

ARTFORUM

"Picture Industry"

CCS BARD GALLERIES AND HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART, ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY

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Harun Farocki, *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (detail), 2006, still from a 37-second color and black-and-white video component of a twelve-monitor installation.

"PICTURE INDUSTRY," curated by the artist Walead Beshty at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard, has quietly thrown down the gauntlet, not only for exhibitions that address the history of photography, but for all future surveys of twentieth-century art and political imagery broadly. The exhibition is unabashedly ambitious and pedagogical: Three hundred works by more than seventy individuals and collectives spread across seventeen galleries, with extensive wall labels culled from primary sources and the leading scholarship. But the show's lessons can be found not in the texts so much as in the objects themselves. "Picture Industry" offers at least three essential insights for historians, curators, critics, and practitioners of modern art and media.

Petzel

1. The long twentieth century, from which we are still emerging, was the cinematic century.

Ostensibly a presentation of photography from its origins to the present, the exhibition opens and closes with cinematic images of workers leaving the factory—by the Lumières (1895) and Sharon Lockhart (2008)—and is structured by Harun Farocki's thirty-six-minute video *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) and twelve-monitor video installation *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006). As such, "Picture Industry" posits along twentieth century anchored aesthetically, conceptually, and technologically in cinema. The repercussions are vast. The eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky had already put it bluntly in 1936:



Martha Rosler's photomontages and newspaper reproductions, ca. 1967–72. Installation view, 2017. Photo: Chris Kendall.

If all the serious lyrical poets, composers, painters, and sculptors were forced by law to stop their activities, a rather small fraction of the general public would become aware of

Petzel

the fact and a still smaller fraction would seriously regret it. If the same thing were to happen with the movies the social consequences would be catastrophic.

The declaration is dated—cinemas could go dark without spawning too much awareness or regret; and museums have become outlets of mass media, especially in cultural capitals and around art festivals—but the provocation holds. Indeed, if “the movies” describes a cinematic century, one encompassing film, television, video, digital imaging, lantern slide shows and other projections, photo essays, illustrated magazines, postcards, chronophotographs, etc.—that is, the very objects that constitute the picture industry suggested by “Picture Industry”—then Panofsky’s provocation is self-evident. To nearly everyone outside the art world it is. “Picture Industry” assembles many of the artists and nonartists who recognized this fact most powerfully, even—or especially—if many of them did not make movies. Visitors encounter objects, images, and artworks that emerged at the cusp of cinema’s arrival (the chronophotographs of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge; the images from lectures by Jacob Riis, who was an early adopter of the lantern slide) those that realized cinema by other means (the photomontages of John Heartfield and Martha Rosler; the magazine work of Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, and LaToya Ruby Frazier; the slide shows of Allan Sekula) and those that carry us into a postcinematic future (the film and video works of Stan Douglas, Seth Price, and Hito Steyerl). (Warhol is absent. But his spirit is omnipresent.) “Picture Industry” announces itself as an alternative account of photography. That is too modest. It is an alternative account of art and images in the cinematic century.

That century’s historical subject is widely acknowledged and named at the start, through the very title of the Lumière’s film: *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* is, in a sense, the history of industrialization and exploitation as told from a postindustrial moment, with an emphasis on the human body as dissected by science and as spectacularized by entertainment—from the biometrics of Alphonse Bertillon through the poetic documentaries of the Black Audio Film Collective and the *Objets de grève* (Strike Objects), 1999–2000, of Jean-Luc Moulène. The century’s central aesthetic techniques are familiar and, here, well represented: framing, cropping, montage, serialization, projection, looping, de- and rematerialization, reproduction, and so forth. And yet the watershed intervention staged by “Picture Industry” lies neither in its depicted subject nor in its represented techniques, but rather in its constitution of the picture as an image in circulation across media platforms.

2. There are no mediums, only media platforms; no stable works, only their circulation.

Petzel



Stan Douglas,
Monodramas (detail),
1991, still from a 30-
second color video
component of a mixed-
media installation with ten
gelatin silver prints and five
monitors.

Whether in textbooks, museums, or auction catalogues, the history of photography is still largely told as the history of photographic prints. As such, it enters into the history of art prints more broadly and, thus, into the history of art and its collectible objects. (Their more recent emergence as tableaux merely raises the stakes and prices without altering the logic.) As everyone knows and everyone knows to ignore, this is a museum and art-market fiction. “Picture Industry” combats that fiction with the reality of images that circulate across media platforms, both within and beyond the world of art.

