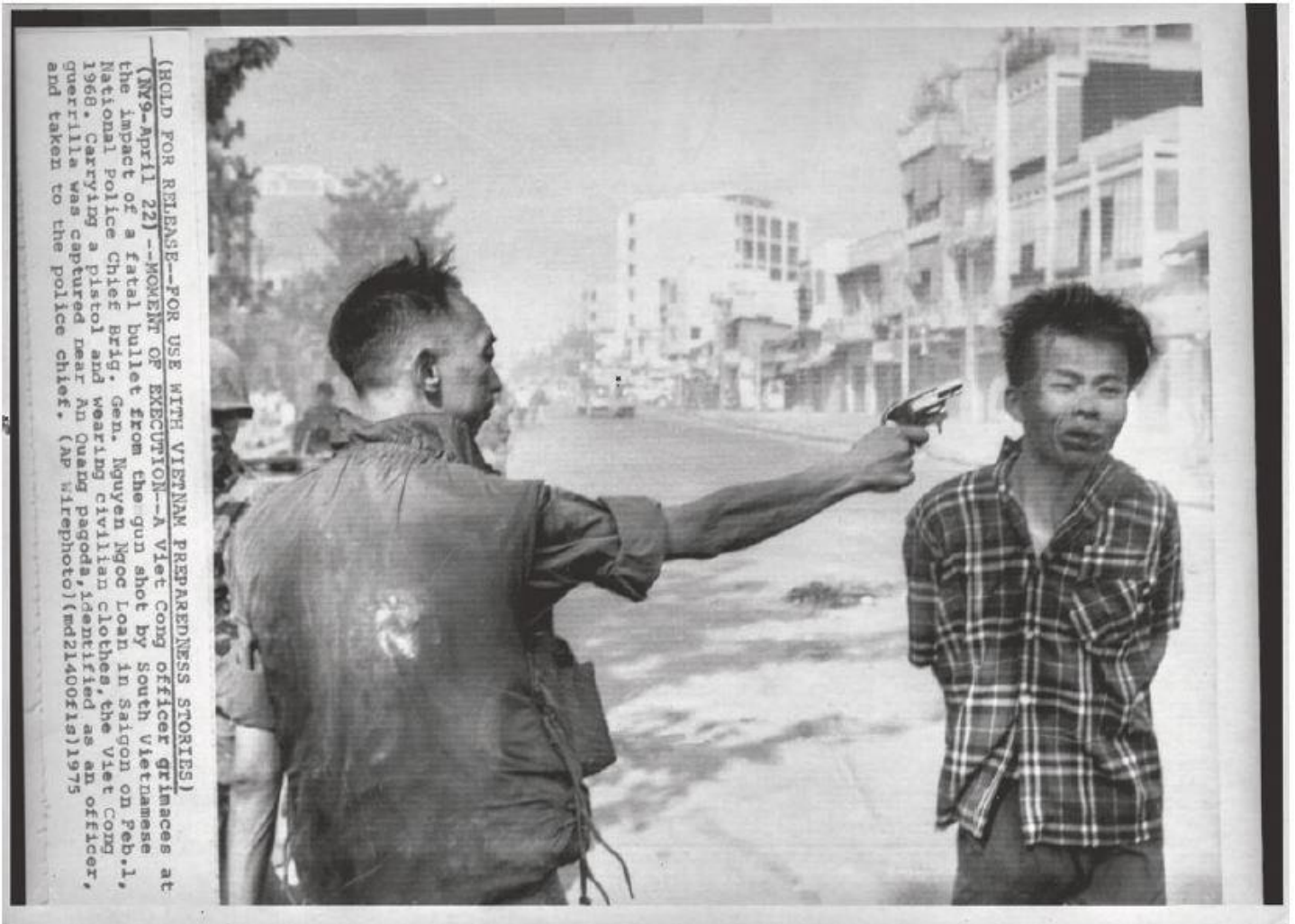


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'68: 'NO OTHER YEAR HAD THE SAME RESONANCE'

By Sandee Brawarsky, February 20, 2018



Half a century ago, black sprinters raised their fists to signal “Black Power” at the medal ceremony at the Summer Games in Mexico City, students got arrested protesting the war in Vietnam, New York City teachers went on strike and women protesting the Miss America pageant tossed stockings and bras into the garbage. 1968 was a year of assassinations, hijackings, unrest and, also, the debut of “Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In” and “Fiddler on the Roof” in Japanese.

While there have been thoughtful books on “the year that rocked the world,” a new exhibition presents a potent and original visual chronicle.

“Day by Day: 1968,” at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea through Feb. 24, is a fast-paced year in slow motion, with an image for every day and a grid for each month, moving clockwise around the room. The vintage news photos — bold

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black-and-white expressions of events and themes — are mounted on the walls as though dates on a large calendar page, seven photos across, no captions: It's a visual sweep of time.

"No other year had the same resonance," said James Garfinkel, who curated the show, drawn from the photographic collection of Ari and Helene Bousbib of Monsey. "So many issues are simmering: war, race relations, immigration, gender/sexuality, environment, drugs, police, technology. All are either starkly expressed, or flower, or explode."

"This was the year when Negroes became blacks, [and] Arabs living in Israel took on the name Palestinian," he said.

Guiding a visitor through the year as it unfolds, he said, "January '68 doesn't know it's going to be January '68. By the time we get to April, we know the year is going to be different. I'll argue that by March, the match is lit." In March, Robert F. Kennedy enters the race for president. April opens with the news that President Johnson will not seek re-election and, a few days later, Martin Luther King Jr. is killed and violence erupts in 125 American cities.

For those present at the time, the photos transport the viewer to the emotional excitement and trauma of those days. For others, it can be a recognition of how things really haven't changed that much. A friend paging through the accompanying catalog describes the experience as "Groundhog Day." Captured here is the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales by his mother; he's still prince and she's the Queen.

And there's Muhammad Ali, Barbra Streisand, Dustin Hoffman, Abbie Hoffman, Diana Ross and the Supremes on the Ed Sullivan Show and Molly Picon on stage with Godfrey Cambridge in "Who Wants to Be a Jewish Mother?" Daisies adorn mod fashion and Elizabeth Taylor's hair in "Boom!" and the Age of Aquarius dawns as "Hair" premieres on Broadway. Some persist in wearing their hair bouffant-style, and others let it go, long and free.

In terms of Jewish life, Garfinkel says, "It's a year after the Six-Day War, with very fresh memories and concerns. On the one hand the PLO has selected Yasir Arafat as their leader, there were plane hijackings and bombings, and there were also Jewish kids playing in the snow at the Kotel." He also points out that Kennedy's assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, was a Jordanian immigrant who wrote in his journal that Kennedy had to be killed before June 5, the first anniversary of the Six-Day War. He shot Kennedy on June 4.

Three years ago, Garfinkel was inspired to create the exhibition in anticipation of the 50th anniversary. In 1968, he was a fifth grade student at the United Nations International School in Manhattan. He remembers school closing at times that year and writing essays trying to make sense of King's assassination.

The final image is a two-page spread, "Earthrise," a stunning view taken by astronaut Bill Anders on the Apollo 8 mission — in Garfinkel's words, "a quiet coda to this tumultuous year."