

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Breaking News: Turning the Lens on Mass Media

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Los Angeles

December 20, 2016–April 30, 2017

Breaking News: Turning the Lens on the Mass Media, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, was a timely and evocative, albeit traditional, look at how artists using the camera have responded to media culture. Arranged chronologically, the exhibition presented photographs and videos by seventeen artists whose work is inspired by or directly appropriates images from mass media, beginning with black-and-white photographs created between 1969 and 1970 by Donald Blumberg and ending with the installation of *War Primer 2* (2011), a bookwork by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin.

Numerous compelling and seductive artworks were on view, but the curators relied too heavily on works in the Getty's collection and artists who are known for this line of inquiry, rather than searching for new and less familiar artists and presenting works that challenge accepted methodologies. To be fair, it has never been the Getty's mission to reinvent the wheel as much as to reiterate the canon. But in the current political climate in particular, the audience might have been better served by the inclusion of more current work.

Breaking News succeeded at contextualizing the appropriation of mass media as social, political, and cultural critique. Opening the exhibition were Donald Blumberg's rarely seen black-and-white

images from his series *Daily Photographs, 1969–1970*. In these works, Blumberg photographed front pages of a wide range of newspapers, isolating specific images and their captions or headlines and enlarging them to more than double their original size. Although the newspaper images are presented out of context, it is clear that their overall theme is the Vietnam War. These fragmented glimpses of what was happening politically during that period are a perfect entree into Blumberg's contact sheet collages. Entitled *Television Political Mosaics* and *Television Abstractions* (both 1968–69), the works are comprised of grids of politicians shot on television screens. From their black-and-white aesthetic and grain, to the rounded TV screens and proliferation of talking heads pontificating via the broadcast media, these iconic works perfectly encapsulate the times.

Blumberg's photographs have an affinity with Masao Mochizuki, a Japanese photographer who used custom-made cameras to systematically photograph Japanese television. Between 1975 and 1976, Mochizuki documented thousands of television shows, presenting each broadcast as a series of small individual frames composited into visually complex grids that strip the narrative of any meaning by simultaneously presenting a chaotic mixture of news and entertainment images. Blumberg and Mochizuki's works also share a kinship with Robert Heinecken, who is represented by his seminal 1984 work, *A Case Study in Finding an Appropriate TV Newswoman* (A CBS Docudrama in Words and Pictures), a pseudo-documentary of the quest to find the "perfect" female newscaster. Heinecken's satirical piece traces an invented search via textual commentary and photographic composites of different newscasters' faces in an attempt to find the ideal female accompaniment to preselected male counterparts.

Jumping from images of broadcasts from the 1970s and '80s to the 2000s, one happened upon Catherine Opie's Polaroids from the series *Close to Home* (2004–5). These photographs of the television document mass media coverage of the political scene—the 2004 presidential debate, the confirmation of Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, and myriad images of a smiling President George W. Bush. Opie's spontaneous images capture telling moments and can be seen as a prelude of what is to come. Omer Fast's video *CNN Concatenated* (2002, 18 min.) is a fascinating monologue composed of CNN footage about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Fast combines the newscaster's broadcasts, breaking them down word by word and reediting them into a new sequence that becomes a parody of the genre.

While Heinecken, Mochizuki, and Opie used a camera to capture what was on television, Sarah Charlesworth, Alfredo Jaar, and Martha Rosler appropriated images from print. In *Breaking News*, Rosler was predictably represented by her seminal work *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), in which she created photomontages that juxtapose magazine images of the Vietnam War with plush interiors. Two of Charlesworth's well-known sequences from 1978 were also on view: *April 20, 1978*, a grid of altered front pages from twenty-five different newspapers on the day the Italian Red Brigades announced the abduction of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro; and, juxtaposed with this sequence, *Osservatore Romano, March 17–May 10, 1978*, documenting twenty-seven days

Detail from *A Case Study in Finding an Appropriate TV Newswoman* (A CBS Docudrama in Words and Pictures) (1984) by Robert Heinecken; © The Robert Heinecken Trust; courtesy Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

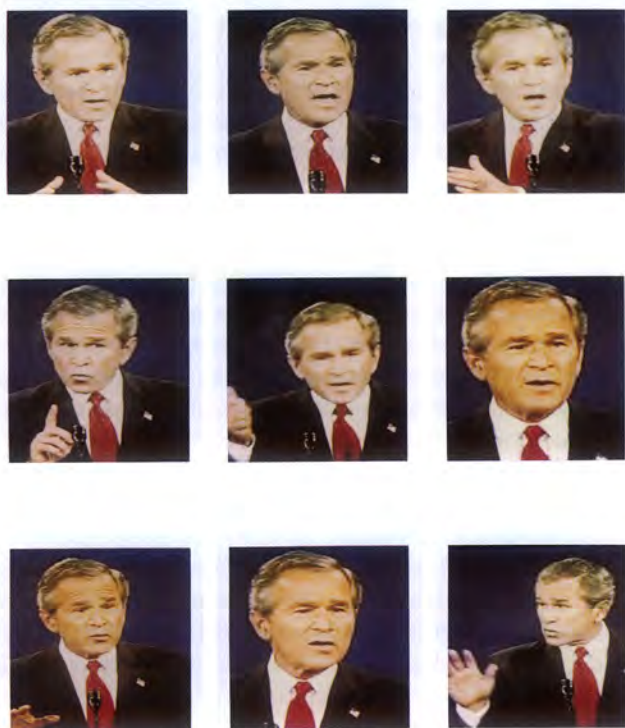


of coverage of the same event by the Vatican newspaper, which pays surprisingly little attention to the abduction.

Jaar also uses a sequential approach to investigate what is present and absent in mass media. Using images of the covers of *Newsweek* and *LIFE* magazines as a point of departure, Jaar pinpoints what these publications ignored. In *Untitled (Newsweek)* (1994) he presents *Newsweek* covers over seventeen weeks at the height of the Rwandan genocide, juxtaposing texts about the number of people killed with the cover images that touch on many unrelated cultural and political subjects outside of Africa. Similarly, he presents a grid of every *LIFE* magazine cover in miniature from the first issue in 1936 to 1996. Entitled *Searching for Africa in LIFE* (1996), the work reveals that in the magazine's then-sixty-year history only five covers were devoted to Africa, and those stories were about wildlife and food scarcity. Jaar's works allude to the fact that editorial content is ultimately a political choice driven by sales.

The final stop in the appropriationist trajectory was Broomberg and Chanarin's *War Primer 2*. This limited edition artists' book uses Bertolt Brecht's 1955 publication, *War Primer*, as a point of departure, altering Brecht's book by inserting color news images documenting contemporary conflicts among the original black-and-white photos. Sixteen books opened to different page spreads were laid out

Debate (2004) from the series *Close to Home* (2004–5) by Catherine Opie; © Catherine Opie; courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles



President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton along with members of the national security team, as they receive an update on the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House May 1, 2011 from the book *War Primer 2* (2011) by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin; © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin; courtesy the artists and Lisson Gallery

in vitrines in the final room of the exhibition. Where Brecht's original was concerned with the Second World War, Broomberg and Chanarin have overlaid Brecht's work with images culled from the news media that purport to represent both sides of the "War on Terror." Broomberg and Chanarin's version is a subtle and poignant reflection on the aesthetics and poetics found in representations of war.

The exhibition was not without humor. John Baldessari's video *The Meaning of Various Photographs to Ed Henderson* (1973, 13 min.) documents Baldessari presenting eight news photographs, clipped from papers and devoid of captions, to Henderson and asking him to identify them. The ensuing narrative that develops points to issues about photographic veracity and the projection of unconscious desires.

Breaking News: Turning the Lens on the Mass Media was a timely, yet timeless, exhibition. It illustrated the myriad ways artists have used and interpreted news imagery in their works, calling into question the relationship between truth and fiction and the differences between art and journalism. It is evident that these artists challenge photographic truths and construct meaning through image relationships. As in the past, artists continue to photograph what they see on the television and to rephotograph printed media, and in the works they create these found images often undergo some kind of transformation. If the exhibition had a single takeaway, it was the importance of context and the crucial role of the artist in questioning what the media presents. In today's climate, the proliferation of images is a given, and the underlying message and current that ran through the exhibition is to always look twice and to think about where an image comes from, how it is presented, and what lies beyond its initial intention and ultimate reception.

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