The exhibition largely forgoes collectible prints, instead presenting the books, reports, magazines, postcards, portfolios, etc. that constituted the primary platforms for the production, dissemination, and reception of works by many photographic heroes—William Henry Fox Talbot, Timothy O’Sullivan, Lewis Hine, Riis, August Sander, Evans, Frazier, Stephen Shore, etc.—and an even greater number of less familiar names. Stated polemically, the argument is that *photography* does not exist—only photographic platforms do; *the* photograph does not exist—only its circulation does. (The rule is most readily discernible in cinema, despite the protestations of celluloid and movie-theater fundamentalists. “Picture Industry” includes 16-mm film, film transferred to video, assorted video formats, television sets, black-box galleries, and a petite movie theater, among other moving-image platforms.) It demonstrates that what is true for photography and cinema is true for much ambitious modern art.

Petzel



Hito Steyerl, *The Tower*, 2015, mixed media with three-channel HD video (color, sound, 6 minutes 55 seconds). Installation view, 2017. Photo: Chris Kendall.

Fittingly, the emblematic instance is *Schema (March 1966)* (1966–70; there are several iterations on display), a nonphotographic work by the Conceptual artist and amateur photographer Dan Graham. *Schema (March 1966)* inventories the grammatical content and graphic design of its immediate publication context—e.g., “35 adjectives, 7 adverbs, 35.52% area not occupied by type” (*Aspen*, no. 5/6 [1967])—such that the work cannot be exhibited except through its placement in a magazine. As it was elaborated by Graham, who is quoted in the wall text, “Conventionally, art magazines reproduce second-hand art which exists first, as phenomenological presence, in galleries. Turning this upside down, *Schema (March 1966)* only exists by its presence in the functional structure of the magazine and can only be exhibited in a gallery second-hand. . . . The meaning of the work is contingent upon the specific meaning of each of its appearances; collectively it has no one meaning.” Crucial, he continues, is “the use of the magazine system as support.” The artist-theorist Beshty has learned deeply from the artist-theorist Graham. What *Schema (March 1966)* is for magazines, “Picture Industry” is for photography’s multifarious platforms. Both are also didactic demonstrations of the conditions that determine the production, dissemination, and reception of art.

3. Politics are platform specific.

In the seven-and-a-half-minute video *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, 2016, Arthur Jafa overlays footage found online—contemporary and historical, professional and amateur—with Kanye West’s anthem “Ultralight Beam” to create a harrowing portrait of black life in America. We recognize many of the images because we’ve seen them online. The formal structure—found footage combined with popular

Petzel

music—is a YouTube commonplace. But the work is projected in a black-box gallery. *Love Is the Message* arrives toward the end of “Picture Industry,” after Douglas’s *Monodramas* (shown on ’90s TV monitors) and Frazier’s *Flint Is Family* (2016), which is represented via two platforms: a nearly twelve-minute video and a spread in *Elle* magazine, accompanied by related contact sheets and page proofs. In other words, by the time we arrive at *Love Is the Message*, the gallery—be it white cube or black box—has been stripped of its status as neutral platform. The black-box gallery is a choice, and a stark one, since, unlike its source material, the video is unavailable online. Why did Jafa limit the work to the gallery? The art market is a significant but only partial answer. The limitation is also a response to Jafa’s own question: “But this footage is all over the place. . . . It’s literally everywhere so the question becomes: How do you situate it so that people actually see it . . . as opposed to just having it pass in front of them? And simultaneously, how do you induce people to apprehend both the beauty and the horror [of] these circumstances?” In order to make ubiquitous images visible, Jafa takes them out of circulation. The choice is considered, urgent, and—given the trajectory of the exhibition—productively problematic.



Arthur Jafa, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, 2016, digital video, color and black-and-white, sound, 7 minutes 25 seconds.

Several galleries before Jafa’s video, attentive viewers can find a bound copy of *Jet* magazine (vol. 8, no. 19, September 15, 1955)—also available online through Google Books—open to the story “Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth.” The article includes four pages of text and seven photographs, three of which depict the mutilated face of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American victim of lynching. The inclusion of *Jet* magazine reads like an implicit rebuke to the 2017

Petzel

Whitney Biennial and its scandalous painting of Till, which is comparatively decorative and tasteful. Face-to-face with the wrenching four-page story and documentary photographs reproduced in the diminutive fifteen-cent magazine, we are forced to ask whether gestural painting is germane to, let alone valuable for, the representation of photographs conscientiously circulated in magazines such as *Jet*—that is, photographs we now recognize as direct precursors to the traumatic videos gathered by Jafa. Rather than pass judgment on a medium such as painting—let alone make declarations about who has (or does not have) the right to represent black anguish—“Picture Industry” tests the aesthetic and political limits of platforms such as galleries and magazines. Jafa’s *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* takes uncomfortable refuge in the gallery. *Jet* marks the limits of such a withdrawal.

*“Picture Industry” is on view through December 15. Noam M. Elcott is an associate professor of art history at Columbia University, an editor of the journal *Grey Room*, and the author of *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (2016).*