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Office Hours: In Focus

The Main Museum

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By Jody Zellen



The Main Museum posits that it is presenting the first museum-curated exhibition on Instagram. The exhibition, *Office Hours In Focus* is an extension of their annual program *Office Hours* in which 50 artists from downtown Los Angeles have the opportunity to meet and share their work with the Main Museum’s director, Allison Agsten. At the close of these sessions, there is an onsite exhibition at the museum, (November 1-18, 2018) where the participants are invited to hang their work. In conjunction with this showcase, the Main Museum presents *Office Hours In Focus*, an exhibition created specifically for Instagram, featuring the work of five photographers. The photographers— April Banks, Philip Cheung, Vikesh Kapoor, Dan Lopez, and Elizabeth Preger— are represented by between two and six images. These artists have a somewhat traditional approach to photography; documenting people and places that resonate for them personally. The works range from an exploration of the particulars of a specific environment like Dan Lopez’ photographs of Los Angeles that look at the “poetics of the mundane” or Philip Cheung’s themes of power, capital, and labor as depicted in his photographs taken in the United Arab Emirates. Vikesh Kapoor investigates the life of his aging parents. April Banks juxtaposes past and present to interrogate “history and its telling,” while Elizabeth Preger makes portraits honoring important people in her life. Unfortunately, reconfiguring these images to conform to the specific structure of Instagram strips them of their uniqueness as photographs. They are digital documents that have been cropped into smaller squares and organized into the grids of an Instagram page. The project is as much (or even more) about information design and the web, than it is about the work of the artists.

According to Agsten, “In developing a gender balanced and racially diverse program that includes artists who work across genres, we aim to challenge long-held assumptions about museum organizing. Just like we question who and what should be represented in an art institution, we also interrogate the physical framework of the museum.” The desire to challenge assumptions about display and to take advantage of a given new technology was put to the test in the 1990s with the proliferation of net art, as both artists and museums embraced the web as a platform for presenting artworks. The term net art was coined in the early 1990s and encompassed works that explored interactivity, hyper-text storytelling, software and the frame of the browser. Institutions like the Whitney Museum, Rhizome and Adaweb began to commission artists and curate exhibitions of works that could only be seen online. Net art pre-dated sites like flickr, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram and perhaps one of the reasons that it was short lived was because it could not compete with the “global community” afforded by social media. As sharing art via social media became the norm, most net art faded into obsolescence.

Enter Instagram. While Agsten must be aware of the historical precedents for online display, she is forward thinking and smart about her approach to Instagram. Rather than upload individual images, she and her team have infiltrated the template and manipulated the given structure to transform looking at these pictures into an interactive and educational experience. *Office Hours In Focus* can be viewed on both computers and mobile devices. The “exhibition” begins with the title and introductory text at the top of the page followed by a row of colored circles. For those familiar with the nuances of Instagram it is obvious that these circles represent stories and can be clicked on to reveal pop up windows. Each of the six circles has textual information that pertains to the images seen below. Next comes the exhibitions didactics — the who and the what followed by the individual photographs. The designers had to carefully compose the graphic presentation to work with the Instagram grid. Because Instagram is a long scrolling webpage consisting of rows of three squares separated by approximately 1/4 inch white border (this border is smaller on mobile devices). On the computer, each square turns gray with a mouse-over indicating that they can be clicked. On the iPhone there is a thin white line separating the sections. Upon a click, an individual square enlarges to provide a place for comments, liking and sharing. Embedded within the page are curators comments, and short video clips providing context and more information about the show. It is also important to note that all the text is in both English and Spanish as the museum is committed to presenting all materials in both languages.

All of this is extremely well presented, thought out and fascinating as a concept that perpetuates the sharing of photographs. What suffers however is the individual photographs as none of the images can be viewed as a whole. They are cut apart to fit into the prescribed grids. Some of the squares have white borders and captions, while others are image fragments. Scrolling through the page feels like a preview and an invitation. The desire for more is never satisfied. But perhaps that is the point. The focus of an online exhibition or a show created for Instagram has different goals than a physical exhibit. *Office Hours In Focus* invites viewers to think about the ease of seeing and sharing photographic images. It is an inventive use of the platform, but it privileges the structure of the display above the artist’s works. *Office Hours In Focus* is auspicious in beginning and it is clear that future iterations of Instagram exhibitions will be met with high expectations, great enthusiasm and applause.

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