Objektiv

PROTOCOLS OF DISPLAY

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By Nina Strand, Phil Chang and Travis Diehl

In a conversation for our current issue of Objektiv, the young art scene was discussed, artists that goes beyond the gallery, doing shows in their living rooms, in their backyards, on the side of their studio, in storefronts.... Perhaps we are not looking to established institutions to resolve critical issues? Maybe the artist-run spaces might be challenging larger institutions? The precedent for this development goes back to the garage galleries of the 1950s and 1960s, a formative time when spaces and co-operatives dedicated to photography were founded in major cities in the West. Previously, there wasn't a visible infrastructure, there were simply spaces where people tried to do things together. There is a parallel with what we're living through now. Amongst the missions of Objektiv is an investigation of the ways in which camera-based art is exhibited, both from institutional and artistic perspectives. During this year's PhotoLA in January I held a panel questioning the protocols of display, inviting artist Phil Chang, writer Travis Diehl, and the inaugural Director of Photography at the V&A, Duncan Forbes. We discussed if artistic practices actually produce spaces for display, and not the other way around? The panel talk was not recorded, but I have asked Chang and Diehl to share their statements on the LA scene here.

Phil Chang:

I believe that photography excels at capturing and describing the world in images. However, I also believe that something else other than photography excels at capturing and describing the world; this would be in the way that we produce, circulate, and consume photographic images. I believe that these actions more accurately describes the world than actual photographic images of the world.

 In July 2019, I staged an exhibition at The Suburban in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Started in 1999, The Suburban has allowed artists and curators to self-direct and organize an exhibition with the intention of moving the site of production – whether that be the artist studio, the institution, the museum or any site considered for production – into their space.
 My exhibition included works where I manually applied inkjet printer ink onto inkjet printer canvas. Each work was installed by pushpins, blue painters tape, aerosol spray adhesive, and a single, stretched inkjet canvas held up by screws. This varied approach to presentation and installation methods was crucial to knowing that I would be showing work in an independent, artist-run space.

I chose to highlight this exhibition at The Suburban since it was best suited as a response to a question that appeared in the description of the panel discussion: "What are the external structural forces that govern the protocols of a given exhibition?"

Several criteria informed these structural forces for me as I conceived of my exhibition. They were all contingent upon one another and enabled the subsequent development of more criteria as each one was met. These included the nature of the exhibition space that I would show in (i.e. commercial, non-profit, or independent/artist-run), the degree of experimentation that the space would permit, the presence of an artist community around the space, the function of generosity if that community was present, and the degree to which both the space and the community was open to migrating the site of production to the site of the exhibition.

Travis Diehl:

I second the premise that Los Angeles supports a unique ecosystem of artist-run and alternative spaces—in storefronts, studios, cars, trucks, elevators, desks, and so on (sometimes to the point of parody). I'm not sure how this relates to photographic work in particular. My feeling is that the same conditions that allow for these flexible, fly-by-night spaces to thrive also counteract the ability of artists to display photographs in any traditional sense. There's a barrier to entry, for example, in terms of the production costs required to make, print, frame a photograph that doesn't apply to the small, quick paintings and ceramics you often see in these spaces. Photography doesn't lend itself to this kind of social curating. Put another way, photography is inherently institutional—these conventions of display, prints and frames and so on, are an institutional format, and so they don't make sense in a more fluent, worldly context.

On the other hand, you see photographs everywhere, all day long, every day, and they're essentially free to produce and distribute—a function of your "phone" and a part of everyday communication—so here again the idea of putting a photograph in a gallery is somewhat counterintuitive and overly formal. This also has something to do with what I've described as the direction of anxiety over photography as a medium: artists are anxious to move away from photography, and end up working in 3D media as a result of that anxiety (as opposed to being drawn towards 3D media).

Two exhibitions come to mind that bear out these ideas. The first is a two-person show at As It Stands by Haena Yoo and Erin Calla Watson. Both artists incorporated photography in their work, in the form of magazine/newspaper clippings and reproductions of ID documents in the former, and images found online in the latter. Watson in particular uses a kind of novel, middle-class technique of having her found images "printed" in laser etched crystals of the kind you usually see in corporate awards and sentimental portraits of your grandparents. There's a photographic fluency there that doesn't result in traditional photographs.

The other exhibition is proof by exception. Carter Seddon's last two shows at Jenny's have consisted of silver gelatin photos framed with white mats in a modernist style. His sensibility veers between the snapshot of some close, simple still life of an apple or a flower, and a dry sort of street photography—and, in all, Seddon's shows are animated by this profound frisson between anachronistic technique and contemporary banality. That, to me, is the present condition of photographic display.