Unsuspending Disbelief: The Subject of Pictures

The Materiality of the Image

The Urgency of The Real

Slippage of Description

Conceived and organized by Laura Letinsky, Unsuspending Disbelief: The Subject of Pictures, is a daylong symposium at the University of Chicago that will address questions regarding what a photograph pictures as opposed to what a photograph “means,” seeking out a more precise ontological mapping of the relationship between pictures and photography.
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Despite our longstanding knowledge that what we see, how we see, and how we “picture” is not natural but rather a complex negotiation of physiological, psychological, historical, and social factors, the photograph’s ubiquity naturalizes its ways of describing. The fact that what was before the lens—be it person, place, or indistinct blob—imposed its reflection onto the receptive mechanism of the camera is taken as concrete evidence, a truth about the world even at a time when “truthiness” (to borrow comedian Stephen Colbert’s term) makes evident the irony of even this possibility. What is “pictured” in a photograph is regularly taken as evidentiary, and in identity discourse, what is pictured matters. However, like ink squiggles on a white page that form letters and words—creating a whole complex of signification subject to interpretation—what the photograph actually means is in fact rarely self-evident and equally relative.

Particular characteristics of photography that were once necessary for the medium’s inclusion within the cannon of high art—such as intentionality, control, specificity, and originality—are today utilized alongside spontaneity, accident, ordinariness, and quotation. These latter qualities were actualized through photography itself and are now synonymous with postmodernism. This symposium doesn’t propose a radical departure from the contemporary photographic discourse: its aims are at once more modest and precise. Rather than proposing the rhetoric of rupture, this symposium is conceived as an ongoing conversation with photographic artists and theorists across a wide range of approaches and methodologies.

With: Matthew Connors, Anthony Elms, Daniel Gordon, Shane Huffman, Martin Jay, Doug Ischar, Barbara Kasten, Deanna Lawson, Laura Letinsky, Margaret Olin, Chris Mottalini, and Thomas Struth.
Friday, November 21, 2014

9:30 – 10:00AM
Coffee & Opening Remarks

The Materiality of the Image
Anthony Elms
Daniel Gordon
Barbara Kasten
Moderated by Shane Huffman

10:00 – 11:30AM

The Urgency of The Real
Deana Lawson
Chris Mottalini
Margaret Olin
Moderated by Doug Ischar

11:30AM – 1:00PM

Slippage of Description
Matthew Connors
Martin Jay
Thomas Struth
Moderated by Laura Letinsky

2:30 – 4:00PM

1:00 – 2:00PM
Lunch

1:00 – 5:00PM *
Doug Ischar’s Alone With You, come lontano, and Tristes Tarzan

4:00 – 5:00PM
Closing Discussion & Reception

* Ischar’s recent videos will be screened next door at the Logan Center in room 014 for viewing during the lunch break, as well as during the closing reception. Total running time is about one hour.
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Daniel Gordon

*Summer Fruit*, 2014
Chromogenic Print
60”w × 70”h
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Barbara Kasten
*Studio Construct 123*, 2011
Archival pigment print
53.75”w × 43.75”h
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Laura Letinsky
*Untitled #49, 2014*
from the series *Ill Form & Void Full*
Archival pigment print
50”w × 38.9”h
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Thomas Struth
*Mountain, Anaheim, California, 2013*
Chromogenic Print
131”w × 83.5”h
© Thomas Struth
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Laura Letinsky with the support
of Zachary Cahill.

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