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THE ART INSTITUTE PRESENTS FIRST RETROSPECTIVE OF CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS

The Production Line of Happiness in Chicago January 25–May 18, 2014

Works Spanning 35 Years on View Across the Museum

The Art Institute of Chicago, in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), has organized the first retrospective ever mounted of Christopher Williams—one of the most influential artists working in photography today. The Production Line of Happiness—which premieres at the Art Institute of Chicago on January 25 and runs through May 18, 2014—charts Williams’s 35-year career in a multipart installation, fronted by hundreds of feet of brightly colored vinyl, that spans three sets of galleries across the museum: the Allerton Building Photography Galleries (lower level, 1-4); the Bucksbaum Galleries for Photography in the Modern Wing (ground floor, G188–189); and the Architecture and Design Galleries in the Modern Wing (second floor, G283–285). This exhibition marks a homecoming for Williams, who had his first-ever museum showing in 1982 at the Art Institute. Following its premiere in Chicago, Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness will travel to MoMA (August 2–November 2, 2014), and the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (April–June 2015).
Christopher Williams (b. 1956) studied at the California Institute of the Arts under the first wave of West Coast conceptual artists, including John Baldessari and Michael Asher, only to become one of his generation’s leading conceptualists and art professors—he is currently Professor of Photography at the Kunstkademie Düsseldorf. From a love of cinema, expressed in several little-seen student films included here, Williams moved in the early 1980s to works of appropriation and rephotography that managed simultaneously to subvert conventions of photojournalism and habitual practices of gallery or museum display. In the major work Angola to Vietnam* (1989), which will be seen in its entirety at this exhibition for the first time in decades in the United States, Williams overlaid taxonomies of scientific and political inquiry to encourage reflection on both these systems for ordering knowledge and our fellow human beings. In the 1990s and over the last 10 years, meanwhile, Williams has pursued two lengthy series in which individual photographs are juxtaposed, recomposed, and redeployed in site-specific ways across books and exhibitions, allowing the artist to develop attention over an extended time to grand themes: colonialism, the question of artistic genres, Cold War popular culture, and the camera’s inbuilt “program,” among others. In all his works, Williams furthers a dialogue with chosen past and present artists working in various media, so that his pictures form a polemic on behalf of art history. Through these works, which masterfully balance apparent simplicity with intellectual complexity—and much sly humor and feeling—Christopher Williams has established himself as one of the most thought-provoking artists of our time, one whose interests in his generational elders are mirrored by the impact he has on a range of younger artists.

The Production Line of Happiness is conceived as a multi-part artist installation, unified across the museum galleries by extensive vinyl “supergraphics” covering the walls outside each of the three exhibition spaces. The vinyl covering features, in black letters on a bright Kodak yellow ground, numerous elements taken from the exhibition catalogue, such as the checklist, graphic elements, and selected writings—so that the show appears to unfold from the book. In the lower level Photography galleries in the Allerton Building, film works from CalArts, transferred to video, mark the earliest entries in the exhibition. Angola to
Vietnam* (1989) appears here, along with selections from For Example: Die Welt ist schön (1994–2001), the first of Williams’ two extended series. The artist took his subtitle (in English, The World Is Beautiful) from a 1928 book by German industrial photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch, which itself carried a subtitle, “100 Photographs,” and was first meant to be called simply “Things.” Renger-Patzsch had indeed gathered “things” from nature, industry, and the products of human endeavor in his quasi-encyclopedic photobook. Taking that precedent as one source of inspiration—and a whole tradition of German photography as another, from Bernd and Hilla Becher to their students, in particular Thomas Struth—Williams traveled around the globe, as if filming on location, to “archive” scenes of natural and man-made creation in a mode that crosses and short-circuits the agendas of tourism, ethnography, and colonial politics.

A single work, Bouquet for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D’Arcangelo, will be displayed in the Carolyn S. and Matthew Bucksbaum Gallery for Photography on the ground floor of the Modern Wing. This piece, a memorial to two Conceptual artists who worked in Los Angeles and died young, will turn the gallery into a space that is at once unusually focused and exceptionally open. Bouquet first made explicit Williams’ understanding of photographs as visual creations that take account of the space around them, in the manner of sculpture or architecture. A traditionally matted photograph shows an arrangement of flowers (determined by a professional floral designer) strewn across a tabletop, recalling the film Primary Time by Ader, in which the Dutch-born artist arranged cut flowers colored blue, yellow, and red; this photograph hangs low on a specially built wall with proportions that echo the plain walls D’Arcangelo made and presented as his works of art.

Installed in the Architecture and Design Galleries on the second floor of the Modern Wing is the most recent and prolific series, For Example: Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle (Eighteen Lectures on Industrial Society, begun 2004). Here Williams has concentrated on Cold War culture. Hiring for his “shoots” hand models, props and costume specialists, and even the Dutch Playmate of the Year for 2012, Williams now runs an auteurist cinema studio, even though he continues to generate still photographs. His polemically chosen references in art and popular culture remain grounded in art of the 1960s and 1970s—Daniel Buren, Lawrence Weiner, Claes
Oldenburg, and as ever his mentor Asher—but as they extend into popular culture, these references now point heavily toward Eastern Europe (particularly East Germany) of the 1950s and 1960s. Camera equipment, from a light meter to lenses or instruction manuals, figures heavily and serves to recall the industrial-political program of image creation and image control that was developed in the U.S. and Europe during the Cold War—one that holds sway to a surprising degree today as well.

Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness is accompanied by an artist book-catalogue, featuring essays by Matthew S. Witkovsky, the Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator, Department of Photography, the Art Institute of Chicago; Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator in the Department of Photography, the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Mark Godfrey, curator, Tate Modern, London. The catalogue—a survey of one of the most versatile yet cogent and influential careers in contemporary art—also includes the previously unpublished transcript of a illuminating lecture by Williams on the foam pieces of sculptor John Chamberlain, plus writings by fellow artists and intellectual inspirations such as Claes Oldenburg, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and music group Scritti Politti. Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness is published by the Art Institute and distributed by Yale University Press. The 182-page book includes 100 color illustrations and will be available beginning January 25, 2014, at the Art Institute’s Museum Shop for $45.00.

About Christopher Williams

Christopher Williams has been the subject of solo exhibitions worldwide, most recently at Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany; Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (both 2011); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Germany; and the Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (both 2010). Other notable solo exhibitions include the Kunsthalle Zürich (2007); Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal (2006); Secession, Vienna; and the Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany (both 2005). Angola to Vietnam* was featured in the 55th Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni (on view through November 24, 2013).

Major museum collections that hold works by the artist include the Art Institute of Chicago; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Ludwig Museum, Cologne; Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna; Solomon R.

Images:


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The exhibition is curated by Matthew S. Witkowsky, the Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator, department of photography, the Art Institute of Chicago; Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator in the Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art; and Mark Godfrey, Curator, Tate Modern.

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