

The Medium and the Messages

LIZ KOTZ ON WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES

IT IS AN ENDURING CLICHÉ that Los Angeles is anti-intellectual—too spread out, too traffic choked, and too privatized to sustain public debates. And it's true that, compared with New York, museums here seem to do relatively little public programming. Everyone complains that no one will drive across town to go to events. Yet when there's something genuinely interesting, like Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's 2007 talk about Michael Asher's Santa Monica Museum installation, it is jammed. Indeed, under the surface, a million conversations about art are going on—a hidden public sphere just waiting to crystallize.

The recently published print-on-demand book *Words Without Pictures* documents the kind of lively, free-form debate LA's art world can generate. Austerely designed by Dexter Sinister's David Reinfurt, the publication records a series of events and online discussions, also called "Words Without Pictures," hosted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's photography department. Commencing in November 2007, the project was co-organized by Charlotte Cotton, then the curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department at LACMA, and Alex Klein, a Los Angeles-based artist and writer who works as a curatorial fellow at the museum (and who edited the volume). The endeavor aimed, as Cotton and Klein's introduction to the book puts it, "to create spaces where thoughtful and urgent discourse around very current issues for photography could happen," and to

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that end their Web-based forum posted an essay or position paper by an artist, curator, educator, or critic each month for a year. These writings gave rise to conversations, as invited contributors and other interested parties e-mailed their responses. Finally, a series

Photography cannot be reduced to regimes of abstraction, but neither can it fully resist them.

From *Photography and Abstraction*
By GEORGE BAKER
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Screenshot, *Words Without Pictures* website, 2009.

of artists' panels and dialogues, each engaging a topic more or less related to the most recent paper, brought the program into the space of the museum.

Held in the intimate if depressingly institutional basement auditorium at LACMA, the "Words Without Pictures" events generated a considerable following, with committed attendees becoming participants, interlocutors, and authors. What was remarkable was not just that these discussions were hosted by a museum but that people actually talked about them. The series's opening salvo, by curator Christopher Bedford, proved provocative: In his essay, he contended that, despite its canonical and collectible status, photography as art is not "all it can be"—largely because of a "radically impoverished mode of criticism" that stems from widespread ignorance of photographic technologies and processes. Calling for a more technically informed photo criticism, he aired a guarded wish for "an advanced and, dare I say, medium-specific discourse." The essay raised some hackles and got things going, leading to a rather heated online forum and Q&A following the related panel discussion with artists Arthur Ou, Michael Queenland, and Mark Wyse. This intense dialogue continued, if in fits and starts, through the ensuing year. Overall, Cotton says she was struck by the "earnest and thoughtful type of critique" that prevailed, as well as by the participants' willingness and desire to talk about things beyond the bounds of "received wisdom."

The papers, responses, and transcripts archived in the book, along with a collection of questionnaire responses, make for a fascinating snapshot of current debates and

conversations about photography. Collectively, the nearly one hundred contributors convey a sense of a medium at an uncertain, fluid, and dynamic moment, one in which nobody is quite sure how to define the currents that have emerged since the Demand-Gursky-Credwson staged-tableau paradigm fell from dominance. This impression is bolstered by the book's collagelike mash-up of typefaces, but amid the cacophony, through lines emerge concerning the legacy of Conceptual art, post-Pictures photographic practice, and the stakes of the recent turn to photographic abstraction. Most of the participants are LA-based, and discussions regularly refer to local artist-teachers such as Sharon Lockhart, Allan Sekula, and Christopher Williams. But it is James Welling, known for his exploration of photographic abstraction as well as for his shuttling among technologies and styles, who emerges as the central figure. Welling (in a 2004 interview in *Bomb*) has recalled how when he graduated from CalArts in the mid-1970s he "began to wonder whether modernist photography could be fused with conceptual practice." The book suggests that many of the younger artists involved in "Words Without Pictures" have come right back to that question and are grappling with it afresh.

All the contributors are steeped in the postmodern and post-Conceptual fusions of art and photo practices of the '70s and '80s, whether or not they are old enough to have participated in them. They are also versed in the contemporaneous texts—by Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens, and others—that reconsidered the relation of photography

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The meaning of a photograph is contained not primarily in what it depicts, but in the myriad associations that it mobilizes.

From *Remembering and Forgetting Conceptual Art*
By ALEX KLEIN
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Screenshot, Words Without Pictures website, 2009.

to art history and, in alliance with structuralist and poststructuralist theory, fundamentally reshaped critical models for thinking about art practice. (In fact, with its plain white text on a black cover, and its modest production values, the book looks like it could have been issued by Artists Space or the New Museum circa 1983.) But for all its looming presence, this 1980s legacy remains contested. The recent “Pictures Generation” show at the Met presented its genesis as inextricable from Conceptual art, particularly various unorthodox California Conceptualisms steeped in pop culture, advertising, and narrative. Yet by the ’90s, the antiauthorial, antihierarchical, and dispersive elements of photographic postmodernism had become recodified as just so many more ways of making art for galleries and museums. As the LA-based artist Shannon Ebner protested, on a panel with Sarah Charlesworth and John Divola, “It’s almost like postmodernism happened, and then it had to get tucked back in.”

Perhaps with such complications in mind, Klein, among others, insists on the need to “think through conceptualism’s implications for photography,” and indeed, this question seems urgent given the ambiguous relation of Pictures practice to these earlier models. In the youngish art world represented by “Words Without Pictures,” Conceptual art has long since ceased to be regarded as anti-art, and instead represents the moment when photography was first taken seriously *as* art. Everyone, apparently, has read Jeff Wall’s 1995 essay “Marks of Indifference,” in which the artist famously posits Conceptual photography as paradoxically representing the apotheosis of modernist self-reflexivity, thereby paving the way for the re-introduction of picture making around 1974. In a panel transcript, Wyse even jokes that “a lot of people

in the art world . . . take Wall’s essay as the beginning of contemporary photography”—a pretty scary idea to those of us who consider the text a landmark in the canonization, academicization, and, ultimately, utter repudiation of what was most interesting about Conceptual art. After all, a relentless focus on picture making completely elides the radical distribution strategies, interdisciplinary experimentation, and performance and process elements that animated any number of ’60s artists. Looking back, you could argue that Conceptual art got codified, and co-opted, by and as photography—which might serve more as a warning than a model to emulate.

Back in 1969, Douglas Huebler famously quipped, “I use the camera as a ‘dumb’ copying device that only serves to document whatever phenomena appears before it through the conditions set by a system. No ‘aesthetic’ choices are possible.” Welling’s own exploration of photographic materiality, outmoded technical practices, and beautiful, elliptical images represented a rebellion against this muteness, an impulse to see what the camera could actually do. For the present generation—artists such as Walead Beshty, Liz Deschenes, Carter Mull, Anthony Pearson, and Eileen Quinlan—the exploration of photographic materiality and abstraction, while producing its own surplus of visual pleasure, is partly a response to our digital moment, with its endless vernacular proliferation of images. Now, when all our students carry cell-phone cameras, photography and its histories continue to be crucial way stations between art practice and the wider culture. And yet, noting the “rather surprising reinvestment in medium specificity,” Beshty suggests in his own essay that “the drive to reconstitute a stable and practicable definition of photography is inextricable from the

very real sense that the prominence of photographic discourse within contemporary art has receded.”

Beshty’s text makes a somewhat tortured case for photography that rests on the medium’s materiality, its irreducibility to mere image. Yet for all the jokes and bantering, the discussion that follows makes an effort to parry his arguments, to insist that images do matter. And as the larger debates demonstrate vividly, while artists like Beshty, Mull, and Pearson may seem to be part of a shared “movement” of abstraction, they couldn’t be coming from more different places aesthetically and theoretically (even if one gets the sense that, for a current generation of MFAs, the classic Sekula and Rosler critiques have generated a veritable phobia of signification). In a partial response to Beshty, George Baker enlists Fredric Jameson’s analysis of modern finance capital as a far more pervasive and destabilizing process of abstraction, to propose a dialectic of abstraction and atavism evident in works by Lockhart and Zoe Leonard. This belated emphasis on economic substructure and larger cultural forces is welcome. Particularly since the discussions occurred alongside the global economic collapse, lurking in the background are the inevitable questions about gallery practice and the status of photographs as art objects—reigning economic models, to be sure, but perhaps not lasting ones. The current crop of art students are as likely to post their materials to Facebook or YouTube as on a gallery wall. As Cotton observes, gone are the days when we could take a photograph’s physical existence for granted: “A photographic print is no longer a default position; it is an act of will to make a photographic print.”

Words Without Pictures does skirt or barely touch on some topics—digital media, documentary and photojournalism, power relations in photography—that might seem de rigueur. And for all the efforts to get different “camps” to talk to one another, some of the discussions are pretty clubby. But by positioning photography broadly, as a lens through which to address contemporary practice more generally, and by bridging online and traditional publication formats in an unusual new hybrid, *Words Without Pictures* offers what one hopes is a prescient model for efforts to communally understand and shape art today. □

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