

Hyperallergic (www.hyperallergic.com)
October 26, 2016

HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

A Photography Biennial Asks a Perennial Question About the Medium's Objectivity

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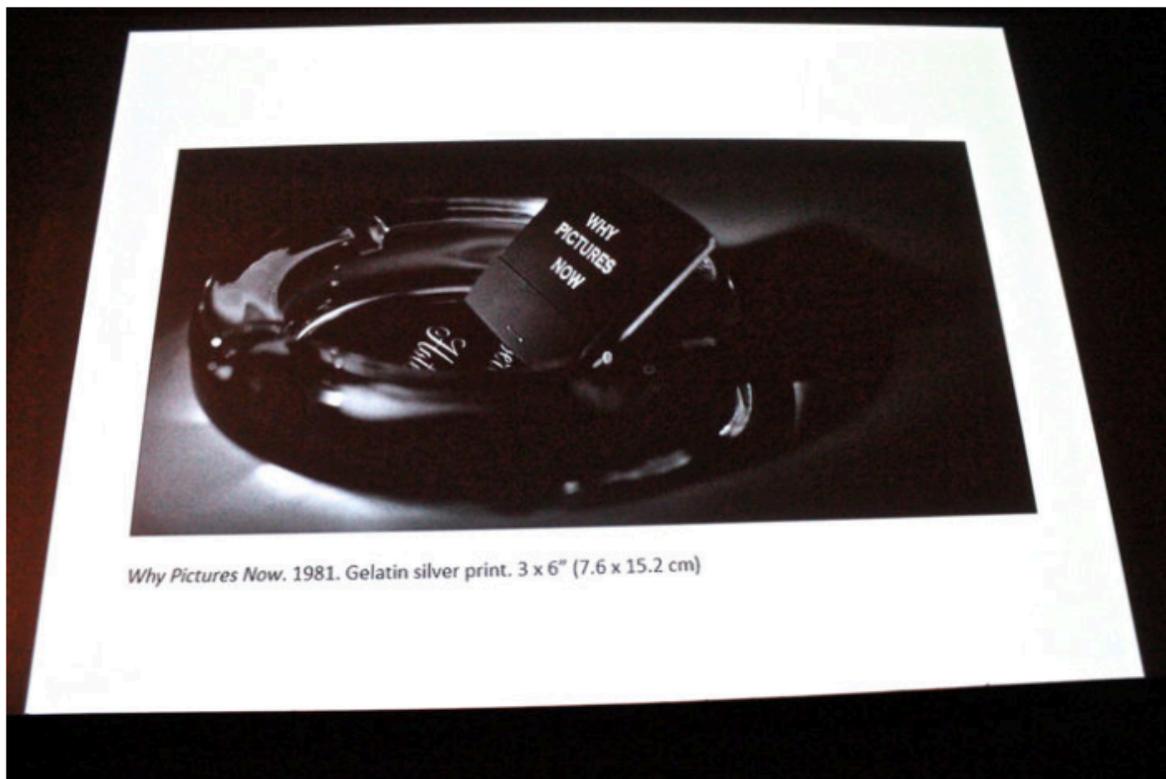


Sarah Rose Sharp | 7 days ago



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, "Hoktemberjan, Armavir" (2001), part of the series *After Industry at the Weston Gallery* documenting bus stops in Armenia (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

CINCINNATI — The opening keynote for the [2016 FotoFocus Biennial](#), which has been taking place throughout the month of October in myriad locations in and around Cincinnati, centered on the American artist and photographer Louise Lawler. [Roxana Marcoci](#), who delivered the opening address and is the senior curator in the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, is working with Lawler on a career retrospective at the museum, [WHY PICTURES NOW](#), which will open in April of 2017. At the biennial, Marcoci took the opportunity to share some of her research on this unique artist, as well as wax philosophical on the role of the viewer in the life of an artwork.



From Roxana Marcoci's lecture on Louise Lawler, the eponymous photograph for her upcoming career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art

According to Marcoci, throughout Lawler's career, she's stated that the artist is "not the sole author of the artwork's meaning." This somewhat simple assertion speaks to an issue of great depth: whether or not artworks can hold inherent meaning, or if they are entirely dependent on context and a viewer's agency. Over her career as a conceptual artist, Lawler has continuously reframed the existing artworks of other people, forcing the viewer to consider ways that the work changes meaning at a layer of remove, and questioned the role of the artist as she interjects herself and mediates between viewer and original object, much as the camera does.

In her discussion, Marcoci also characterized photography as a medium with "inherent promiscuity," due to the way it can absorb other mediums, such as performance, collage, and literature. The comment seemed apt for the biennial, which, this year, the artistic director and chief curator [Kevin Moore](#) wanted to push beyond the baseline conception of photography as a documentary process — something artists have sought to have done pretty much since the advent of the medium.

