STEPHEN CARPENTER: I want to show you a picture, an image that I created collaboratively this morning. So as you see, this was tagged Danbury, Connecticut. So that's just down the road. And since I posted it this morning, six hours ago, 18 people have liked it. They haven't told me what they like about it, but they've liked it.

And I added some context there. My name, or my handle is there-- @bscarpenterii-- "Double Water Fountains," Danbury, Connecticut, 2017. Then there's some hashtags-- #doubletaking, #troublemaking. And then I've tagged some other folks who I follow or follow me, who I thought might be interested. All three of them happen to be connected to MIT.

So this image is, in many ways, just a black and white Instagram photograph that I also posted to my Tumblr account and I posted to my Twitter account. This is a practice people do quite often. But this is a photograph that originated and continues to exist within a conversation for me, with an existing photograph, specifically, other similar photographs, as well as it sits within a conversation with other people-- as you can see, at least 18 people who like it but haven't commented on why they like it.

This photograph was originally taken as a color photograph, using this phone. I set the setting from portrait and landscape to square, because we can do that now. We have these options. And then once the photograph was taken, I put it through a series of filters in Instagram to turn it into this black and white photograph.

Now, as you can probably notice, I most likely didn't shoot this on my own, unless I had a tripod and then a timer that I set. So one might assume that someone else actually took the photograph. And that's what happened.

This is the most recent photograph in a series-- I believe I'm at or beyond 100 of these in the past three or four years-- in which, if I'm in a public space and I see a double water fountain and there's someone nearby, I'll ask them-- excuse me. Would you give me a hand? I'm an artist. And I take photographs of double water fountains. Would you mind taking a picture of me?

I'm going to drink out of the fountain. And I'd like you to take a picture of me. Make sure both fountains and my body are in the photograph, please. That's all the instruction I give them.

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There's no composition 101. There's no depth of field lesson.

And then they take a picture. And I drink the water during the entire time they're setting up and moving their body and in and out. And sometimes it takes a couple of seconds. Sometimes it takes what feels like four or five days. You know, you've had this experience, right?

And then what happens when you ask someone to take a photo of you using your camera or your phone? They turn around and they show it to you. We can do that with digital photographs now. How is that? And I look at it, and say, oh. Oh, that's quite nice.

And then if they have time, if they're not rushing off-- oh, I have to run-- well, would you mind looking at another photograph? And most of the time they say, yeah. I'll look at the other photograph. And it's that other photograph that I show them that inspired me to start taking these photographs.

So the other photograph I show them is this one. This is also a black and white photograph. It was not taken with a digital phone. It was actually taken with a camera that uses this interesting technology called film. A lot of people who use these machines don't actually know what film is.

And this photograph was taken in 1950 by Elliot Erwitt. It was taken in South Carolina. And this photograph shows a gentleman wearing a hat, drinking out of one of two water fountains. The water fountains each have labels. And they, although, are situated as double water fountains, or side-by-side fountains, they are, essentially, constructed for different audiences and different users. And we might know that because of the labels that are above them.

This photograph, double water fountains-- or, it's actually called "Segregated Water Fountains"-- is one of a few that Erwitt took in the '50s. He used to take-- he was known as a street photographer at that time, when he was taking photographs, and capturing just some basic, typical scenes that would happen in daily life.

So it's this photograph that I had probably seen, or one of them similar to it, years and years ago. I don't remember the first time I saw it. And you know how images come in and out of your life, or people come in and out, or stories come in and out? Well, this one did the same thing.

But about 10 years ago, 15 years ago, maybe, when I started wearing hats like this, in part because I just thought they looked pretty interesting and they reminded me of my grandfather,

whose first name is also my father's first name-- it's also my first name, so there's that connection there.

And as I looked at this photograph shortly after I started wearing these hats, I started to see these photographs differently, because as I looked more closely at that photograph, I started to see myself in that photograph, and wonder whether years before I was even born-- I was born 15 years after this photograph was taken. But certainly, signs like this and practices that these signs encourage were still in place when I was born.

But as I continued to look at this photograph and others like it, I would see myself in it differently. And I would wonder, would I-- what would I have felt like? What would I have done? What would it have been like for me to be in that situation?

So I started to take-- in public places, it's not uncommon to see double water fountains. In public places, it's not uncommon to see other people. In public places, it's not uncommon for me to have my phone, which takes pictures. So that combination of components inspired me, or has been the motivating piece, and also the materiality of this series of works.

This is on a beach in California. I don't recall where this one is. Instagram remembers. I don't have to remember. This is in the State House in South Carolina, three or four months before the Confederate flag that was flying about 100 yards away from this spot where you see me, three or four months before it was taken down a few years ago.

