Unsuspending Disbelief: The Subject of Pictures
RICHARD AND MARY L. GRAY CENTER FOR ARTS AND INQUIRY
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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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