The theme of FotoFocus 2016 is "The Un-Document," and offers a range of environments for viewers to encounter photography from over 100 international artists in 60 venues — from the predictable environs of [museums](#) and [galleries](#), to [academic](#) and [historical](#) settings, to [commercial](#), [hotel](#), and [artist-run spaces](#), and even [out on the streets](#). Some of the portraiture or landscape photography does seem to take the more traditional documentary approach, but, in most cases, the documentation has been disrupted in some way, because of political intervention or the subjective gaze of the artist.



William E. Jones, "Punctured" (2010), sequence of digital files, black and white, silent, 4:56, still capture

As part of *New Slideshow* — a three-day exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center — artist William E. Jones presented “Punctured,” a five-minute film compilation of hundreds of images taken at the behest of the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. Photographers like Walker Evans, Marion Post Wolcott, and many others documented everyday life in this series — some of which went on to be iconic snapshots of American existence, but many were deaccessioned by FSA director Roy Stryker, by means of a rather violent hole punch through the negative. Jones discovered hundreds of these images within the public image collection of the Library of Congress, and through exhaustive hours of research was able to collect a great deal of them and re-present them. Sometimes the reasons for non-inclusion are obvious — Stryker has simply eliminated all but the best composed or least blurry in a series of similar shots — but in other instances there is a clear desire to editorialize the slice of life being presented by the project, for a cleaner, more edited version of history. In particular, an entire set of photographs that featured young men in hotel rooms were destroyed, eliminating not only the work of the photographer, but the evidence of his homosexuality. Jones’s work undoes this, bringing these punctured images to the forefront and reversing this act of cultural erasure.

Likewise, South African photographer and activist Zanele Muholi is indisputably documentary in her work, presenting a series of portraits of LGBTI individuals in her vast personal network at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. At the biennial, Muholi punctuated her artist talk with a constant litany of names — which also constitute the title of each work — and personal stories, which create a kind of oral record-keeping of fleeting stories alongside the quasi-permanent photos. “Everything is temporary,” Muholi was quick to say, when asked by a gallery visitor about her relationship with social media as a dissemination mechanism. Though she seems to accept the relative transience of any given human’s existence, Muholi’s history is punctuated by the loss of members within the queer South African community to hate crimes, including corrective rape, transmission of HIV, and violent beatings.



Zanele Muholi poses alongside one of her self-portraits at the Freedom Center.

There is a sense of photographic preservation and perseverance in Muholi's process of documentation — and yet, accompanying this portraiture show, *Personae*, is a second gallery featuring her self-portraits, *Somnyama Ngonyama* (“Hail the dark lioness”) which, among other things, play with the technical values of images to shift her own skin tone, demonstrating how subjective the so-called impartial witness of the camera lens can be. Muholi's work travels full spectrum from the undocumented to “un-document” — her self-portraits are no longer proof or records of something; by shifting her appearance so dramatically, Muholi challenges the notion that she is showing herself, even with very personal self-portraits.

For the artist, her inclusion in a museum dedicated to the history of the African-American experience in the United States, rather than art, holds great significance, for she sees her work as an act of activism and communication, rather than an aesthetic practice, per se. To be shown in an institution dedicated to African-American people and their struggle for recognition resonates deeply with her cataloguing of and signal-boosting for queer South Africans.



Inside the inflatable exhibition space for *The Peeled Eye*

In the end, these photographs not only demonstrate the medium's ability to express personal perspective, but also its subjective nature. *The Peeled Eye*, for instance, an inflatable pop-up installation outside the Freedom Center about surveillance culture, underscores some of the complications inherent in our ever-increasing social practice of treating cameras as reliable witnesses.

Ultimately, FotoFocus 2016 reminds us that photography can be much like journalism — while there is an idealized conception of the practice that suggests it offers an impartial or “true” view of the world, the decisions we make about what we document, or purposefully obscure, place a thumb on the scale of impartiality. It will always be difficult to argue that photography is not a documentary medium — it draws subjects and light from the world — but FotoFocus 2016 successfully makes a case for deeper awareness that whatever pictures convey is truly not the whole picture. If Louise Lawler is correct, the only person who can complete that picture — and perhaps settle the question of whether an “un-document” is possible by these means — is the viewer herself.



Henry Wessel Jr., “Forty Real Estate Photographs, 1990–1991,” part of *After Industry* at the Weston Gallery



Two installations of portrait photography at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center: Jackie Nickerson's *August* (foreground) and Zanele Muholi's *Personae* (background)

FotoFocus 2016 continues at venues around Cincinnati through October 31.

Editor's note: *The author's lodging and travel expenses were paid for by FotoFocus 2016.*