

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.

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