Wie bei allen Arbeiten des Künstlers ist der Film initiiert von historischen Vorlagen und Konventionen der durch Medien und Geschmack „gestalteten“ Repräsentation. Vorlagen für den hier realisierten Film ist eine 1966 für das Fernsehen produzierte Dokumentation der Choreographie *Passacaglia* der amerikanischen Tanzlegende Doris Humphrey; des weiteren ins Alltagsdesign eingegangene ästhetische Klischees wie der „California Drop Cloth“, ein Stoffmuster, das auf dem Amerikanischen Expressionismus und auf banalisierten Erkennungszeichen zum Beispiel der Arbeiten von Jackson Pollock beruht und für zahlreiche Innenausstattungen herhalten musste. Ebenso integriert ist eine Auseinandersetzung mit Methoden für das Lesen von Kunstwerken am Fernseher, basierend auf psychologischen und wahrnehmungstheoretischen Erkenntnissen sowie die Übersetzung des bekannten Gemäldes *La grande Portugaise* (1916) von Robert Delaunay in ein Bühnenbild für den von Lassry neu arrangierten Tanz mit Tänzerinnen und Tänzern des New York City Ballet. Die tastenden Kamerafahrten des kurzen Filmes schaffen eindringliche Bilder und ein irritierendes Werk, das keinen Aufschluss über eine Choreographie, ein Gemälde, ein Bühnenbild oder eine Geschichte gibt, sondern den Prozess des Sehens als komplexe Erfahrung erlebbar macht, die sich in der direkten Beziehung des Sehenden zum gesehenen Objekt realisiert. Und vielleicht deshalb lächeln uns die bis anhin als Objekte wie Gemälde, Teil von einem Set und der Choreographie erfassten Tänzerinnen in der Endeinstellung des Filmes direkt ins Gesicht.

Elad Lassrys Ausstellung in der Kunsthalle Zürich, zu der diese Publikation erscheint, war die erste umfassende Zusammenschau seines fotografischen und filmischen Werkes. Die Ausstellung umfasste einen Überblick über das gesamte Schaffen Elad Lassrys mit einer Auswahl von 53 Fotoarbeiten und den bis anhin realisierten fünf Filmarbeiten.

Zahlreiche Einzelpersonen und Organisationen haben entscheidend dazu beigetragen, dass die Ausstellung und diese Publikation realisiert werden konnten.

Zuallererst möchte ich Elad Lassry dafür danken, dass er die Einladung, seine Arbeiten in Zürich zu zeigen, angenommen und die Ausstellung sowie den Katalog enthusiastisch und engagiert begleitet hat.

Wir freuen uns sehr, dass Texte von Bettina Funcke, Liz Kotz und Fionn Meade in diese Publikation aufgenommen werden konnten, und danken ihnen für ihre bereichernden und anregenden Beiträge.

David Kordansky und das Team der David Kordansky Gallery, insbesondere Ana Vejzovic Sharp, haben sich unermüdlich für die Realisierung des Projektes eingesetzt und zahlreiche, grosszügige Leihgeber haben sich bereit erklärt, sich zeitweise von ihren Werken zu trennen. Dafür möchten wir uns herzlich bedanken.

Mein grosser Dank gilt erneut dem Team der Kunsthalle Zürich, das die Ausstellung wie immer mit grossem Einsatz vorbereitet hat und dessen Engagement und Enthusiasmus wesentlich dazu beiträgt, dass Projekte wie diese realisiert werden können.

Für kontinuierliche Unterstützung danken wir dem Präsidialdepartement der Stadt Zürich und der LUMA Stiftung sowie der Swiss Re für die Förderung unseres Vermittlungsprogramms.

Liz Kotz

“This Is to Be Looked At”

It is a short, simple film of movement and stillness. A zebra’s tail rhythmically moves next to its still and massive rump as the camera slowly pans, more or less horizontally, forward across the zebra’s body. The angled stripes create a bold painterly composition, a flat abstract pattern filling a rectangular frame. It is startling when this graphic field suddenly moves, as the zebra twitches its muscles, and the pan, which briefly reverses, reaches the neck and the much narrower stripes of the head. Suddenly the eye blinks rapidly as the animal turns to briefly face us. Half animal and half Op art: is this what a zebra looks like?

After cutting to black, the pan slowly arrives at the theatrically-lit face of a blonde woman in three-quarter view, gazing intently in what seems to be the direction of the zebra. She is lit both from front and from behind, her glowing blond hair sharply isolated against the dimensionless black backdrop, creating an overtly artificial scene. Her eyes blink and she purses her lips, then briefly looks down, before she too disappears. Shot in Super-16mm, *Zebra and Woman* (2007) is silent and a little over five minutes long, but its oddness does not decrease with multiple viewings. A curious combination of cropping and movement allows the film to oscillate between painterly abstraction and three-dimensional reality. As Lisa Dorin notes, Elad Lassry “transforms his literal subjects—the zebra and the woman—into a means of presenting a space that is both cinematic and painterly.”[1]

Animate and inanimate, human and animal, moving and still, two-dimensional and three-dimensional: these are some of the core elements that structure Elad Lassry’s work. They recur differently among his several short films, and in his many C-print photographs and collages, an ensemble of works that share a curious and unstable visual language that somehow collects together a diverse and idiosyncratic set of subjects. Lassry’s work since 2007 essentially combines three different types of materials: short films shot on either 16mm or Super-16mm, unique silkscreened magazine pages, and C-prints produced as small editions. The two-dimensional works are all fairly compact in size, roughly 35.6 × 27.9 cm, about the size of a large-format magazine page or coffeetable book. The films, which are projected alongside the photographs rather than in a separate darkened space, are shown quite small, at about the same scale and height as the images. This close-up projection allows them to retain their sharpness and luminosity even in a fairly well-lit space, and emphasizes the intermingling and interpenetration of the three formats. Lassry’s choice of an intimate and modest scale is clearly posed against the massive size and technical mastery of 1990s art photography modeled on large-scale history paintings. And in a similar counter-move, Lassry’s use of modest painted frames color-keyed to the dominant tone of each image reinforces photography’s keepsake quality and its existence as a framed object to be handled and displayed.

Much has been made of Lassry’s combination of the altered magazine pages, which are vaguely Constructivist-looking collages, and the carefully toned C-prints, which include both studio-shot and altered photographs.[2] Other hallmarks of Lassry’s practice are his broad range of visual styles (combining 1970s product photography, film stills, portraiture, and modernist tropes like double-exposures), his constant moving back and forth between “original” and found or altered materials, and the fact that he clearly doesn’t differentiate between these genres and formats. This shifting between proper photography and collage, between art and vernacular styles, and between found and originally-shot images is not uncommon among younger artists working with photography. Yet in Lassry’s project this strange disparity has acquired a surprising unity and coherence, even if its organizing principles remain elusive.

In one of his earliest exhibited images, *Los Angeles at Night* (2006) (ill. 1), a Xeroxed two-page spread from a book or magazine depicts a nighttime view of the city's bright lights shot from above the Hollywood Bowl. The gutter cuts vertically across the image, and we see the telltale sheen along the inner edge of one page; the caption, recounting the making of the image, is retained, but half the left-hand page has been cropped out. It is one of relatively few magazine page works in which the text has not been blocked out; another is *The Family Dog* (2007), a slightly off-kilter image of three white spaniel puppies posed on a floral surface, with one incongruously sitting in a wicker bowl. These are completely generic images, taken from American magazines of perhaps the 1960s or 1970s, and yet they are also very personal—we can sense without knowing, for instance, that the artist has long lived in Hollywood, and is an avid animal lover. All images are images of desire, of course, substitutes for things near at hand, out of reach, and completely impossible. And Lassry's images alternately suggest scenes of cheerful and wholesome postwar Americana, and its stranger more ominous undertows.

In one C-print that particularly recalls *Zebra and Woman*, a man's two hands, cropped midway up the forearm, awkwardly hold a boldly striped black and white snake that seems to intertwine around his wrists (*California King Snake*, 2007). Shot in acutely sharp focus, the hands and snake are suspended in a dimensionless black field we recognize as a studio backdrop: that empty neutral space that is nowhere, that serves to isolate and dramatize whatever is placed in front of it. Whether they feature people or inanimate objects, the subjects of Lassry's pictures appear posed and self-consciously on display—even the strange double-exposed wolves standing before a studio backdrop (*Two Wolves*, 2008) are clearly actors, hired animals that have been trained to hold poses for the camera. Across all kinds of subject matter, Lassry investigates conventions of presentation and display: in *Chocolate Factory* (2007), two white-gloved hands pick up unwrapped Hershey's chocolate kisses against a flattened field of oddly-luminous chocolates. In *Circles and Squares* (2007), a double-exposed still life of melons lying on reflective boxes places fruit in a glossy display setting we might expect for shoes or cosmetics; the doubling of reflections and of the double-exposure renders the field spatially dense and confusing. In *Hollywood Bowl, Fog* (2007), we look down from a wooded hill toward a freeway and cityscape shrouded in fog, as the picture's receding horizon is obstructed by the gray haze (looking closely, we can recognize nearly the same scene and vantage point as that in the earlier *Los Angeles at Night*).

One could go on, describing example after example, because it is difficult to provide any overview or apparent rationale that defines or describes these images as a set. Some subjects—wigs, melons, particular models, the actor Anthony Perkins—reappear in different images. And in a frequent device, consumer objects like lipsticks or shoes are placed on rectangular or square display pedestals that are oriented frontally toward the picture plane, so that their three-dimensionality is only revealed by shadows; in other works, two-dimensional pictures are placed on top of these stands, rendering the relation between flatness and depth even more puzzle-like and un-decidable. Based on real things, the compositions continually fracture into pattern and abstraction. Yet it is an abstraction arrived at through representation, or, as Lassry terms it, "abstraction through the subject": "I start from a place where I don't see much difference between the backdrop and the subject […] It is abstraction in the sense that the subject almost disappears."[3]

To elucidate what Elad Lassry is doing, it may help to clarify what he is *not* doing, what paths he seems to be breaking from. If his static studio-shot photographs share a surface resemblance to some of the equally stagey color-saturated photographs of Christopher Williams, Lassry presents his pictures severed from the kinds of textual anchoring and analysis provided by Williams' extravagantly detailed titles. The sumptuous color image is not a lure into a larger game of reference and signification, in which apparently diverse subjects—an ear of corn, a camera, a woman in curlers—are integrated into a larger historical narrative. There is nothing to know, or to learn, in Lassry's strangely blank and seductive images. If there is a logic that links, for instance, photographs of a skunk, scattered vegetables, and a female nude holding a basketball (to recall the artist's most recent show in Los Angeles), it can only be found through formal, pictorial, or psychological associations.

For some time, many of the more vigorous strains of "critical" photography (and wider art practice) have pursued what we might still understand as a project

of "demystification"—aspiring to break down and analyze the image and its larger apparatus, to strip these of mystery and seduction, and lay them bare as sets of strategies, codes and conventions. From Stephen Prina and Christopher Williams to countless younger practitioners, contemporary artists informed by conceptual art and its legacies have sought to investigate media and institutional archives, trace otherwise invisible historical connections among images, and reveal their production processes and institutional underpinnings, often by employing strategies of displacement, disjunction, alienation effects, and layered commentaries. Of course, part of the fascination of this project lies in the absurdity of its drives to reason, clarity, and system, and in the perverse ironies of using neo-conceptual strategies that are, by now, as nuanced and mannered as, say, gestural abstraction.

Sliding off this pedagogical impulse, Lassry tends to talk about the occult, about the persistent ghosting or haunting of an image by its absent context. Lassry likewise sidesteps familiar tropes of conceptual photography, avoiding text or commentary, and rarely working in series, to instead focus, yet again, on the singular image, and on the strange singularity of images. He speaks of this as a regression, a circling back to certain almost 19th century attitudes toward the image. And he quite consciously turns his photographs into objects, in which tightly composed compositions feel trapped in vitrines, or, as Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer described them, "sealed in their tidy frames."[4]

"THIS IS NOT TO BE LOOKED AT" (ill. 2) reads a celebrated 1968 painting by the Los Angels-based artist John Baldessari. Some 40 years later, much work done in the wake of Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, et al, could be captioned something like "I know very well, but"—as disavowals of different types organize present-day photographic practice. We know very well that the classic moves of conceptual photography have long since been exhausted, codified, and recuperated by the art market—yet generations of art students continue to plumb them for some mix of easily-recognizable "criticality" and savvy marketability. Another set of practitioners simply proceeds as if conceptual art or postmodern photography never happened, and we can continue to take cool-looking photos of everything around us as if it were 1950 and arty photo-journalism was still young. And yet others aspire to retool modernist photography and its self-reflexive explorations of the photographic medium for a digital age.[5]

Animated for decades by the powerful intellectual and aesthetic experiments of early 20th century modernism, Conceptual art, and postmodern photography, present-day photographic practice often finds itself at a standstill, where a rich experimental history seems to have arrived at countless dead-ends. Lassry tries to find aesthetic and psychological charge precisely through this pervasive sense of exhaustion and over-familiarity. In so doing, he perhaps plumbs a side of the "Pictures" project sidelined in its dominant reception, which fixates on crucial but well-trod questions of authorship, originality, and institutional context. Indeed, his persistent references to "haunting" and ghosts recall language used early on by key Pictures Generation figures. In his 1977 essay "Pictures" (expanded and republished in 1979), Douglas Crimp was at pains to elucidate how an art context organized around duration and performance underpinned the making of pictures, describing how "An art whose strategies are thus grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theater has been the crucial formulating experience for a group of artists currently beginning to exhibit in New York."[6] In discussing the work of Jack Goldstein—an artist important to Lassry as well—Crimp notes that, "The psychological resonance of this work is not that of the subject matter of his pictures, however, but of the way those pictures are presented, staged; that is, it is a function of their structure."[7] For Crimp, the curious temporality of a work like Goldstein's 1978 film *The Jump* (ill. 3) comes from how the technique of rotoscopy renders it both a drawing and an erasure, a making and an effacing—a temporality that he sees not as tied to a specific medium but as possible in both still and moving images.

In a 2009 roundtable on the legacy of the Pictures Generation, Lassry singled out Goldstein's *The Jump* as a work that needs to be freed from "the overwhelming emphasis on the act of appropriation. When you revisit the works themselves, and you let go of this framework, there is actually so much more that can arise […] Neither the fact that the film originates from stock footage nor its rotoscope special effects eliminate the possibilities of engaging with another kind of experience or another meaning in the work."(8) Protesting that the term "appropriation" has become so reductive that "it doesn't allow one to move toward a new set of

questions," Lassry suggests that Goldstein's films using appropriate materials nonetheless "become autonomous gestures," and that "there are other things happening, within the work, like the negation of cinematic agency and the diffusion of cinematic experience."[9] Lassry's debt to Goldstein's short films like *Some Butterflies* (1974) and *Shane* (1974) is clear, in that they offer a cryptic way forward beyond questions of authorship and context by shifting back onto the very curious things happening within the frame.

In a 1985 interview in *Arts* magazine, Sherrie Levine protested how critics tended to neglect the actual pictorial content of her work and, in effect, ignored what was going on inside the frame. Recounting a conversation with the writer Howard Singerman, who proposed that "people tend to look at the work as if it starts at the frame and goes out, as opposed to looking at the picture from the frame in," Levine notes how "we've become so sensitive to context that we sometimes just see the picture as a hole in the wall. In fact they are pictures. They're very complicated pictures, but they can be read iconographically. The images in the *1917* show are crosses and people masturbating. Most people who have written about this work have either ignored or repressed the iconographic content."[10]

Levine also frequently makes recourse to a language of ghosting in discussions of her work, particularly to describe the relation between "original" and "copy": "The pictures I make are really ghosts of ghosts; their relationship to their original images is tertiary, i.e. three or four times removed […] When I started doing this work, I wanted to make a picture which contradicted itself. I wanted to put a picture on top of a picture so that there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they're both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work's about for me—that space in the middle where there's no picture."[11] This absence is, of course, relative, as Levine proceeds to insist: "I think a lot of the people seem to get lost in the gap, and think that there's no picture there, when in fact there are two pictures there."[12]

Like much early Pictures work, Lassry investigates the photograph as it exists in print media. Yet his interest lies in where this economy of circulation and reproduction stops, where it condenses into a single complex image, to explore a kind of circulation that is more mental and interior. For Lassry, the mediation involved in reworking and reanimating a found image, in severing it from its source and thereby "orphaning" it, is intimately related to the relations between working with still and moving images.[13] In a recent interview, he suggests that "Something about trying to print on photographs or magazine paper, or dealing with the physicality of how photographs register on another surface (while in the process, erasing something that was preexisting) marks the transition from collage to film."[14] Yet the very filmmaking he is most interested in hovers on the boundary of the pre-cinematic, and on the historically old and yet still disconcerting shock of pictures that move, admitting that "There's something regressive about the idea of film being no more than a sequence of photographs."[15]

For Lassry, film becomes a key tool for exploring the possibilities and impossibilities of rendering subjects in a two-dimensional field. Drawing on an illustration in a 1971 science textbook, *Untitled* (2008) (ill. 4) places a series of young people on top of a brightly colored diagram of a house. Although we know the diagram is two-dimensional, the actors struggle to present it as if it occupied real space—sitting on the roof, posing as if to stand in the doorway. As Anat Edgi notes, the brightly colored scene echoes a "1970s-era PBS educational television style in which primary colors, bold shapes, forced perspectives [and] visual games […] get compared and contrasted."[16] And yet more than a visual lesson in perception, the film takes on psychological associations about the family and the deeply odd relationship of human figures to such an artificially constructed set of spaces—and to one another.

These perceptual games are intensified in *Untitled* (2009), a 16mm film loosely based on restaging production stills from Jerome Robbins' 1955 made-for-television version of *Peter Pan* (ill. 5). Lassry has long understood his work as informed by both appropriation art and structural film, an idiosyncratic pairing that becomes forcefully evident in this work, which segments and recombines highly-abstracted fragments of an already warped children's classic (in which the childlike Peter Pan is played by an adult female actress). Yet the actual cultural antecedents nearly disappear in Lassry's restaging, which pushes the materials toward series of abstract compositions that just happen to be made with human bodies. As the film starts, a female dancer's cropped torso, sealed in an intensely bright red leotard, fills the frame. She bends over and begins to move, and slowly the camera moves with her, through what appear to be series of gray and black columns that divide the frame into vertical stripes. Intercut with other materials, including a blue-eyed man gesticulating against a light blue background and walking amid a series of brightly colored polished columns, the dancer's red body becomes a graphic emblem used to explore space and motion in a two-dimensional medium. Just as the leotard itself functions to abstract the body, to simultaneously reveal and conceal, Lassry's persistent close-ups and pans play with this figure on the boundary of human and objects.

Across his body of films, Lassry uses a series of simple devices—the close-up, the slow pan, the superimposition of pictorial perspective—to explore how filming "real space" can complicate the spatial surface in strange ways. We can understand his films as a kind of primer for how to look at the photographs, as they explore the inherent problematics of representing space with a camera, producing a constantly changing sense of depth and surface, and repeatedly returning experience to flatness. In so doing, they pose a series of question about film that then double back on pictorial media like photographs. What is the texture of depth on the screen, and how is it or isn't it related to other pictorialized space? Can cinematic or pictorial space arrive at point where it surpasses imitative depth, and achieves some other uncanny depth? What does it mean to have a continuous glimpse of screen space that moves, rather than to move through a discontinuous series of still glimpses? In Lassry's work, flat planes of color that border on the monochrome become reanimated as inhabitable by objects or figures, yet in ways that continually undercut any sense of these as coherent or rational spaces. In the end, Lassry's pictures—both still and moving—work to erode distinctions between subject and backdrop, between figure and ground, using intensely fabricated surfaces to move photography and cinema toward perceptual concerns more often associated with painting. "There is this moment," he described in conversation, "where the picture you thought you knew starts moving."[17]

1. Lisa Dorin, *Film, Video, New Media: At the Art Institute of Chicago*, Yale University Press, London & New Haven 2009, p. 104.
2. Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer describes the relation between the found and original images as a kind of rhythmic interplay: "Inserted into groups of his studio-shot photographs, they serve as a kind of punctuation, imparting an aura of mystery to the other works." In Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, "Openings: Elad Lassry," *Artforum*, New York, vol. 48, no. 2, October 2009, p. 219.
3. Walead Beshty, Elad Lassry, Carter Mull, and Erika Vogt, "After Materiality and Style," *Art in America*, New York, April 2009, p. 134.
4. Lehrer-Graiwer, "Openings: Elad Lassry," p. 221.
5. After all, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau was at pains to point out nearly 30 years ago, the formalist appropriation of once-radical modernist techniques formed the backbone of post-WWII American art photography; see "The Armed Vision Disarmed—Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," *Afterimage*, Rochester, January 1983.
6. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October. MIT Press Journals*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, no. 8, Spring 1979, p. 77.
7. Ibid., p. 79–80.
8. Beshty, Lassry, Mull & Vogt, "After Materiality and Style," p. 131–132.
9. Ibid., p. 132.
10. Sherrie Levine, in Jeanne Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," [1985], reprinted in Siegel (ed.), *Art Talk: the Early 80s*, Da Capo Press, New York 1988, p. 253.
11. Ibid., p. 247.
12. Ibid., p. 253.
13. In a 2008 interview, Lassry describes the remnants of a picture's original context as "a ghost that remains. The history of it persists, haunting the picture, always […] I am sort of kidnapping this picture and removing it from its story, with the acknowledgment that the story has never been stable." In Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, "Studio Visit," *FlashArtonline.com*, November 18, 2008, http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=studio_det&id_art=210&det=ok&title=Elad-Lassry (last accessed: June 17, 2010).
14. Elad Lassry, "Hijacked in a Winter Garden Moment: Cay Sophie Rabinowitz with Erin Tao in Conversation with Elad Lassry," *Fantom Photographic Quarterly*, no. 3, 2010, www.fantomeditions.com/issues/issue-03/ (last accessed: June 29, 2010).
15. Ibid.
16. Anat Ebgi, "Elad Lassry" *artisrael.org*, June 2009, http://www.artisrael.org/feature/press/elad-lassry-june-2009 (last accessed: June 17, 2010).
17. Conversation with the artist, April 1, 2010.