In at least two cities in the world of print it was a busy time, with the New York Art Book Fair and the Print City: Detroit conference being held the same weekend. Although no competition in raw numbers probably, Detroit drew enough people and events to make it an exciting place to encounter the expanded possibilities of print. The conference was a collaboration between the Mid-America Print Council and the James Pearson Duffy Department of Art and Art History at Wayne State University, and involved a full schedule of panels, demonstrations, events, themed portfolios, local exhibitions, and keynote speakers. The organizers’ goal was to blend academic and independent practices, a premise supported by the urban context of Detroit, even though completely engulfing and overshadowing it. Everywhere, within and surrounding the conference, words like salvaging, infrastructure, revival, abandonment, mobility, collaboration, street knowledge, stenciling, and platemaking popped up to drive the conversation about print’s changing place in different and challenging urban ecologies. So strong was the connection that the most stimulating features of the conference demonstrated how this distressed yet advancing city mirrors the renewed relevance of print culture itself.

Many of the conference activities made obvious the often humorous and campy connections between printmaking and the most glaring features of Detroit. The first day of demos opened most flagrantly with “Blended Hits: Reclaiming Printmaking’s Muscle Car,” which demoed printmaker’s colorful technique of the “Blend Roll” or “Split Fountain,” much like a the muscle car packing “a lot of power into each punch.” Yet the hands of a contemplative printmaker could transform these techniques from a hot rod to a luxury cruiser. If that wasn’t enough hyperbole to force the obvious connection, a group from the Kendall College of Art and Design, under the name of “Collective Pressure: Mobility as Maker,” offered a “printmaking experience” involving “collective, large-scale printing using objects or tools related to either the auto industry directly or transportation in general,” such as car tires, bike parts, timing belts, etc. The team wore Tyvek-like jumpsuits emblazoned with an image of a gear and appeared in those getups as either a throwback to an industrial-age assembly line or a vaguely futuristic team of scavengers reinventing the machine detritus of the past. As with other demos, the action of configuring paper on large conveyor-belt-like rolls became a symbol for the felt dynamics of print in urban circumstances that appear stuck in a loop but nevertheless always on the move.

The obvious placement of print as a mirror to Detroit’s condition pointed to deeper, more serious co-relations with print as environment. Without blatant metaphors of “motor city,” a number of the other demos and panels spoke to the ambient existence of print culture through stenciling techniques, the “push and punch of pochoir,” and other environmental forms of print working outside of paper and press. As keynote speaker Susan Tallman (editor in chief of Art in Print) revealed, even the traditional paper and press forms of print have a deep historical alliance with the urban environment. She argued persuasively that we must understand printmaking as an infrastructure for the transmission of signs and images as important as the material formations of roads, sewers, buildings, and energy grids in cities. She emphasized how singularly important print has become in producing multiple networks of players—artists, printers, publishers, dealers, and audiences—whereas traditional painting and drawing only exist in comparatively simple arrangements (and, even those arrangements rely on print-based infrastructures of communication). While not explicitly addressing any conference theme, the other two remarkable keynote speakers, Enrique Chagoya (whose exhibit of editioned work at Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, Wayne State University, ironically addressed cultural clashes around the world) and Judy Pfaff (whose exuberant, large-scale works incorporate many different media), both exemplified in their work how prints operate in dynamic terms of space and geography and underlined the historical notion of print as infrastructure.

Well known in the shifting fortunes of Detroit, such accelerating and collapsing infrastructures have multiple stages and layers unfolding in time: forms of decline and ascent coexist. This sensitivity to the contradictions of progress between print and the city stood out clearly in the themed portfolios exhibited at the conference and around the city. The Revival portfolio at Corktown Studios, for example, allowed the included artists to address the “past importance of industrial power and its relationship to the printmaking medium” while believing in Detroit as a “rising hub for contemporary art.” One of the most promising artists’ spaces in the city, Whittel Arts, displayed the Evolving System portfolio using “the common connections” between prints and cities as a way of “allowing previous

Installation view of Flux Density: Detroit (2014); photograph by Jennifer Williams
Unsuspending Disbelief: The Subject of Pictures
RICHARD AND MARY L. GRAY CENTER FOR ARTS AND INQUIRY
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
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Laura Letinsky, professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, whose lush enigmatic photographs of tabletops, food, and flowers have become increasingly abstract, organized a daylong symposium at the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry for twelve working photographers and theorists, including herself, to convene and discuss the state of contemporary photographic practice. Letinsky launched what she proposed as an “ongoing conversation,” on “The Subject of Pictures,” with the conceit that suspending disbelief—part of the agreement between reader and storyteller that makes fiction possible—is not necessarily part of the photographic exchange because, as Letinsky said, in the words of Diane Arbus, “with photography there is always the real.”

Shane Huffman, whose photographs record the movement of microwaves and cosmic background radiation, moderated the first panel, which was comprised of Anthony Elms, curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and Barbara Kasten and Daniel Gordon, colorists who both photograph scenes (architectural sculpture and appropriated elements to form still lifes) constructed for the camera. The panelists considered questions framed by the topic “The Materiality of the Image,” while sitting in chairs flanked by their images displayed on an alternating loop.

Huffman proposed a definition of photography as a domain (covering light, space, time, event, and movement) rather than a medium, in an abstruse but critical discussion concerning the function of photography as a process that depicts or records. The group’s necessarily inconclusive considerations moved on to questions concerning time as it affects depiction and recording: durational exposures, decisive moments, a shift of time to the process of construction, and subjective experiences of time.

The second panel departed from the paradoxically abstract and dizzying problem of materiality by posing questions about “The Urgency of the Real.” Photographic practices that foster relationships among groups of people and record, commemorate, memorialize, give power to, or provide witness grounded the interchange between Deana Lawson, Chris Mottalini, and Margaret Olin. Moderator Doug Ischar, whose photographs of gay communities in Chicago and San Francisco in the 1980s documented what was at stake during the AIDS crisis, and whose strikingly formalist and homoerotic films were screened in an adjoining room, described his commitment as being not to a material practice but to a set of issues. Olin’s latest project—she is likewise working in a mode that was once called “engaged”—consists of finding bystanders and participants in photographs that she took in 1970 at the first Gay Pride parade in Chicago. Mottalini has documented a series of homes designed by modernist architect Paul Rudolf that are abandoned and slated for demolition. His subjects, preserved in the book After You Left / They Took It Apart (2013), reveal the fragility of buildings, documenting very deliberately designed dwellings on the brink of disappearance. Lawson works with the present, composing, in collaboration with her subjects, large, lush photographs examining cultural and psychological dimensions of the black body in photographs.

Returning to the ontological problems and the status of truth in the photographic image that introduced the symposium, Letinsky moderated the last panel with photographers Thomas Struth and Matthew Connors, along with intellectual historian Martin Jay. Struth’s incomparably lucid and monumental photographs, while often choreographed, nevertheless serve as documentation, while Connors’s latest images from cities around the world are manipulated to add and subtract elements of the image, shifting any documentary function away from a single point in time or unified space, and modifying the process of production to implicitly question the indexical status of the photographic image. Jay asked, “Can photographers lie?” and quoted Theodor Adorno’s “Art is magic free from the lie of being true” as a way to offer perspective on the polarities between constructed and recorded realities, and their implications for what one of the panelists described as meaning and resistance to meaningfulness.

In response to photographers’ roles as witnesses and their commitment to the real raised by the second panel and extended here, Connors remarked, “I do consider myself to be a witness, but a calculating and complicated witness,” articulating a fluid postmodernist position on the problem of truth in contrast to Struth’s commitment to a critical understanding of things as they are. Connors’s stance reflected the meanings of the term “slippage” used in the panel title “Slippage of the Description,” borrowed from the field of semiotics and referring to the possibility for multiple significations and the possibility for play between signifiers and signifieds.

At the end of the day, the twelve panelists and moderators came back together for a concluding discussion. While some subjects were launched and shifted course throughout the symposium, the unfolding of ideas among this important and dynamic group of photographers, curators, and thinkers gave a privileged view of the questions at hand on the subject of pictures.

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and new strategies to exist simultaneously.” This actionable belief that print exists simultaneously as a relic of the past and as an avenue toward the future relates strongly to Raymond Williams’s ideas about “the residual” as a realm of past social forms that, far from being old or outmoded, offer possibilities of renewal through the retrieval and revaluing of discarded artifacts and fashions. The printmakers here, whether academics or independents, appeared allied in seeing this sense of the residual—mirrored by both print and city—as the most engaging stage of cultural reinvention.

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