grossly...”
The photograph ran the following day in PM, a tabloid newspaper, with the headline “Brooklyn Schoolchildren See Gambler Murdered in Street.” Unlike the newspaper’s bare descriptive caption, Weegee’s title, *First Murder*, has ironic moral bite. He aligns the photograph’s grisly subject matter with the firsts that constitute an American childhood: first birthdays, first grade, first adult teeth, and first kisses. The title reduces the ghastly event to a banal milestone. Moreover, Weegee adds another turn to the moralizing screw: While watching the crowd take in the murder’s aftermath, we by proxy also stare at the unseen atrocity off-camera. We too gather around a violent death that occurred on a Brooklyn sidewalk one afternoon more than half a century ago. Weegee offers a blistering statement about the power of another’s misfortune to bring people together. It is a species of *Schadenfreude*, for sure, but one whose pleasure seems to fold back on itself in confusion and distress.

In comparison to Weegee’s photograph, Torkel Korling’s *Oak Street Beach* hardly registers as an event at all. Perched in an upper floor of Chicago’s Drake Hotel, Korling’s viewpoint crops much of Lake Shore Drive (on the left) and miniaturizes beachgoers. The pattern they form is the result of everyone seeking a bubble of space, a margin of privacy. Their individual decisions when viewed from this distance seem to shift from being voluntary and willful to something statistical. They could just as easily be scattered seeds. Neither chaotic nor wholly predictable, the beachgoers’ pattern of distribution is what ecologists studying plant and animal populations call dispersion. Korling takes a day at the beach—the epitome of free time outside of the scheduled increments of the working day—and shows how regimentation saturates leisure.

Weegee, in contrast to the pictorialist style of Stieglitz and his circle, was a news photographer. *First Murder* was taken on the steps of Public School 143 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on Oct. 8, 1941. As schoolchildren were let out for the day, Peter Mancuso, a local mafioso, was gunned down in the street outside the school. The photograph’s macabre power comes from the onlookers’ variety of emotional responses. From gleeful to despondent, they jostle to see the victim. Weegee’s photograph lassoes them together in a single ragged circle, their flashlit faces popping against the dark background. In a word, he gives us a crowd, though one utterly unlike Struss’s ethereal moon watchers.

Ill-Used.” The article documents “[t]he vile language of the men, the screams of the women defending themselves, [and] the crying of children” as some of the outrages foisted on the steerage class by unscrupulous ship companies. And yet all this stays repressed in Stieglitz, who transforms the filth and poverty of the steerage into a vague “feeling” about life. If Stieglitz found in these people a refreshing contrast to stilted first-class cabin life, he nonetheless kept them at a distance and spared himself direct acknowledgment of their plight. Thus, while a crowd is essential to the image, it remains oddly sidelined.

Besides being a photographer, Stieglitz was an impresario of modernism who edited several art journals and ran the influential galleries 291 and An American Place in New York City. He also led the Photo-Secessionist group, a movement determined to foster an appreciation for photography as an art form on par with painting. This group of artists strove to create emotive, soft-focus photos in the pictorialist style, each one rich in tonal variation and beautifully printed. Karl F. Struss benefitted from Stieglitz’s promotion of young talent when the elder artist inducted him into the Photo-Secessionists. Struss’s *Crowded Pier by Moonlight, Arverne, Long Island, New York* (1910–1912) is a nocturne, a standard genre in the pictorialist repertoire. Like nearby Coney Island, Arverne was a getaway for day trippers who arrived on public transit to enjoy the cheap amusements and cool ocean breezes. But here the festivities are over, and the scene feels far removed from the tawdry sideshows and glaring brass bands of daytime. We see a gathering of people perched on a spindly pier gazing out at the moonlit Atlantic. Struss’s rich, dark hues contribute to the photograph’s luminescence. Merging with the humid atmosphere, the group’s fuzzy outlines dissolve into the night—an effect amplified by the soft focus. Watching the glimmering Atlantic bonds them in a transcendent unity.
Spuance’s Evening (1937)—one of a four-part series called The People Work—shows the end of the workday and is a good example of a mundane subject—the commute home—treated with care. People, tunnels, cars, buses, and subways pile up to reveal a city’s multilayered infrastructure of human circulation during rush hour. A traffic cop halts cars for pedestrians, while commuters pour down a staircase to catch the subway. As a reviewer in 1938 put it, Spuance “sees the intrinsic color in the drab routine of the day and interprets this with intensity.” In Spuance’s own words, “I’m counting on [my prints] to say a great deal of what I think about the crowd.” With hints of individual narrative—the traffic cop’s face, men buried in newspapers, a boy running along, a woman on the subway—this crowd is somewhat distinct and, therefore, dignified.

With the exception of silhouetted drivers, Spuance’s Traffic Control (1936) eliminates individuals completely, replacing them with an aggregation of cars. While it feels solitary, driving is an incessant negotiation with others: making lane changes, predicting what other drivers might do, speeding up, slowing down, avoiding bicyclists and pedestrians. Two traffic lights signal stop and go, but to no avail: automobiles swarm like insects; everyone is driving every which way. This is a parable about the controlled disorder of the average street packed with cars.
By any measure, George Bellows’s lithographs are among the greatest in the medium. They were already recognized as “a collector’s rarity” at the time of his death in 1925. Moreover, their unvarnished, even cruel, social commentary was noticed early on. Writing in *The New Republic* in 1920, a critic said, “They are as dreadful as reality and as intolerable.” This was a compliment. Critics also commented on his rich, beautiful black tones with their “velvety depths of gloom.” Within those inky depths, crowds lurk and multiply.

These “velvety depths of gloom” work overtime in *Billy Sunday*. First published in the radical magazine *The Masses* in May 1917, it illustrated an article by John Reed about William Ashley “Billy” Sunday, a former baseball player turned evangelist during the tent revivals of the early decades of the 20th century. Here Bellows only articulates the first row of penitents; imagination fills in the rest of the tent. With an accusatory outstretched arm, Sunday bounds toward the audience, his animation emphasizing their passive receptivity. Some are rapt, while others stare on like surprised dolls. To tamely observe that Bellows “satirizes” Sunday is too weak for this image’s bitter medicine. While Reed thought that Sunday was not all bad, Bellows was apoplectic: “Do you know, I believe Billy Sunday is the worst thing that ever happened to America? [. . .]. He is against freedom, he wants a religious autocracy, he is such a reactionary that he makes me an anarchist.”

While Bellows is probably best known for his boxing paintings, like *Stag at Sharkeys* (1909; Cleveland Museum of Art), he also produced 10 lithographs inspired by the sport. In *Preliminaries* (1916), the match is relegated to the margins. A woman looks away from the ring toward the viewer, while a portly man in a tuxedo and top hat gazes into the distance seemingly at nothing. These people seem not to know what is taking place around them. The conjunction of well-dressed society members with the violent spectacle—talking about his boxing paintings, Bellows is reported to have said that “I was painting two men trying to kill each other”—lacks the moral clarity and outrage found in many of his lithographs. Bellows provided this caption: “Society attends a big fight at Madison Square Garden, New York.” This studiously neutral phrase hints at veiled criticism. It is as if Bellows inched up on satire but then backed away, leaving us only a residue in the form of the conspicuous lack of integration of “society” with the rest of the spectators.

*Benediction in Georgia* (1916) has no such ambiguity. In contrast to the fervor of *Billy Sunday*, a white preacher raises a haughty hand in benediction, while beleaguered African-American prisoners sit. About this print Bellows said, “The white Georgian preaching the gospel to the negroes is a satire on hypocrisy.” His upright rigidity conveys his pomposity much as the prisoners’ crumpled bodies communicate their subjugation. The room feels paradoxically spacious and cramped at the same time. One imagines but cannot actually see the endless rows of compacted prisoners stretching to the back of the room. The wall lights up and aerates the space, but also acts as a physical barrier to prevent escape. In a terrifying turn of phrase, a critic wrote that Bellows’ lithographs are like the “middle of a barrel of tar at midnight.” By evoking drowning and suffocation, these words could describe *Benediction in Georgia*. 
Deal reforms kicked off in March 1933, the article asked the federal government to do more. Marsh’s print lampoons the glib hopefulness of those who thought partial reforms might stem the tide.

The American photographer Walker Evans, who also documented the ravages of the Depression as a freelancer throughout the 1930s, worked as a staff photographer for *Fortune* from 1945 to 1965. Henry Luce, the publisher, treated the ostensibly business publication as a pet project, lavishing high production values on the magazine while encouraging its writers and photographers to travel and report broadly. A nearly identical version of *Yankee Stadium with Capacity Crowd and Billboards* was published in an article on the New York Yankees that appeared in the July 1946 issue, and *Bridgeport Parade: Marching Band and Crowd* (1941), though not published in the magazine, was taken while working on a piece about the effects of wartime production on Bridgeport, Conn. While both subjects are potentially saccharine and nationalistic—after all, what could be more wholesomely American than baseball and parades?—in Evans’ hands they are neither. He is not criticizing or mocking, but neither is he celebrating.

In *Yankee Stadium*, the game itself is cropped out, and distance neutralizes the ability to identify with the fans. We can’t cheer along with them. The radiating arrangement of spectators, regimented by the seating, runs up against a wall of corporate logos: Phillip Morris, Bronx Savings Bank, and Botany Ties are legible, but the people are not. In *Bridgeport Parade*, similarly, the parade has little gusto. The destabilizing tilt of the camera, and the eye-catching moiré-like patterns distract from the parade. As with the photograph *Yankee Stadium*, Evans forces us to look at the formations of people, rather than the people themselves. Interestingly, he insisted that this feeling of composedness in his photographs was not intentional: “It’s all done instinctively, as far as I can see, not consciously.” Yet, the result, he assures us, must be the “transcendence of the thing.” If the “thing” in these two photographs is a baseball game and a parade, then both are pushed to the side in favor of an eccentric and unrepresentative view.

Reginald Marsh’s art usually features New Yorkers on sidewalks, at striptease shows, in the subway, or at the beach. They are moving, talking, yelling, staring, or on the cusp of such activity. His art is ribald and earthy. However, in *Breadline—No One Has Starved* (1932), Marsh’s rollicking sidewalks are replaced by a static line of men in long coats and caps, each one individuated only by height and the distinctive creases of their ill-kempt clothes. By cropping the line at both ends and reducing the architectural details in the background, Marsh gives the impression that this is only one segment of a line extending endlessly in both directions.

These men illustrate the dire economic circumstances facing the country at the beginning of the Great Depression. Marsh’s title refers to a September 1932 *Fortune* magazine article, “No One Has Starved,” that used extensive statistics to concretize the Depression’s impact and to criticize the well-intended but woefully inadequate response of state and local private charities. Most damningly, the article reported on data collected from hospitals that documented Americans starving to death and being hospitalized due to malnutrition. Published before Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms, the article asked the federal government to do more. Marsh’s print lampoons the glib hopefulness of those who thought partial reforms might stem the tide.

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Much of John Baldessari’s art involves selecting photographs and film stills gleaned from extensive research. He crops and masks out parts of these images, sometimes reproducing the photographs in discordant colors. With these gestures as well as his ambiguous titles, nondescript source images become mysterious or paradoxical. In Crowds with Shape of Reason Missing: Example 1, the artist uses a found film still and whites out the central event responsible for bringing the people together. His title plays on the association of crowds with irrationality and destructive behavior. People in groups commit acts they would not do otherwise: Reason is missing in crowds. In a revealing 1998 interview, Baldessari said, “I have always had the feeling that there’s something bubbling underneath the boredom” of contemporary life. In the same interview, he speculated on what caused this generalized anxiety: “I do have the feeling that . . . having seen all those pictures as a kid, of the Holocaust and . . . I didn’t ever understand it then and I don’t now. I had no reason to think that it was going to stop. So, calmness, tranquility is temporary, why wouldn’t it happen again?” Society’s moral structure is fragile and mercurial. Order and tranquility could go missing again.

The vilest chapter of the crowd’s history in American culture is the lynch mob, which is most strongly linked to the racial violence perpetrated by whites in the American South. In a report released this year, the Montgomery, Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative has documented 3,959 lynchings of African-Americans in 12 southern states from 1877 to 1950. In January 2000, an exhibition at Manhattan’s Roth Horowitz Gallery, “Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen,” put ghoulisch memorabilia of racial violence on public view, including lynching postcards. The exhibition prompted other researchers, including Ken Gonzales-Day, a Los Angeles-based photographer and writer, to delve into the visual and material evidence of lynching’s history. Gonzales-Day’s photographic series Erased Lynchings and his book Lynching in the West: 1850-1935 (2006) examine the 352 documented lynchings that have occurred since California achieved statehood. His research revealed that although Asian, African-American, Native American, and white men were lynched, a large number were identified as Mexican or Chilean. Only one woman is known to have been a victim. Furthermore, Gonzales-Day countered the idea that lynchings were merely frontier justice, the result of citizens using makeshift courts and juries to administer justice in areas too remote for the state or federal legal system. His research found that victims were often already in jail and either awaiting trial or punishment after conviction. In other words, lynchings interrupted a judicial process already underway. Acceptance and participation in vigilante violence was widespread and openly condoned at the highest levels. In 1933, two men were accused of murdering Brooke Hart, the son of the local department store owner. After a mob hung them from a tree in St. James Park in downtown San Jose, Calif., Gov. James Ralph offered to pardon anyone convicted of lynching.
Like Baldessari, Gonzales-Day obscures the focal point around which a group has formed. He takes photographs and postcards of lynchings, then digitally erases the bodies. He has stated that he wants the Erased Lynching series to stand as a metaphor for the erasure of these violent acts from California’s history. However, he does something else by erasing the bodies: he turns attention away from the atrocious spectacle toward the perpetrators. In the three images on display, no one shields his or her face. Notwithstanding the flashbulb’s drama, their ordinariness is disturbing. With the suspended corpse of Jack Holmes removed, the scene could be mistaken for a legitimate and innocuous social gathering.

“Lonely” could have been added to the exhibition’s title, for isolation and loneliness tend to bend thinking. Think “lost in the crowd” or “go with the crowd.” Fast forward to the early 21st century when smartphones and social media along with email and text messaging put us in continual contact with others. In her recent book, Alone Together (2012), Sherry Turkle concludes after decades of research that the proliferation of media technologies does not bind people together more tightly. While a family member talks

Example 1
John Baldessari
Crowds with Shape of Reason Missing
Exemplar 1 (2012)
Mixografia® print on handmade paper, 30 x 43 1/2 in.
Courtesy of John Baldessari and Mixografia® Workshop
George Bellovs
Benedish in Georgé (1916) *
Lithograph, 15 1/4 x 19 1/4 in.
Gift of Hannah S. Kully
2014.30.18
George Bellovs
Billy Sunday (1923)
Lithograph, 8 9/16 x 16 1/4 in.
From the Print Collection of Hannah S. Kully
George Bellovs
Preliminary (1916)
Lithograph, 15 1/4 x 19 1/4 in.
From the Print Collection of Hannah S. Kully
Walker Evans
Bridgeport Parade
Marching Band and Crowd (1943)
Gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 x 9 1/4 in.
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
84.XM.956.574
Walker Evans
Yankee Stadium with Capacity Crowd and Billboards (1946)
Gelatin silver print, 6 11/16 x 7 11/16 in.
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
84.XM.956.1081
Ken Gonzales-Day
East First Street (2006)
Lightjet on cardstock, 3 1/4 x 6 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles
Ken Gonzales-Day
Five in a Raw (2006)
Lightjet on cardstock, 3 1/4 x 6 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles
Ken Gonzales-Day
Tombstone (2006)
Lightjet on cardstock, 3 1/4 x 6 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles
Ken Gonzales-Day
Oak Street Beach, Chicago (1929)
Gelatin silver print, 13 1/4 x 10 1/4 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection, Gift of Carol Vernon and Robert Turbin
Photo © 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA
Ken Gonzales-Day
Cut-Away Abstraction, Rockford (1944)
Gelatin silver print, 10 1/4 x 13 1/4 in.
The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection,
Gift of The Annenberg Foundation, Acquired from Carol Vernon and Robert Turbin
Photo © 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA
Armin Landeck
Manhattan View (1934) *
Drypoint, 10 1/4 x 8 1/8 in.
Gift of Hannah S. Kully
2013.17.46
Reginald Marsh
Breadline—No One Has Starved (1933)
Etching and engraving, 6 1/8 x 11 1/8 in.
From the Print Collection of Hannah S. Kully
© Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League, New York/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York
John J.A. Murphy
Shadou Roei (1931) *
Woodcut, 8 x 9 in.
Gift of Hannah S. Kully
2013.17.64
Benton Murdoch-Spruance
The People Work—Evening (1937) *
Lithograph, 13 1/4 x 19 in.
Gift of Hannah S. Kully
2013.1.35
Image courtesy of www.bentonspruance.com
Benton Murdoch-Spruance
Traffic Control (1938) *
Lithograph on wave paper, 9 x 14 1/2 in.
Purchased with funds from Hannah S. and Russell K. Kully and Ida Crotty for Prints and Graphics
2013.1
Image courtesy of www.bentonspruance.com
Alfred Stieglitz
The Steerage (1907)
Photogravure, 13 1/4 x 10 1/4 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Gift of The Annenberg Foundation
1965
Karl S. Strauss
Stephenson tonal platinum print, 5 3/4 x 4 7/8 in.
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
84.XM.189.89
© Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas
Abraham Walkowitz
New York Skeletons (1919) *
Brush and black ink and wash on cream wove paper, 13 1/4 x 14 1/2 in.
Purchased with funds from Ida Crotty for Prints and Graphics
2013.10
Wegwe
First Murder (Negative October 9, 1941; Print about 1950)
Gelatin silver print, 10 1/4 x 11 in.
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
84.XM.4.6
© International Center of Photography
Wegwe
Joy of Living (c. 1946)
Gelatin silver print, 6 1/4 x 4 1/4 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Gift of Mrs. Nancy Dubois
© Collection of The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens