

THE FIRST MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE OF THE INFLUENTIAL PHOTOGRAPHER CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS EXAMINES THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND IMAGE PRODUCTION

Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness

July 27–November 2, 2014

The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Gallery, sixth floor

Press Preview: Tuesday, July 22, 2014, 9:30–11:30 a.m.

NEW YORK, June 23, 2014—The Museum of Modern Art presents ***Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness***, the first retrospective devoted to the 35-year career of Christopher Williams (American, b. 1956), one of the most influential cinephilic artists working in photography. The exhibition brings together outstanding works that engage the conventions of photojournalism, picture archives, and commercial imagery within their sociopolitical contexts. Williams has pursued an artistic direction that examines the theoretical and political history of photography within the larger context of image production. On view from July 27 through November 2, 2014, the exhibition includes some 100 photographs as well as video and film works and architectural interventions. *Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness* is organized at MoMA by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, with Lucy Gallun, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography. Organized by MoMA in collaboration with The Art Institute of Chicago, the exhibition travels to Whitechapel Gallery, London, in spring 2014; it was previously on view at AIC.

Williams studied at the California Institute of the Arts from the mid to late 1970s under the first wave of West Coast Conceptual artists, including Michael Asher, John Baldessari, and Douglas Huebler, only to become one of his generation's leading Conceptualists and art professors; he is currently professor of photography at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Deeply invested in the histories of photography and film, Williams has produced a concise oeuvre that furthers a critique of a late capitalist society, in which images typically function as agents of spectacle. For the title of this exhibition, Williams has taken a line from *Marcel*, a documentary by French director Jean-Luc Godard made in collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville, in which an amateur filmmaker compares his daily job as a factory worker with his hobby of editing his films of the Swiss countryside, describing the latter as "the production line of happiness." In Williams's hands the phrase appears to refer to the function of much photography in postwar consumer society, in which it not only pictures but also produces so many experiences and objects to be consumed.

The Production Line of Happiness begins with an installation of extensive vinyl "supergraphics" covering the walls outside the exhibition space. These supergraphics—black letters on a red oversaturated AGFA color ground—feature elements culled from the exhibition

catalogue, such as the checklist, graphics, and selected writings, so that the exhibition appears to unfold from the book.

One salient aspect of the MoMA installation is the display of walls culled from previous exhibitions, foregrounding Williams's long-standing engagement with architecture and the history of display. The walls chosen for this installation include: a mobile wall with trolley and a mobile wall on a platform, both from Williams's exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago; wall fragments from the previous MoMA exhibitions *Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling* and *Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary, 1926–1938*; and the reconstruction of a wall from the 1958 exhibition *Jackson Pollock* at Whitechapel Gallery, London. In this way, Williams brings into the MoMA installation building components from the three venues of his exhibition *The Production Line of Happiness* in Chicago, New York, and London, while also revealing that each image is connected to a broader architectural context and ideas.

Early Works

The exhibition presents Williams's little-seen early Super-8 shorts within its film program, as well as major projects from the 1980s to the early 1990s, including *SOURCE* (1981), a work of appropriation and rephotography that subverts conventions of photojournalism; *Angola to Vietnam** (1987–89), an installation of 27 photographs crossing taxonomies of scientific and political inquiry, which is being shown in its entirety for the first time in the United States in decades; and *Bouquet for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D'Arcangelo* (1991)—a single photographic still life of a bouquet mounted on a free-standing wall just beyond the main wall of a room—which pays tribute to two under-recognized artists from the 1960s and 1970s who met tragic ends. Williams calls art “a dialogical exercise,” in which each work forms part of a conversation with other artists and traditions; in his case, with Neue Sachlichkeit, photo-Conceptualism, and the films of Godard, Harun Farocki, Georges Franju, and Jean Painlevé, among others. Other photographs in the exhibition include images of works by artists and architects such as Mies van der Rohe, John Chamberlain, and Daniel Buren.

For Example: Die Welt ist schön (The World Is Beautiful)

From 1993 until 2001, Williams worked on a single photographic series known as For Example: Die Welt ist schön (The World Is Beautiful), which he describes as an “essay on modernity and modernization.” One inspiration for the series is Albert Renger-Patzsch's 1928 book *Die Welt ist schön*, which contains 100 pictures of natural and human creations. Similarly, Williams's series brings together various subjects in the world—Japanese models who have undergone Western-style hair and makeup changes; a tropical beach in Cuba, carefully maintained for foreigners; a travel poster with International Style buildings constructed in Africa; an overturned Renault recalling the student unrest in Paris—to address the aftereffects of decolonization, histories of avant-garde art, and the radicalism of May 1968. Like Renger-Patzsch, Williams attempts to

create an atlas of the world while enacting a critique of photography's role in the history of the Cold War that defined much of the second half of 20th century.

For Example: Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle (Eighteen Lessons on Industrial Society)

In the last decade, Williams has worked on another major series, For Example: Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle (Eighteen Lessons on Industrial Society), which takes its title from the 1962 book by French sociologist Raymond Aron, a study of modes of production in Fordist capitalism and Soviet planned economy. The series puts photography itself at its core, featuring numerous images of precision optics: sectioned cameras, lenses, photographic color-charts, analog darkrooms, and light meters isolated against pristine backgrounds like fetish objects. The focus, this time, is the photographic apparatus and image culture across Europe and America during and in the aftermath of the Cold War.

There are also pictures of socks, tires, chocolate bars, bricks, and apples, reflecting Williams's fascination with German painting of the early 1960s (including the Capitalist Realist phases of Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, and Konrad Lueg), which engaged the consumer culture of mass-media society with a sense of ambivalence. This ambivalence is reflected in Williams's pictures, which emulate regular advertisements, but include deliberate imperfections or "irritations." Employing an auteurist approach in his studio practice, Williams has continued to raise questions about representation and photography's historical role in the formation of the society of spectacle.

SPONSORSHIP:

Major support for the MoMA presentation of the exhibition is provided by MoMA's Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art through the Annenberg Foundation and by The William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund.

Additional funding is provided by The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art, Emily Glasser and William Susman, Joseph M. Cohen, Keli Lee, and the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund.

PUBLICATION:

Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness is an illuminating and unusual volume, equal parts artist's book and exhibition catalogue. With a trio of essays by Mark Godfrey, Curator, Tate Modern; Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art; and Matthew S. Witkovsky, Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator, Department of Photography, The Art Institute of Chicago, the book explores Williams's engagement with his artistic peers and predecessors, with cinema (particularly the film-essay), and with the methods and modes of display and publicity in the art world. These contributions are "interrupted" by a transcript of a talk Williams delivered on the work of John Chamberlain, and additional historical and contemporary textual and visual materials that were selected by the artist himself. An exhibition history, bibliography, and illustrated list of works round out the publication. *Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness* is published and distributed by Yale University Press. It is available in the MoMA Stores and online at MoMAstore.com. 186 pages; 100 illustrations. PB-with jacket, \$45. ISBN: 9780300203905

FILM PROGRAM

Carte Blanche: Christopher Williams

July 23–29 and September 17–23, 2014

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2 (T2)

In conjunction with *Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness* and as part of MoMA's *Carte Blanche* screening series, Williams has curated a two-week experimental film program. Organized around the themes of Tenderness, Entertainment, Economy, Exchange, Enjoyment, Concentration, and Choreography, the program features films by Bruce Conner, Tony Conrad, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Joris Ivens, Peter Kubelka, Ed Ruscha, Quentin Tarantino, Andy Warhol, and Lawrence Weiner, among others.

This film program is organized by the artist and Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, with Lucy Gallun, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography.

Prints courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix; Les Films du Jeudi; Morgan Fisher; Icarus Films; Janus Films; Leisure Time Features, Rialto Pictures; Estate Peter Roehr and Mehdi Choukari, Berlin; Ed Ruscha and Gagosian Gallery; and Swank Motion Pictures, Inc. With thanks to Isa Cucinotta at Film Society Lincoln Center.

Please see *Carte Blanche: Christopher Williams* screening schedule or visit MoMA.org/film for details.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness Panel Discussion

Tuesday, September 16, 6:00 p.m.

The Celeste Bartos Theater (T3)

A series of scholarly presentations and creative disruptions address issues in Williams's work: its engagement with the history of early 20th-century avant-garde photography and film, epic dramaturgy, the society of the spectacle, and installation as a medium. Participants include Devin Fore, Associate Professor of German, Princeton University; John Kelsey, artist and art critic; John Miller, artist and Professor of Professional Practice, Department of Art History, Visual Arts Concentration, Barnard College/Columbia University; R. H. Quaytman, artist; and Julia Robinson, Assistant Professor, Department of Art History, New York University. Moderated by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art.

Tickets (\$15; \$10 members and Corporate members; \$5 students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased online or at the information desk, the Film desk after 4:00 p.m., or at the Education and Research Building reception desk on the day of the program.

MODERN MONDAYS

An Evening with Christopher Williams

Monday, September 15, 7:00 p.m.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater (T2)

Christopher Williams joins Stuart Comer, MoMA's Chief Curator of Media and Performance Art, for a discussion of Williams's longstanding engagement with cinema. The conversation will touch upon Williams's *Carte Blanche* screening series. Williams will also discuss and screen his own Super-8 films, made in 1979 while he was a student at CalArts. The evening will be introduced by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator in MoMA's Department of Photography.

Admission to the Modern Mondays program is free for Museum ticket holders, but separate program tickets are required. A Modern Mondays admission ticket does not include admission to

the Museum galleries. The price of a film admission ticket may be applied toward the price of a Museum admission ticket or MoMA membership within 30 days of purchase.

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For downloadable high-resolution images, register at MoMA.org/press.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, MoMA.org.

Hours: Saturday through Thursday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m.

Museum Admission: \$25 adults; \$18 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$14 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Free admission during Uniqlo Free Friday Nights: Fridays, 4:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m.

MoMA.org: No service charge for tickets ordered on MoMA.org. Tickets purchased online may be printed out and presented at the Museum without waiting in line. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs).

Film and After Hours Program Admission: \$12 adults; \$10 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$8 full-time students with current I.D. The price of an After Hours Program Admission ticket may be applied toward the price of a Museum admission ticket or MoMA Membership within 30 days.

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