So my daughter, who is now eight, but at the time that this photograph was taken, she was about three or four-- and because I think I'm a pretty good dad, I take her with me to various places. And public places have double water fountains.

And she would watch me ask people to take my picture in front of double water fountains, which was all well and good, because that's what papa does. He's an artist. And he does things and takes images. But one day, she asked me, Papa, would you take my picture? I said, sure. I would be happy to. But you have to take my picture.

[LAUGHTER]

And so we gain perspectives on the world through the eyes of other people, seeing what we see through what they see. But more than that being an interesting photograph of this three-year-old angle, a few feet off the ground, it was also a moment where I realized that the next

question for her after, would you take my picture, was, Papa, why are you taking these pictures?

So then I had to have conversations about the history of this country, and a particular story, an ongoing story, an uncomfortably challenging story in the history of this country, a story that we're still writing today. I had to talk to my daughter about race. And so this project, the "Double Water Fountains" project, you can find on Tumblr. Just look for @bscarpenterii, and there it is. I post these images quite often.

So I'm saying all this to say, these photographs come from my interest in and my relationship with the double water fountain photograph, or the segregated photograph, by Elliot Erwitt. This historical photograph, for me, sits in a conversation with many other photographs like it, but also within the practices, the policies, the cultural understandings that allowed for segregated water fountains and segregation to exist.

LARRY SUSSKIND: If you walk down the street of Baltimore or Philadelphia-- and there's plenty of confrontation this last year in Philadelphia that a lot of people would feel is racially rooted. And if you say, oh, we should have more constructive conversations between people. They should learn how to deal with conflict that's in some way connected to or racially defined or rooted. And well, people don't know how to do that. They don't know how to do that, to-- cross race.

STEPHEN CARPENTER: Sure.

LARRY SUSSKIND: And so you think it's the picture that makes the conversation possible? It's a pretty harmless picture. It's not an inflammatory picture.

STEPHEN CARPENTER: No. So the conversation begins well before the photograph is taken. The conversation begins well before the Erwitt photograph is presented. The conversation begins well before the conversation about race or history or wherever the direction is. Right?

So your question about, well, how do we engage in these conversations-- how do we engage in these conversations? We start the conversations. I don't know that-- I take it-- I'm concerned that when I hear statements or there's an assumption that, oh, well, it's a difficult conversation, we can't talk about it, I don't think that's the case at all. We can. I think it's the starting.

And this is, I think, central to part of your question is, how do we start those conversations? I think we need to start it. The mediator, which is also what I heard in what you were saying, might be the camera and the photograph. It might not be another individual.

The third thing I would say is, and I hope this came through with my description and my earlier responses, I'm not trying to persuade anyone. I'm not trying to make a case. Or, in your example, where maybe sensing someone's defensive, I'm not trying to nail them to the wall or prove them wrong, but bring up other examples that allow us to continue the conversation.

It's about opening it up rather than saying-- so for example, if someone said, oh, well, we're way past that, I'd say, no, you're wrong. Here's-- I wouldn't-- it's not about, no, you're wrong. It's, oh, well, what about this? Or tell me about such and such.

So instead of being persuasive to the point of arguing a point to convert someone from one perspective to the other, while that might be, at some level, a goal for some folks engaged in this work, I think before one gets there, becoming comfortable, setting a comfortable space for the conversation needs to happen. So it's not about persuasion. It's about, let's open up that space and talk about the difficulties within, and the complexities in that conversation.

LARRY SUSSKIND: So for me, there's something unusual that I think is attributable to the photograph, to the fact that the photograph's at the heart of a conversation about race. And there's both an old photograph and a new photograph. And in some other realms, particularly in the realm of science, there are difficulties of people from different disciplines talking to each other.

And one theory about how to overcome those difficulties is to use something known as a boundary object. So it's not me and you and our different disciplines. It's, oh, here's a map. And how do you read that map? Oh, no. I read that map differently. What do you think that map said? Oh, I think-- and I don't have to talk directly to a person from a different discipline. We can both be talking about or through the boundary object.

And my question, and the question in my mind was, does a photograph, in particular, and a black and white one, in particular, an old versus a new one, provide a means to address, in this case, a potentially difficult conversation?

Now, I think who the people are matters. And I think your non-defensive style and your willingness to track the conversation wherever it goes probably has more to do than anything else with how the conversations you have turn out. But I'm trying to see if we might deduce

from your project some kinds of insights about the use of photographs in particular, but not only, to make difficult conversations easier. That's where I'm going with my questions.

STEPHEN CARPENTER: So your example of boundary object is interesting, because it makes me think of a couple of different things. One, when talking about works of art in schools, or even in galleries, for a number of reasons that we don't necessarily need to get into at this point, many folks are interested in the formal qualities of those works. And those formal qualities are fine-- formal meaning shape and color and texture.

But as we start to look and think about those works of art contextually, place them into an historical context, a social, political context, those works are about those other realms as much as they are about the physicality, moving it away from the material, the physical material into other kinds of-- what might move into new materialisms in some way. So I think there's a bit of that going on, where your example of the map, it's not about the physical map itself. It's about the representation and the signifying aspects.

Now, these photographs, the black and white component, the formal aspect, moves it away from-- and this was intentional for me, because the original dozen or so that I took were in color. And there was some distance for me between those color images and the Erwitt photograph. And it wasn't until I tinkered with the first one in Instagram and made it black and white-- and I resisted it, because I didn't want it to be too literal. You know?

There was a shift that happened. The time element flattened. And so putting oneself in-- there's something about a black and white photograph that it moves it away from a contemporary sense of-- because the color gets removed.

Now, the other piece there is-- so you know, you want to have an interview with someone. So you say, OK, bring an object that means something to you. Or we'll talk about this map. This photograph, we produced together. As a matter of fact, the person I'm talking to, they're the ones who produced it, primarily. They composed and took the shot. So they have a degree of ownership and connection with it.

LARRY SUSSKIND: That's very interesting. That's a very interesting way of reframing why it might be easier for them to use the photo as a basis for the conversation, because they have part of the ownership of having taken it.

STEPHEN Not only are they part of the ownership of having taken it, but if you look closely at the

CARPENTER: photograph, you don't see them in the photograph. I'm in the photograph. So anything they say about it is separated from them.

But it gets difficult, too, because the person in the photograph is the person standing next to them. So while the photograph allows for some separation and objectification of that individual, the very subject at hand is right there. So there's a complexity there. But their contribution to the creation of that work and that ownership, I think, is key to this conversation.

LARRY SUSSKIND: I've been trying, since the first time I saw this, to imagine if there is a method in here to make it easier for conversations that have race at their root. But I particularly mean conversations about situations where race is at their root, and they are about people being unable to deal with differences in any other way except through violence. And so I want to make them harder, more difficult conversations.

But I'm trying to imagine-- and hopefully, we can actually, at some point, do this-- whether the same smoothing or easing effect of the exercise makes it possible to have a conversation, which, otherwise, you couldn't have.

STEPHEN CARPENTER: Yeah. I think so. A statement that I'll use tomorrow in the lecture and workshop, but I'll use it right now. I was in-- it was about three years ago. I was teaching an undergraduate class of students who were preparing to be art teachers.

And we were talking about, I said, what is this art? What does art do? Why are we studying art? Why do you want to be a teacher of art? What is art's role in our lives? You know, these really small, insignificant questions. No, it's a big, important question.

And one of the students said, you know, art allows us to-- among the things that it does-- but it allows us to tell stories that we might not be able to tell otherwise, and we probably can't tell otherwise. And I thought, oh, yeah. That makes sense.

LARRY SUSSKIND: It's consistent with the theme that I'm pursuing. I mean, people are terrible, if just caught off-guard and with no special training, trying to deal with issues that have race or ethnicity, and many cases, gender, at the heart of the difference or the conflict. And I'm just trying to think of this notion of flattening and overcoming history by having the two black and whites next to each other in the same location.

And now, not everybody is as charming as you are. And so they would not get the same response. But maybe the existence, and the fact that they took the new picture, which I hadn't

thought of until you said it this afternoon, is, you know, they own some of this. So now maybe it's easier for them to stay with the conversation.

Maybe adding an artist makes-- and doing these things-- makes it easier. Also, you start out by saying, I'm an artist and I'm taking these pictures.

STEPHEN CARPENTER: That's right.

LARRY SUSSKIND: You don't say, I'm someone waiting on the street corner to ambush you, because I don't know if I can trust you, and you probably don't think you can trust me. None of that. It's just, I'm an artist. Will you take a picture of me doing this? And that's very disarming, in every sense of that phrase.

And then maybe that's the key to moving toward a conversation where nobody's anxieties and prejudices go sky high right at the beginning. Now, I don't know how long it would last, once you tell them what that side is, if they didn't already know it, in the model that I'm--

STEPHEN CARPENTER: Sure. And they might know it, especially if they live in that neighborhood or nearby, which would then be quite a rich conversation, in unexpected ways, I guess, for the artist who is initiating their work.