# CAMERAS, CORN, CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS, AND THE COLD WAR

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*"It's about things not connecting and people not connecting."*

—Christopher Williams[1]

*"Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle."*

—Guy Debord[2]

*Prologue*

In the summer of 2006, I was invited to be on a jury of a photographic competition at the Museu Serralves in Porto. When I arrived, I discovered that the proceedings were taking place largely in Portuguese, which somewhat challenged my participation. Thankfully, this circumstance allowed me to spend the bulk of my two days in the museum's temporary exhibition: *Christopher Williams's For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle (Revision 4)*, the fourth iteration of Williams's presentation of a series begun in 2003. Previous exhibitions had been held at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, the Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany, and the Vienna Secession, and though the Serralves show contained many of the same photographs as had been displayed at these venues, it was completely different as an exhibition.

I was grateful for the opportunity to spend time in Williams's show because up until that point, though I had admired his work from afar, I had never seen a solo exhibition in the flesh. Instead I knew some catalogs and had read various essays on his work.[3] Seeing the work at Serralves was an extraordinary and very

1. This is Christopher Williams's description of John Baldessari's work, but the comment speaks to many of the subjects of this essay. See John Baldessari, Ann Goldstein, and Christopher Williams, "The Things We Sweep Under the Rug: A Conversation with John Baldessari," in *John Baldessari: Life's Balance, Works 84–04* (Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2005), p. 90.
2. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 20.
3. For example, Thomas Crow's essays "The Simple Life: Pastoralism and the Persistence of Genre in Recent Art," *October* 63 (Winter 1993), and "Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art," in *Oehlen Williams 95* (Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995).

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perplexing awakening. Included in the show were photographs of cameras, jellyfish, plastic corn, Polish apartment blocks, German postal packages, women with shampooed hair, soap bars, wallpaper factories, bicycles, and so on. All these subjects were obviously important to the artist, and their juxtaposition certainly provoked me to ask why. But equally, the show raised questions with no obvious connection to the photographic subjects. How were the photographs made? What photographic histories and genres did they bring together? How were they installed? What other interventions had Williams made around them? What was the importance of the texts that surrounded the presentation of photographs?

The importance of these questions seemed even greater when I attended the opening of Williams's next exhibition, held at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (GAM): *For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle (Revision 5*). The focus here was on extensive architectural interventions and a special performance scripted for the opening night. It was now abundantly clear that to think about Williams just as a photographer was to radically misunderstand his practice. Indeed, it was evident that Williams's shows could be set against at least three tendencies: the concern with obsolescence in recent photography, the combination of sculpture and photography in various artists' practices, and the phenomenon of artists undertaking historical research as a crucial part of their work. Williams's photographs used nearly obsolete printing technologies and pictured an outmoded camera apparatus. His shows brought together critical tendencies in recent photographic and sculptural practice without mixing these mediums into a multimedia mélange; they suggested a new model of the kind of historiographic activity an art installation might constitute. What follows is a response to these encounters with Williams's work.

### *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*

I will begin by setting aside the iconography of this new series and addressing the very subject of photography. It became clear to me while walking around Williams's exhibition in Portugal that there was a strange range of formal photographic conventions at work in the series, deriving from different historical moments, whose co-presence—though initially confusing—reveals a great degree of deliberation and strategic thinking on his part. The most obvious formal component of Williams's work is the deployment of a style of photography related to the Neue Sachlichkeit of Albert Renger-Patzsch and Karl Blossfeldt.[4] Williams makes photographs that are carefully composed, and

4. Williams's strategic response to Renger-Patzsch and to Walter Benjamin's critique is discussed by Timothy Martin in "Undressing the Institutional Wound," in *Christopher Williams 97 For Example: Die Welt ist schön (Final Draft)* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1997).

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which show their subjects clearly, well-lit, and in focus. The photographic subject is usually pictured head-on: there are none of the downward and upward vertiginous angles associated with Constructivist photography. Their specific size also indicates an affiliation with Neue Sachlichkeit. Williams's images are larger than domestic snapshots, but too small to suggest any affinity with the wall-filling images produced by his contemporaries Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky, whose works (as many have commented) aspire to resurrect traditions deriving from the history of painting. Williams's prints are placed under white mattes and shown in black-painted wooden frames—an extremely conventional presentation device for photography that Williams chose to adopt at a time when many others were showing photographs as posters, on billboards, and as projected slides.

Alongside these signs of Neue Sachlichkeit, there are other formal strategies indebted to the photo-conceptualism that Williams encountered as a student at CalArts in the 1970s. While some of the photographs in the new series are single shots, others are part of diptychs, triptychs, and other mini-series, which suggests a relation to the serial photography of Dan Graham and Ed Ruscha.[5] The titles that Williams gives his images are unconventional and function as separate texts rather than as simple captions. In catalogs, they are printed in full in a separate section from the images, and in his installations, they appear on the wall at some distance from the framed photographs. Some are extremely long, even cumbersome, packed with information providing the specifications of the pictured object, the location of the photograph, and the dimensions of the print and frame, while others have a comparative paucity of information. Many of the longer ones lead off by naming an object that one would not assume to be the main subject of the image, thus reversing the hierarchy that the picture might seem to offer. Dissonant relationships are created, both between a single title and its corresponding photograph, and between the long title for one work and the short one for another. These text/image and text/text relationships indicate the importance to Williams of the work of Douglas Huebler and Robert Smithson. Another evident affiliation is to the rephotography of the "Pictures Generation." Williams's series includes one photograph of a 1969 Dacia 1300 car brochure. The artist simply photographed the brochure and rotated the image by ninety degrees: rather than illustrating the car's spaciousness, the image gives an impression of compression, as the car

5. Ed Ruscha's impact on Williams extends beyond the importance of serial photography. As a Californian interested in New York work in the 1960s, Ruscha did not feel compelled to choose between the different modes emerging on the East Coast: he could work within the frames of Pop art and Conceptualism. From a similar geographic vantage point, Williams has not had to choose one manner of historical affiliation, and has instead been able to produce work in dialogue with various generational predecessors.

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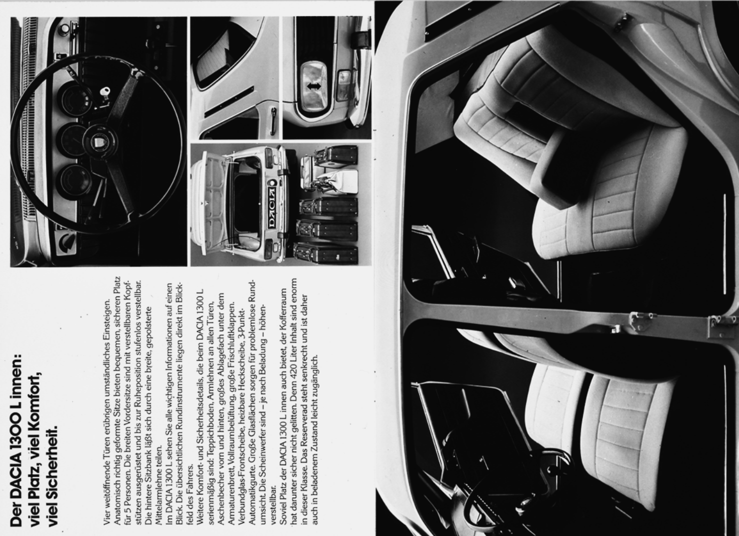


*Christopher Williams.* Brochure for Dacia 1300I, Dacia 1300: Licensed model of the Renault 12. 1289 cm3, 39.7 kW, 142 km/h max speed. First presented simultaneously at the Expozitia Realizarilor Economiei Nationale, Bukarest, and at the Mondial de l'Automobile, Paris (as Renault 12) in 1969. Produced 1969–21.7.2004 at Uzina de Autoturisme, Pitesti, Romania. Spare parts being produced until 2014 in Mioveni, Romania. (On July 2, 1999, Renault bought 51% of Dacia) Douglas M. Parker Studio, Glendale, California August 5, 2005. *2005. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

seats appear to be on the verge of falling onto the dashboard. Meaning is therefore altered by an act of (literal) *détournement*.[6]

The coming-together in Williams's work of these various photographic strategies—some initiated in the 1920s, and others in the 1960s and 1970s—is particularly remarkable insofar as the later artists had critiqued and rejected

6. Williams has used re-photography throughout his career. One of his earliest works, 1982's *SOURCE: The Photographic Archive, John F. Kennedy Library* (the full title is much longer), comprised photographs sourced by the artist in this archive according to particular selection criteria—Williams re-photographed all the images of Kennedy taken on May 10, 1963, in which his back is facing the camera.

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the premises of the earlier ones:[7] Graham, Huebler, and others had pursued a deskilled kind of photography, taking photographs with inexpensive cameras, avoiding elegant photographic compositions, printing at run-of-the-mill laboratories, and framing the resulting shots as expediently as possible.[8] Given the photo-conceptualists' critical rejection of the stylistic principles of Neue Sachlichkeit, and the fact that Williams's work uses devices associated with *both* movements, it is clear that he is presenting a deliberate position in regards to photographic history. Williams's practice involves a re-skilling of photography, yet this is neither a reactionary nor a crude rejection of the premises of photo-conceptualism, but a strategic and rhetorical move. Williams invites his viewers to consider, critically, how viable such photographic strategies are now. Rather than simply taking photographs for the sake of beauty, he might be suggesting that the only way to analyze the workings of photography in the culture at large is to make images that look almost as elegant as those produced elsewhere.

Looking at Williams's work, I also became interested in the character of the prints themselves. It would be possible to take elegantly composed, well-lit, and sharply-focused photographs, in the manner of Neue Sachlichkeit, but to print them inexpensively. However, this is patently not the case here. Williams's juxtaposition of color and black-and-white photographs makes us think about this distinction as a subject in and of itself (were the images all in color, one would perhaps take "color" for granted), and as we consider it, we are sensitized to the prints' chromatic accuracy and intensity.[9] This is perhaps most noticeable in prints showing yellow towels and red plastic wrappers, where it seems that the very dye used to color these products was also used on the photographic paper (in other words, the photographs are not just images of the objects they show, but are materially related to them, a mode of material relationship quite distinct from indexicality). The blacks behind the jellyfish and motorcycle are just as remarkable: velvety and intense. Williams uses dye-transfer color printing and Pyro black-and-white printing. Currently only offered by specialist printing laboratories, these processes are on the very verge of obsolescence, as they are time-consuming and materially expensive. Soon, it will no longer be possible to produce this kind of color saturation or this intensity of tonal range.[10] Williams uses

7. Renger-Patzsch's photography had met with a critical response much earlier on, most famously in Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay "A Small History of Photography." Benjamin had complained that Renger-Patzsch's photography aestheticized the world, and while it could "endow any soup can with cosmic significance," it "cannot grasp a single one of the human connexions in which it exists." Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 255.

8. On the deskilling of photography in photo-conceptualism, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 105–43.

9. Another reason that we are prompted to attend to "color" and "black and white" is that nothing in the subjects seems to motivate the decision as to whether to use one or the other. Photographs with the same subject vary in terms of this division: some photographs of cameras are color, others of lenses are black and white.

10. Since the first draft of this essay was completed, Williams has produced new color photographs for this series. These have been made as C-prints, because the chemicals for the dye-transfer printing process are no longer available.

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such processes neither out of a fetishistic concern with quality nor of a particular fascination with archaic techniques: again, his selection of these processes is rhetorical. The prints provoke viewers to think about the future and ask what will be lost as more efficient and cheaper photographic production methods displace the ones he has used. But at the same time, his photographs give us a sense of photography's past. The quality of his prints is such that we feel a genuine sense of photography's magical ability to replicate the precise appearance of an object. Williams gives us a glimpse of what the original nineteenth-century developers of photography might have felt as they invented the new technology, allowing us to be re-enchanted by a medium we usually take for granted.

The third aspect of the Serralves exhibition that intrigued me was the range of photographic genres in play. *Dix-Huit Leçons* included some photographs that resemble the kinds of images found in mail-order catalogs, scientific illustrations, and fashion and architectural photography. This range of genres should not be confused with the diversity of subject matter. A photograph of a building, for instance, is not the same as an architectural photograph, which has particular stylistic features and is the product of particular production methods. Williams has attributed this tendency in his work in part to his contact with John Baldessari, whose work *Fugitive Essays* (1980), a wall-based collage using re-photographed and enlarged images from various sources such as film stills and nature books, was particularly important to him.[11] Williams was taken with Baldessari's strategy, but, rather than just sourcing images of diverse kinds, he became determined to *produce* images this way as well. This means that his current series expands what can now be thought of as collage. If 1920s photo-collages juxtaposed different images over one surface, and Baldessari's 1980 work spread a collage over a wall, Williams's series collage together different photographic genres over the expanded space that is the entire exhibition. Each individual photograph might appear as a smooth plane with an affinity to a single photographic genre, but overall a sense of collage—and fragmentation—pervades.

Williams works on set with the technical, lighting, and laboratory conditions employed by fashion photographers, architectural photographers, and so on—even employing professional photographers to operate the apparatus—but his photographs indicate that he uses these modes of production in order to produce small forms of disturbance. A model in a shower has a dribble of shampoo running down her neck; a postal package is shown after it has been opened; a flower stand is pictured from the side, foregrounding discarded stems and foliage rather than its beautiful display. Precisely because the photographs so closely embrace the production techniques and qualities of non-art photographic genres, the

11. Williams discusses this work in a conversation with Baldessari: "It was in that show [*Fugitive Essays*] that you broke the collage format by introducing the wall as the support for the collage. You used three different types of photos—such as nature, people, and product photography—and three different types of frames . . . . What so impressed me and interested me about that project was that you made installations that functioned like a collage." John Baldessari, Ann Goldstein, and Christopher Williams, "The Things We Sweep Under the Rug," p. 95.

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slight yet radical distance between the "normal" advertisements, for instance, and Williams's images becomes crucial. As a consequence, his photographs provoke us to think about the kinds of photographs produced in contexts other than the art world, and the relation of fine-art photography to such images.

Another provocative aspect of the series is the question of photographic location. Some photographs have been taken on streets, in museums, and in other specifically chosen locations either near Williams's base in Los Angeles, or far away in Eastern and Western Europe. Other photographs have been taken in photographic studios. Objects are brought to the studio, placed upon glass, and pictured in such a way that all traces of location disappear. The impression of a neutral place is created, as if the object were in a vitrine sealed off from the world. On first glance it seems that there is a clear division here between images taken in specific geographical locations and others photographed in non-specific ones. Yet the titles of the studio shots name both the places where the objects were manufactured *and* the precise locations of the photographic studios.[12] Just as some titles underline Williams's own displacement from Los Angeles to Poland (for instance), so others underline the transport of objects from one location to the studio.

By raising the question of location, Williams indicates the entwinement of photographic activity in discourses concerning globalization and transportation, but, at the same time, he also signals an affinity with another artist who has been important to his formation, one not evident if we only concentrate on Williams's relationship to photographic histories: Lawrence Weiner. Since the late 1960s, Weiner has made sculptures using the ideas of displacement, translation, and shifting—just the ideas that Williams explores through photography. Weiner has defined art as an activity that investigates "the relationships between human beings & objects & objects to objects in relation to human beings."[13] We can see how these relationships are at stake in Williams's work most obviously when we think of the photographs that juxtapose human beings and objects (for instance, a woman and a shower door) or objects and objects (a bunch of corn and a Kodak reflection guide). But, as I have endeavored to indicate, as much as these relationships are evident *within* the images, they are brought into play through the very activity of photography. Photography, as Williams invites us to consider, can involve the movement of a human being to an object, or the movement of an object to a photographic studio, where another object—the camera—lies in wait. As for the act of displaying a photograph either in an exhibition or a publication, this might well be re-described through Weiner's work #143: "AN ACCUMULATION OF INFORMATION TAKEN FROM HERE TO THERE."

12. Williams sees the whited-out environments of his studio shots as "analogues" for the white cube spaces in which contemporary art is so often displayed. Christopher Williams, in conversation with the author, June 2007.

13. This statement appears in various closely related forms in many of Weiner's statements and interviews. This particular quotation is from "[Media(Audio)]," in *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968–2003*, eds. Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 105.

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As I looked at Williams's photographs and thought about the conflicting photographic histories that informed them and that the artist had managed to bring together, about their print quality, their approach to genre and production, and about the question of location, it became evident that a primary concern in Williams's series was photography itself. Of course this was already made evident by the iconography of the photographs: the series contains images of cameras, camera lenses, and other apparatuses associated with photographic production, such as Kodak color reflection guides. There is a photograph of a diagram for a threading device used in a factory that produced photographic paper. There are also photographs of display walls where photographs are conventionally exhibited.

Each of these objects is selected after intensive historical research. It is crucial, for instance, that the camera comes from a *particular* factory. The accumulation of images relating to the photographic apparatus and industry indicates a kind of self-reflexivity at the heart of Williams's project. This self-reflexivity invites comparison with photo-conceptual works by John Hilliard, among many others, in its examination of the workings of the camera apparatus. Hilliard, for example, photographed his camera in a mirror at each of its aperture and speed settings, producing a grid of photographs displaying the technological facilities of the mechanism itself. Williams's work has a relation to modernist material self-reflexivity, but he extends its parameters. Because he photographs the wider apparatus of the photographic industry (lenses, color reflection guides, et cetera)—rather than just the camera he happens to use—his work reflects on this industry as well as on the materials that he employs.

The viewer begins to appreciate the many factors that determine photographic production: photographs are argued to be the result of the work of camera designers, chemical engineers, studio technicians, lighting experts, specialist printers, and so on.[14] The person who clicks the button to expose the film is only one in a chain of producers. (Indeed, in producing his photographs, Williams rarely does this himself.) Reflecting on the wider aspects and structure of photographic production, Williams manages to shift the emphasis away from the photographer-author, whose subjectivity, intentionality, and artistic proficiency is at the core of so much photographic criticism. Likewise, Williams's approach to photography invites us to discard the notion of the "decisive moment" as integral to photographic criticism since it acknowledges all the moments before and after the photographer depresses the exposure button.

14. In much the same way, during the time that Williams studied under Michael Asher, the latter pursued projects that revealed the importance of people other than the artist in the production of an installation. On his 1977 project at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Asher wrote: "By clearly distinguishing and specifically presenting the different participants (work crew, curator, artist) that make an exhibition possible at such an institution, I wanted to show how these necessary but separate functions are equally essential for the constitution of a work." Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983), p. 178.

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The resulting vision of photography has a strong affinity with the account of the practice Vilém Flusser formulated in his 1983 book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Flusser's account of photography is constructed around the notion of "programs": a camera is programmed to produce photographs—no matter the aspirations of its operator, he or she can only use it to produce what it is programmed to do ("The camera is programmed to produce photographs, and every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera").[15] Photography is programmed by the photographic industry; the photographic industry is programmed by "the industrial complex," which is programmed by capitalism, et cetera. Each link in the chain of photographic production is programmed, which means it serves the interest of the link above it (even unknowingly). Photographs—which are the end result of the photographic industry—also program the world they enter, usually to the effect that more photographs must be produced. Photographs, that is, program the world to prolong, improve, and extend the reaches of the photographic industry. Flusser's vision of photography, therefore, is of a self-perpetuating, circular institution, consisting of rings of activity, in which freedom is all but circumscribed, and in which every move is programmed.

In the middle of these rings of activity, the photographer therefore emerges as a functionary, for all he or she might think of the activity as an exercise of free will. Williams has embraced the term—saying he likes to be thought of as a functionary—and has also underlined his interest in Flusser by placing the word "Program" on his catalogs, and in related textual material.[16] Certainly, looking at the images in his series, one becomes aware of photography as something that is connected to the world of capital—photography as something that is programmed to serve the interests and requirements of corporations, tourist boards, scientists, and so on. Photographs program more photographs. The key question is whether Williams critically reveals photography's un-freedom by showing how it serves programs; or whether his interventions and disruptions of photographic conventions, materials, and genres amount to an act of productive contestation.

### *Lectures on Industrial Society*

I want to turn now, though, from all these questions about photography to the other subjects of Williams's new series, with his title serving as an introduction. *Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle* is the name of a book by Raymond Aron published in France in 1962. Williams came across it after watching Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), where this title flashes on the screen. Both book and film connected to Williams's long-held interests in

15. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 26.
16. For instance, see the cover of the catalog for the Kunstverein Braunschweig exhibition. *Christopher Williams: For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle (Revision I)* (Braunschweig: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2005).

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*Williams*. Kiev 88, 4.6 lbs. (2.1 Kg) Manufacturer: Zavod Arsenal Factory, Kiev, Ukraine. Date of production: 1983–87 Douglas M. Parker Studio, Glendale, California. March 28, 2003 (NR. 1,2,3). *2003. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

the postwar era and the Americanization of European culture.[17] With the title as a kind of prompt, Williams, determined to make a representation of the world of the Cold War, began the series with what he has called a "Cold War couple"—a Soviet camera and a plastic bunch of American corn—and continued it by creating images of buildings, people, and products integral to a representation of that world. In this section, I will show how individual images function in respect to the Cold War period and then identify some thematic strands across the series.

The Soviet camera is photographed as a triptych and titled *Kiev 88, 4.6 lbs. (2.1Kg), Manufacturer: Zavod Arsenal Factory, Kiev, Ukraine. Date of production: 1983–87. Douglas M. Parker Studio, Glendale, California, March 28, 2003* (2003).[18] Williams selected the camera because of its remarkable history. It is based on

17. During my interview with him in June 2007, Williams has discussed the influence of Hollywood on Jean-Luc Godard and others, the impact of Pop art on the Capitalist Realists, and of Claes Oldenburg on Marcel Broodthaers.

18. The photographs show the camera from three angles: at 45 degrees from the front left; at 45 degrees from the back left; and side-on. There is no frontal shot of the kind which would appear in an instruction manual whose photographic conventions Williams has *almost* replicated.

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*Williams.* Kodak Three Point Reflection Guide, © 1968 Eastman Kodak Company, 1968. (Corn) Douglas M. Parker Studio, Glendale, California, April 17, 2003. *2003. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

Hasselblad designs stolen from German photographic factories at the end of 1945 by Russian troops liberating the country. (Some believe that the Germans had earlier stolen these designs from Swedish technicians.) Having appropriated the designs, the Russians began to produce the camera in a former arms factory in Kiev that had been the location of a 1918 strike during the Russian Revolution, the subject of *Arsenal*, a film made ten years later by Aleksandr Dovzhenko. "Within this one object," Williams noted of the Kiev 88, "you have this political history with a capital *P*: the Russian Revolution; a well-known film representing that revolution and reflecting upon the position of that revolution in history; the appropriation and displacement of the means to produce photographic apparatus; and then you have the idea that it's a collectable and a consumer product. Built into my photograph of the Kiev 88, there is the idea of social change."[19]

19. Williams, in conversation with the author, June 2007. Unless otherwise stated, all other comments from Williams are from this interview.

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The other half of the couple is the picture of a nine-strong pyramid of plastic corn on the cob, similarly photographed in a studio. A Kodak Three-Point Reflection Guide protrudes down from the top of the image, and though the text on the guide is upside down and runs right to left (suggesting that the negative has been flipped), the words "© 1968 Kodak Eastman Company" are visible along its surface. This again is an image with a resemblance to an advertisement, but with a difference: the color guide would usually not appear in a published advertisement. Williams chose to photograph corn because this staple is bound up with the history of colonialism, having been first transported to Europe only in the fifteenth century. He was also interested in the fact that corn remains the largest crop in the Americas, being used not just for food, but also for a vast number of manufacturing industries.[20] Of particular interest to Williams is corn's use in the photographic industry. "The lubricant used to grind the camera lenses has a corn by-product in it; the film strip itself has a corn by-product in it, many of the chemicals associated with the production of a fine art print also have corn in them," he has said. This means that though it shows fake corn, Williams's photograph is in all probability made from real corn. The photograph, in other words, dramatizes a material self-reflexivity of an entirely unexpected kind. The 1968 Kodak Reflection Guide functions, in part, as another reference to the material apparatus of the photographic industry, and also as a reminder of a moment of attempted social change (1968) with some correspondence to those dates also invoked by the Kiev 88 photographs (1917; 1928; 1945).[21]

*Lodz, October 2, 2004* was one of the next photographs Williams conceived for the series and one of the first he made outside the studio. It shows a twelve-story block of apartments in the Polish city with another similar block behind it. The image is in color, but the impression of grayness predominates, as it is the color of the sky, the concrete building, and the road. *Lodz, October 2, 2004* is close to the look of architectural photography and of the kind of images associated with students of Bernd and Hilla Becher, but with a slight disturbance: the top of a lamppost protrudes from the bottom right corner. Perhaps somewhat reminiscent of the palm tree in Baldessari's *Wrong* (1967), the lamppost disrupts the view and serves as an indicator of the camera's position (here it is important to note a difference from Gursky's photography in particular, which offers god-like viewpoints persuading viewers to forget the physical situation of the camera). Whereas

20. Williams learned this from Margaret Visser's *Much Depends on Dinner* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986).

21. Discussing this photograph, John Miller indicates that the history of corn production and export is bound up with the economics and politics of the Cold War: "In the early 1970s, the world economy shifted from multinational markets to transnational complexes. The United States responded with a 'green power' exporting strategy to help offset its trade deficit and costs of the Vietnam War. This strategy focused on exporting low-value crops such as wheat, soybeans, and corn at prices too low for its competitors to meet. The 1973 Farm Bill finally removed production constraints on American farmers, allowing them to undercut agricultural production in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Third World." Miller, "Mechanization Takes Command: Modernization, Terminable and Interminable," in *Christopher Williams* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2005), p. 40.

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*Williams.* Lodz, October 2, 2004. *2004. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

Williams chose the Kiev 88 camera and the 1968 Kodak Color Reflection Guide for their particularities, this block of apartments was selected exactly for its generic qualities. Typical of Soviet-era Eastern European architecture, this kind of apartment block might be found anywhere from East Berlin to Moscow. However, like the first two images, it was a product of the culture of the Cold War.

Williams populated his Cold War world with various photographs of people, and the first major group was a mini-series of five black-and-white photographs showing a woman to the right of a shower door. Despite its proximity to advertising there are again slight and important differences—the fact that the model is older than most seen in shampoo advertisements; the dribble of water running down her neck; the somewhat disturbing reflection of a slice of her nose and teeth in the side of the shower door in some of the shots (advertisements tend to show the body whole, and not fragmented by such reflections). Once again, everything that appears in the photograph is determined by specific research. Williams started with an interest in the design and photographic work of Charles Wilp, who produced advertisements for beauty products in the 1960s showing women emerging from showers, somewhat influenced by Richard Hamilton. Williams divided up the elements of Wilp's images and worked to find a shower door and a model. The woman was selected according to the casting instructions that Jacques Tati supplied for *Playtime*: Tati had in mind a female lead whose appearance suggested education and refinement, qualities that

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*Williams.* Model # 105M—R59C, Keystone Shower Door, 57.4 X 59"/Chrome/Raindrop, SKU # 109149, # 96235. 970—084—000 (Meiko), Vancouver, B.C. Wednesday, April 6, 2005, No. 2. *2005. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

Williams discerned in this model. The shower door was produced by the Keystone company and is a model called Chrome Raindrop, which simultaneously looks like water dropping down a surface, and acts as a surface for such drops.

This intensity of reference to the particular histories and social realities represented in the photographs is extremely unusual, and all the more remarkable because the photographs, at first sight, look so simple.[22] Whereas Jeff Wall's photographs, for instance, announce their allusions very loudly, Williams's are very reticent: the compacted references in the photographs become apparent only with time. Indeed, Williams's work in refining and paring his research down to an essential and simple image is in direct inverse relation to the viewer's work in

22. In discussing Williams's work while writing this, I have found that many people who admire it find the mismatch between the simplicity of the images and the intensity of the research carried out to make them a source of considerable humor, especially because the subjects of the research are often so obscure. Others, however, find the reticence of the images frustrating.

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opening out each image to discern its multiple referents. Sometimes, the viewer's task involves discovering a single object's identity and history, but at other times the viewer must confront the juxtaposition of two. I mentioned before that, as a whole, the series presents a collage of different photographic genres, and that those images that present two oddly juxtaposed objects also appear as collages. However, whereas other photocollages associated with the Cold War period show juxtapositions of dissonant objects and images across a fractured photographic plane (for instance, the American interiors and Vietnamese exteriors of Martha Rosler's 1967–72 series *Bringing the War Home*), Williams's photographs appear as smooth surfaces containing disparate elements.

*

Various Cold War subjects can be identified across the photographs in the series, primarily transportation, decolonization, sanitation, and design. These four strands weave together in surprising ways. Car production was crucial to the recovery of postwar France. As Kristin Ross has written, "Postwar French economic growth was a direct result of having modernized sectors of production . . . and the most vital of these was automobile production."[23] Though mass produced, the car could be marketed to its consumers as an individual product that would satisfy their individual desires. For Roland Barthes writing in the late 1950s, "cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object."[24] The car's main function, however, was to transport workers to their workplaces, helping to create a mobile workforce, "available Man, relatively indifferent to the distances where he'll be sent."[25] Cars were consumed to increase production. The importance of efficient transport in the Cold War period is marked by the photograph of the Romanian Dacia 1300, which is a licensed model of the 1969 Renault 12. The image bears witness to the flexibility of resurgent French capitalism, for it shows that Renault found a way to sell and market its product despite the political divide between Paris and Romania. There is also a triptych of a 1964 Velosolex 2200 Nr. 1 motorized bicycle. Manufactured to speed up the journeys of workers to their factories, this was the most commonly used mode of transportation in Indochina and France's African colonies.

Other photographs pick up on the late history of the colonies—for instance, the image of the stacked sun shutters of Jean Prouvé's *Maison Tropique*. Designed at Prouvé's Maxéville workshops at the end of the 1940s, Prouvé's structures were light enough to transport by airplane to Brazzaville in the Congo where they had stayed

23. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press and October Books, 1995), p.19.
24. Roland Barthes, "The New Citroen," in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 88.
25. Ibid., p. 22.

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until 1999, when they were shipped back to France. Prouvé's idea was to create an easily mobile structure that could be disassembled and repositioned, and whose shutters could regulate light and enable air circulation, enabling French expatriates working in the colonies to create domestic conditions approximating those of home. (As it happens, the *Maison Tropique* was never mass produced). Another, less direct indicator of the impact of colonialism can be detected in the pair of photographs showing Africola ashtrays from the back and the front. These were manufactured in Germany; Africola was a European brand of soft-drink whose name was chosen as a marketing device because of its exotic appeal.[26] As this image indicates, Williams does not aim to represent the violence of colonial rule, nor the tumultuous conditions of post-colonial existence; instead, he picks objects and buildings whose innocent appearance at first belies their implication in these histories.

A third theme in Williams's series is sanitation, but it is a subject closely connected to decolonization. Ross identifies a logic whereby France told itself that it needed to clean itself up in the wake of the German occupation, and that it had to become hygienic since dirtiness was a feature of the colonies from which it had to distance itself. Through a process she calls "interior colonialism," the "rational administrative techniques developed in the colonies were brought home and put to use side by side with new technological innovations such as advertising in reordering metropolitan, domestic society, the 'everyday life' of its citizens."[27] Most importantly, "the transfer of a colonial political economy to a domestic one involved a new emphasis on controlling domesticity."[28] In a pair of color images, Williams's model "Miko" looks to the camera smiling, and then away mid-laugh. Wearing a bright yellow towel wrapped around her head, she appears next to another 1968 Kodak Three Point Reflection Guide, whose red, green, and blue strips contrast with the towel's yellow (indeed, the blue strip has the word "yellow" printed on it, drawing attention to this contrast).[29]

Despite the fact that the model's veins and moles are slightly more evident than would be the case in most advertisements, these images recall the advertising of Cold War hygiene products, even while the over-directed facial gestures clarify the complete artifice of such photographs. The inclusion of the photographic apparatus in the image underlines the ways in which photography was used not just to represent bodies but to control and define them, subjecting the body to regimes of cleanliness. The series also features a triptych of photographs showing a woman wearing 1970s yellow curlers; meanwhile the international spread of these regimes is indicated by the photograph showing two cellophane-wrapped Cuban Rina soap bars—the front

26. The manufacturer's stamp appears upside down in the image, another "mistake" separating this image from the conventions of advertising.
27. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 7.
28. Ibid., pp.77–78.
29. Christian Holler suggests that in this photograph, the date "1968," with its connotations of social revolt, serves as a "political counterpoint to the shimmering world of advertising and consumerism to which the mise-en-scène refers." See "World Picture Lessons: Christopher Williams' *For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle*," in *Christopher Williams* (Vienna: Secession, 2005), p. 66.

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*Williams.* Three Point Reflection Guide, © 1968 Eastman Kodak Company, 1968. (Meiko smiling), Vancouver, B.C. April 6, 2005. *2005. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

*Williams.* Lavar, Rina Jambon de Lavar "Lava, Limpia, Dura Mas," 200 gr., Douglas M. Parker Studio, Glendale, California, November 8, 2004. *2005. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

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*Williams*. Cologne, November 1, 2004.
*2004. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.*

one of which is shown upside down in a position that nicely disturbs the product's own agenda of order. (Ross cites a statistic that "consumption of these items [soap] rose 86 percent in the 1950s.")[30]

Another strand in the series involves design, decoration, and display. One photograph shows a Polish factory where wallpaper passes through rollers. This will be used to decorate apartments such as those shown in the Lodz image. There is also the photograph of the Cologne flower stand. Though the side-view onto the stand reveals discarded clutter rather than privileging a floral display, this angle does allow one to sense the efficiency of the florist's trade, the careful organization of awning, water buckets, and containers. These elements, alongside the flowers themselves point to the commercialization of "natural" products. The cost of this intrusion of commerce and design into nature is expressed formally: though it is taken outside, the photograph is so compressed that it induces a sense of enclosure and even claustrophobia. Williams's series also includes images that show the display mechanisms of

30. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 86.

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the institutions in which it has been shown—the mobile wall system developed at Vienna's Secession gallery by Adolf Krischanitz in 1986.

### *Installations and Constellations*

Imagine a real "Leçon Sur La Société Industrielle," a lecture about Williams's work, structured broadly along the lines just mapped out, a lesson designed to illustrate the various Cold War themes in the series. There would be a sequence of slides of his soap bars, his "women-in-showers," and his hair curler picture to underline the theme of the sanitation industry, and a series of slides showing the Velosolex, the Prouvé slats, and the Africola ashtray to illustrate Williams's interest in decolonization. There could be another sequence of images with connections to Cold War sites in Poland, Vietnam, Cuba, and the U.S.S.R.; or another that alludes to dates such as 1945 and 1968. Then slides of the camera pictures and of those photographs with Kodak Reflection Guides would round off the lecture to prove that post-war photographic culture is in a way the über-theme of *Dix-Huit Leçons*, connected to and connecting all these subjects.

Such a lecture might well account for Williams's historical research and show how he has represented industrial society, but it would be a misleading account of his work. This is because it would not grasp the importance of his exhibitions and installations. When I saw this series first in Serralves, I was reminded of Williams's friend Thomas Struth and of Struth's own recent retrospective, but only because of the differences in display tactics. While Struth grouped works with similar themes or genres (street photographs were displayed in one room, family portraits in another, museum pictures in a third, landscapes next, and so on), no such thematic or genre groupings are to be found in Williams's installations. And while artists such as Struth tend to display their photographs without any other interventions, in an exhibition by Williams, a viewer sees architectural alterations, video "supplements," and perhaps even performance components alongside photography.

Williams's architectural interventions owe much to the sculptural developments of the 1960s and '70s, particularly to the work of Williams's CalArts professor Michael Asher, whose practice has involved subtle architectural alterations that reveal the hidden ideologies of institutions, and also the movements of objects from one site in an institution to another in order to represent forgotten institutional histories. The broad range of Williams's interventions can be seen in the Porto and Bologna shows. The Serralves museum was designed by Alvaro Siza in the early 1990s in a park attached to the Casa Serralves. Prior to his show, Williams had been struck by the long wooden floor ramp stretching from the upper galleries to a lower exhibition floor. This ramp was meant to facilitate the flow of human traffic around the museum, as well as to advertise within the building one of Siza's main architectural accomplishments. Siza managed to construct a

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spacious museum with minimal damage to the environmental context. Determined not to cut down trees in the park, working with the "slope of the terrain," he "enabled the building to be partially buried, thus minimizing its visual impact on the surroundings."[31] In other words, the ramp is both an echo of the topography of the park and a reminder of the architect's respect for it. Nonetheless, Williams knew that the ramp would direct viewers away from the rooms immediately in front of the entrance, so he had a false wall constructed to separate the slope from the upper room. The addition of this wall drew attention to Williams's work, but, somewhat paradoxically, it also emphasized the function of Siza's ramp by rendering it a separate entity.

The interventions in Bologna were rather more dramatic. Here, Williams was working with a building in a city whose history had long interested him. Bologna was the hub of Italian Communism in the 1970s, and the radical achievements of its government had been known to him through the 1980 Semiotext(e) publication *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* and the 1978 punk record by Scritti Politti called *Skank Bloc Bologna.* One of the cultural accomplishments of this period is the museum built by Leone Pancaldi in the early 1970s, opened on May 1, 1975. Pancaldi's building was originally extremely spacious and well-lit, with large windows opening onto a square and an extremely tall atrium whose skylights illuminated the central display space. Between this atrium and the front window, Pancaldi constructed another display space with a series of walls running perpendicular to the windows, each elevated off the floor on short steel columns and divided in two by a generous gap through which viewers could pass. By the time Williams came to Bologna, these qualities and features of the building were hard to recognize. The museum's entrance had been moved from a side position to one below the main space. To provide more space for display, curators over the years had blocked up windows with Sheetrock and filled in the gaps of the display walls. Other recessed spaces had been walled up, covering beautiful sections of golden-smoke mirrored glass.

Williams was invited to make the final exhibition in the Pancaldi building before the institution moved to a more central, spectacular, and tourist-friendly site in the middle of medieval Bologna. Aware both of the building's past and its imminent future (the space was scheduled to be given over to trade-fair organizers who will undoubtedly demolish parts of it), Williams made a series of interventions that at once recall Pancaldi's structures and point forward to the building's fate. He reopened the original entrance, removed the Sheetrock from the front windows, and uncovered elegant recessed spaces that had been shut off to maximize the available surface area. In the atrium, Williams installed five large white mobile display walls and left each completely bare, a move that recalls Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* of 1951. Usually reserved for the dramatic centerpiece of an exhibition, the space became a trap for shifting light, the empty walls changing tones as

31. Fundacao de Serralves, "Architecture," http://www.serralves.com/gca/?id=62.

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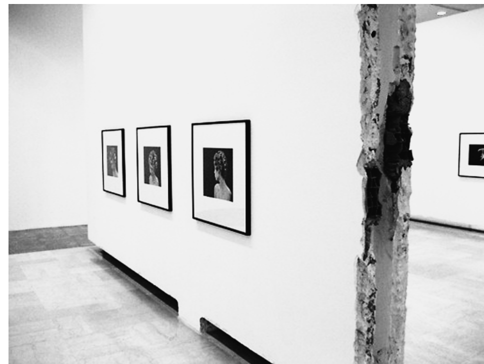
clouds passed by high above. But, not all the artist's interventions aimed to recapture the beauty of the building in the manner of a sensitive restorer. Williams took down false walls, only to reinstall them in another part of the building, making them appear hastily boarded up. Towards the front of the space, the artist knocked back the display walls to their original shape, but rather than smoothing them down after all the hammering, he left them in a raw state, as if the galleries had been visited by the ghost of Gordon Matta-Clark. Though Williams's cuts allowed the viewer to walk over the routes on the marble floor plotted out by Pancaldi in 1975, the artist made no attempt to clean this floor: it was quite evident which sections had been polished over the years, and which covered up by plasterboard display walls. In contrast to the structural interventions in Porto, those in Bologna reflected on the history, as well as the architecture, of the institution. In this way, Williams succeeded in sensitizing viewers to the austere beauty of Pancaldi's architecture, a beauty newly revealed just before the move to a new site in "historic" Bologna. If the decision to move can be thought of as a symptom of contemporary spectacle culture's attachment to a romanticized idea of history, Williams managed to resuscitate the memory of a more recent but less postcard-friendly past, doing so without lapsing into nostalgia, without pining for the Communist Bologna of the 1970s as a lost utopia: his activities were as much acts of ruination as of restoration.



*Williams. Installation view of* For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle (Revision 5). *Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Bologna. 2007.*

Williams's installations include other kinds of interventions. In Porto, two spaces were set aside for video works. In one, a gray Franz West sofa faced a single monitor showing a video of a cooking program; in the other, a long bench faced a trio of TV monitors showing three photographic books whose pages were turned from time to time. The upper video, *Supplement* (2003), was produced by Ringier Television and runs to 332 minutes. Williams was given the facilities to work with the producers of a television cooking show, and as the video begins, the conventions of such a program are adhered to. A cheerful and handsome host enters, discusses mushroom varieties in front of a studio audience, and turns to a chef who demonstrates the preparation of a stock by piling ingredients into a pot to boil. At this moment, the cameras of a normal TV program would turn away as the

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chef reveals "one that has been prepared earlier"; however, Williams instructed his cameraman to record the pot right through the boiling and cooling process. In the installation, a viewer might enter the room to see the most banal of sights: chunks of carrots and potatoes bubbling in water. This might encourage them to sit and wait for a denouement, or provoke them to leave the room immediately, but either way, the video does its work in disturbing television conventions and in introducing the subject of time into the exhibition: the viewer either feels the sensation of waiting in front of something slow or of speeding by a video they have chosen not to watch.

The other room of videos addressed photographic conventions rather than TV. The first monitor showed a book titled *Blende auf für Guinea*. Published in 1960, it shows images of the newly decolonized and socialist country—including a photograph of an African worker reading Bertolt Brecht. The second monitor displayed pages from a 1981 book titled *Traditional Costumes in the Black Forest*; the third had pages from a 1971 issue of *Der Spiegel* and a technical publication from 1968 titled *Grosbild*. The latter links to Williams's concern with photographic culture in the Cold War period and its connection to colonialism, to the reemergence of nationalist tendencies in Germany, and to manufacture and advertising.

The main non-architectural interventions in Bologna also concerned the Cold War period, but were again associated with the specific history of the city and the museum. At the back of Pancaldi's building, Williams displayed the architect's original blueprints on a low plinth. Nearby, there was a series of vitrines—also designed by Pancaldi—that Williams had retrieved from GAM's storage rooms. One contained publications relating to the international reception of the politics of 1970s Bologna, showing three translations of the 1977 book *Red Bologna*; another had Scritti Politti's single, arranged so its sleeve was displayed separated from the vinyl. Other elements of the display in this section of the installation functioned more self-reflexively. One vitrine contained a children's photo-story book titled *Das Apfelmäuschen* (*The Little Apple-Mouse*), and elsewhere, as a kind of exhibition within an exhibition, there was a wall cabinet in which six tiny Asger Jorn ceramic sculptures, all from 1971, were on display. These elements draw attention to the very concept of intervention itself. The inclusion of Jorn's works, for example, reminds one of Situationist precedents for Williams's interventions, and the image of a mouse living in an apple on the cover of *Das Apfelmäuschen* suggests by analogy that the artist is a kind of intruder burrowing into the museum.

Williams also treats the openings of exhibitions and its related events with care, choreographing the speeches that are given by institutional figures. In Portugal, he organized a performance at the post-opening dinner in which an actor and actress gave speeches whose texts were collaged from generic Cold War sources, including Jean-Paul Sartre's lines "Il ne faut pas désespérer Billancourt," an expression of the view that the ugly truths of Soviet Communism should be

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kept from the proletariat, as symbolized by the workers at the main Renault plant outside of Paris. In Bologna, the performance was more specifically formed out of the institution's history. Prior to the show's opening, and with the help and research assistance of the curator Andrea Villani, Williams asked the director, Gianfranco Maraniello, to recite word-for-word the speech that the original director of the institution had read at its inauguration in 1975; Maraniello resisted somewhat, and he wanted to add comments relating to the present time. Williams's response was to cut each sentence of the newly expanded text in half, so that the speech was again at its 1975 length. Thus the exhibition opened with a kind of Dada-esque performance—a recital in which a mixture of 1970s leftist and contemporary institutional rhetoric was sliced into nonsense poetry.

*

Some of Williams's exhibitions include objects; for others he makes architectural interventions. Some viewers will witness the performances at Williams's openings; others will sit on Franz West sofas and watch his videos. There is much to engage the viewer besides Williams's photographs, but what is common to all his installations is the way in which the artist arranges these photographs in constellations. In a reasonably large museum room that would accommodate around ten works the size of his own pictures, Williams might place no more than six photographs, hanging them slightly lower than standard museum practice. Coming into such a room, a viewer immediately senses that this is a very carefully chosen and positioned group of images because of the sparseness of works and baffling diversity of subject matter. One room at Serralves included a triptych of Velosolex bicycle images beside an image of the woman wearing the yellow towel; on the next wall was the Lodz apartment block, and on the final wall, the corn. In a similarly sized space in Bologna, Williams placed the Rina soap bars, the hair curlers triptych, and the Lodz building. (In each exhibition, Williams places photographs in new constellations, creating new juxtapositions).

Williams's constellations disrupt any attempt to construct a reading of the work along thematic lines. As soon as one begins to think about the connections between the images of sanitation, for instance, a photograph that is completely disconnected intrudes to interrupt a train of thought—the corn, for instance. However, as much as our attempts to connect thematic strands are constantly interrupted, we also become aware that we are trying to make other kinds of connections, even if they seem quite random and based only on superficial visual details. We might link, for example, the images of the woman-with-towel, the corn, the postal package, the flower stand, and the Dacia car because each image contains a bright yellow object. Or we might join the hair curlers, the camera lenses, and the diagram from the paper coating factory—objects and images that have nothing to do with one another, but all of which include circular forms. These

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groupings are not meant to be secure: Williams does not provoke us to assemble chromatically or formally similar photographs simply to "rejoice in games of juxtaposition"[32] and to celebrate photography's capacity to make dissimilar things appear alike. Rather, these groupings are created rhetorically: that is, Williams places us in a position where we begin to ask, what might be a valid, and what a superficial, connection of images?[33]

The creation of these constellations and their effects reveals another of the historical figures important to Williams's practice—someone who might seem surprising given his usual association with New Objectivity. This is Georges Bataille, who is thought to have guided the arrangement of photographs on the pages of *Documents*, which he edited between 1929 and 1930. Indeed, Williams signaled the importance of this journal to him by printing the text "Archäologie Beaux Arts Ethnography Théâtre-Vérité" across the cover of the catalog to the very first exhibition of *Dix-Huit Leçons*. The text is an allusion to the cover of *Documents* (1929–30), which had as its subtitle: "Doctrines Archéologie Beaux-Arts Ethnographie." As Simon Baker has recently shown, "a primary doctrine of the magazine (its philosophy of illustration perhaps) could be said to be abandonment to the possibility of misrecognition: objects are reproduced in close-up, at confusing scales; illustrations turn up uninvited in the wrong places; images act as spanners in the smooth workings of earnest, determined arguments, and echo uncannily in the spaces between unrelated ideas."[34] "The reader," Baker continues, "is provoked into seeing non-existent relations between images from separately authored articles." Bataille, he goes on to explain, tempted readers to connect images in this way not in order to indulge in the games of photographic resemblance played out across the pages of magazines such as *L'Art Vivant*; rather, *Documents*' arrangements of photographs tempted readers to make connections so they could see how empty these connections were. "It is the very concept of resemblance that is debased as it gradually makes less and less sense . . . The *Documents* reader is encouraged to reach the conclusion that finding affinities between prehistoric rock art and avant-garde painting is symptomatic of a disruptive glitch in the process of representation."[35]

Baker's account indicates incredible proximity between Bataille's and Williams's photographic strategies, but the principle difference is of course that

32. Simon Baker, "Doctrines [The Appearance of Things]," in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS* (London: Hayward Gallery and Southbank Centre; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 38.
33. A "superficial" or visual connection might turn out to be more important than it first seems. The preponderance of yellow could refer to the yellow of the Kodak brand; the color is another aspect of the series' reference to photographic culture. Similarly, the circular forms are ways of suggesting the idea of revolution conjured elsewhere through dates such as 1968.
34. Simon Baker, "Doctrines," p. 36.
35. Ibid., p. 38. "This photographic culture ['20s magazines] rejoiced in games of juxtaposition and the dissemblance of resemblance by which anything could be shown to be 'something like' anything else . . . . DOCUMENTS, by contrast, chose to reveal such ludicrous sophistry for what it was . . . . Where magazines of the time used photography to transform everything into aesthetic equivalents, DOCUMENTS opted instead to deny the symbolic functions of objects in favor of their tasks or use-values."

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Williams arranges photographs mainly in space, rather than over pages. In the context of the installations, the cumulative effect of Williams's constellations is to give the viewer the peculiar sense that for all the precision of his photographs, both in terms of their appearance and their subjects, the heart of Williams's work lies not so much in the images he has created, but in the space between them. This really is a strange realization in a photographic exhibition, as we are so used to locating the core of a photographer's ambitions within the images that he or she produces. However, in a room of Williams's photographs, one senses gradually that the most important place to look is not towards individual photographs, but to the gaps between them; we become conscious of asking ourselves how one image is connected to another, or how it is separate. It is to the very concept of separation that I now want to turn.

### *Six Degrees of Separation*

Here are the key questions that I think recent exhibitions by Williams really provoke. Are these shows to be understood as presentations of a series of photographs addressing Cold War history through themes such as sanitation and domesticity, transportation and efficiency, and decolonization and design? Or should the emphasis be placed on Williams's radical approach to display, his architectural interventions, his performances, and especially his way of creating photographic constellations that both interrupt thematic groupings and prompt us into making more random connections? Are the exhibitions "leçons sur la société industrielle," or (taking account of the anti-didactic spirit of the shows) is this title deliberately misleading? Should we attend to the photographs' thematic contents or to the ways these contents are separated?

When we begin to see how separation has become the overriding structural principle of Williams's recent work, we realize that these questions present false alternatives. Separation operates in various ways, not just in the pulling apart of thematic groupings in his installations. Its predominance suggests that separation carries particular meanings for Williams rather than just functioning to interrupt thematic strands. What are these types of separation? Within each photograph, there are apparently separate historical photographic impulses at work—impulses that are not reconciled so much as held together in conflict. There is a gap between the manifest quality of the photographic print and the slightly wrong appearance of the image—a separation that in turn is linked to the separation between the genre on which a particular photograph is modeled, on the one hand, and the look of the image itself, on the other. There is the separation between those photographs made in studios and those made outside. There is the mismatch (or separation) between objects in close physical proximity: the corn and the reflection guide, for example, that are brought together but cannot quite be reconciled to make conventional sense together in an

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image. Related to this is the separation between diverse references suggested by a single photograph: "1968" and "beauty-products" in the photographs of the woman with the yellow towel. Then, there is the separation of products from their use: a postal package shown without sender or receiver; a bicycle without a rider. Finally, there is the separation of photograph from title which produces a peculiarly baffling viewing encounter. In front of a single image, a viewer recognizes that an object is presented in absolute clarity, but its identity and the reason for its selection are initially unknown. The Rina soap bar, for instance, is in perfect focus and presented in disarmingly intense color, but there is nothing that immediately indicates why Williams chose this object for photographic scrutiny rather than any other soap bar, or anything else for that matter. The object is just there, blunt and present.[36]

Commenting on this last kind of separation, