Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, born in November 1787, would no doubt be warmed to learn that his former city fills with imagemakers and image lovers during the eleventh month of every year. Photographs fill galleries and museums, with the colossal Paris Photo Fair serving as a centerpiece of this “mois de la photo.” This year, the fair’s twelfth installment, maintained its massive status: over one hundred exhibitors from nineteen countries converged beneath the Louvre to show, tell, and sell all manner of contemporary and vintage images.

This being an art sale in Europe’s most glamorous city, the well dressed and well heeled were out in force. But most appeared to be there to look rather than be seen. That’s not to say the scent of money was absent; Jacquart champagne and Issey Miyake perfume sponsored a VIP lounge, and a sparkling new BMW 730d dominated the main hall. In their defense, BMW did sponsor the Paris Photo 2008 Prize (won by Yao Lu), but the photos displayed with the car (commissioned to promote BMW and separate from the prize contenders) were silly duds. Fashion shooter Frédéric Pinet’s contribution to the ad campaign was a lithe runway model sprinting through the desert, trying to escape a pursing BMW. It is difficult not to think of John Divola chasing those desert dogs and how much less they would have charged to do the shoot.

Continued, vigorous interest in photography books was evidenced by a special section devoted to Japanese art book publishers, giving fairgoers a taste of that nation’s continuing traditions of image excellence. On hand were Seigensha Art Publishing, Tosei-Sha, Akaaka Art Publishing, and others, all doing a brisk business in gorgeous tomes. Beyond just commerce, some education seeped in via a wall-sized “History of Japanese Photography” timeline. Placing key moments in Japanese photographic practice and publishing within the global artistic and cultural landscape, this well-designed chart documented Japan’s many robust contributions to the medium.

Befitting their status as citizens of this year’s “Guest of Honor,” over a dozen Japanese galleries and dealers were displaying the work of their countrymen and women. Among the deluge of flat images, the pop-up people of Akiko Ikeda’s photographs felt fresh. Purists may scoff at what they perceive as a gimmick, but what’s wrong with a little fun? The crowds around her grid of forty-eight snapshots at the Third Gallery Aya booth were dense with smiling admirers; an effective antidote to anyone who would take photography too seriously.

Several selections from Tomoko Yoneda’s “Between Visible and Invisible” series (1998–2008) dominated the Shugo Arts gallery booth. These images of texts as photographed through the eyeglasses of great minds—for example, Brecht’s Glasses—Viewing a Dedication by Walter Benjamin (2008)—generate an echo of emotional “being there” as both observer and participant for these deeply personal and historical moments.

Despite the heavy presence of well-established galleries and the big names they represent, overflowing fairs like Paris Photo provide ample chance to judge emerging talent. Pieces from Maria Antonietta Mameli’s “Human Observation—Red Bags” series (2007) captivated many eyes (and many wallets, as evidenced by the numerous “sold” stickers beside each piece). The images debuted at Bruce Silverstein earlier this year and depict shoppers in New York’s Chinatown, captured from the vantage of the Manhattan Bridge. Later, Mameli removes everything but a solitary figure and their shadow, leaving them to tote their red plastic bags in an expansive void. Elsewhere, while the corporate-sponsored “SFR Jeunes Talents” room was full of visitors, the work found there was less than sparkling. Steven Planchard’s night photos were moody and dark—as night photos are wont to be—and led the ho-hum pack. However, SFR should be complimented for recognizing that fully realized artwork takes time to evolve—the ages of their “young” talents ranged from 27 to 49—instead of lauding the work of teenagers just out of school.

The moving image was not forgotten at this festival of (mostly) prints on paper. In addition to videos by Japanese photographers on view in the fair’s “Project Room,” the occasional flat-panel screen took up...
precious wall space at a few booths. Cristina Lucas’s *Habla* (2008)—a
documentation of her scaling and smashing Michelangelo’s *Moses* with
a sledgehammer (don’t worry, it’s a replica)—had viewers at the Juana
de Aizpuru gallery booth mesmerized. So too did Jeffrey Blondes’s *La
Tailles des Antes* (2007), a twenty-four-hour, high-definition video loop
of a placid forest scene. Barely anything noticeable happened in the
short chunk I was able to view, but that’s surely the point: looking must
remain a patient, intense activity.

Fairs like Paris Photo are often seen as barometers of the health and
strength of the medium and the market. Although the specter of an
economic slowdown spreads throughout Europe and the rest of the
world, this fair showed that there is still a little money changing hands.
But let the buyers and brokers count the cash; beautiful ideas expressed
as images characterized this meeting of photography’s greatest
practitioners and advocates.

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**PLURALISTIC CONVERSATION**

**Disruptions: The Political in Art Now**

**Museum of Contemporary Art**

**Chicago**

October 24–25, 2008

The Museum of Contemporary Art, the Open Practice Committee
at the School of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, and **Critical
Inquiry** co-sponsored the two-day symposium, “Disruptions: The
political in art now.” It was presented as part of “Art and Democracy,”
a series of exhibitions, programs, and performances resonating with
the larger public conversation regarding the elections, the war, and
the economy.

Politics are innately aesthetic because divisions in society and hence
social order are characterized by the sensible: visibility (those who are
seen and those who are unseen), what is audible and inaudible and
what is sayable and unsayable according to Jacques Rancière, who
gave the keynote address, “The Contemporary Paradoxes of Political
Art.” The influential Rancière, Emeritus Professor from the University
of Paris VIII and a visiting professor at the University of Chicago,
was noted for his work in the History of Philosophy. The “framing of
what is given, what we can see”—what can be apprehended by the
senses—is “distributed” by what he calls the “police”—a law of social
order, not simply one institution but a regime of perception. According
to Rancière, “the distribution of the sensible” excludes some people
from participating in democracy.

Doug Ashford of the collective Group Material opened the second
day of the symposium. Ashford’s lecture was organized around his
own eclectic mix of images beginning with an eighteenth-century
print depicting the art of conversation and moving to a discussion
of Group Material’s influential experiments in public art during the
1980s, including, most relevant to the matter at hand, the project
“Democracy,” sponsored by the DIA Art foundation in 1988. In
another project, Group Material invited people to bring objects they
considered valuable into the museum space and display them, creating
what Rancière calls “dissensus,” generative conflict and disruption as
well as counteracting manufactured consent in public culture.

Of course, the dangerous classes were hardly present in the neo-
gothic halls of the University of Chicago; and “class,” with its
Marxian connotations of violence and upheaval, is a word that has
been banished from the discourse of the political and supplanted with
the more visual, spatial, and geographic formulations of inclusions
and exclusions. Presentations by Trevor Paglen and Simon Leung
revealed new formations at the institutional level. Paglen (author of
*I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me* [2007]
and *Blank Spots on a Map* [2009]) brings the visual culture of black military
programs involving rendition, black sites (secret prisons), surveillance,
and other “dark side” operations to the museum, using his skills as a
geographer and his facility in searching and linking lists of code names
to find hidden identities and anomalous flights by private planes that
reveal hidden operations. Paglin’s work presents a clear example of
Rancière’s designation of the sensible: maps, emblems, insignia, and
other visual and geographic signs that work together to construct a
kind of parallel culture in a hidden world.

Leung discussed the 2006 exhibition “Roger Ailes: Retrospective in
Context,” featured in “The Look of Law,” an extended project he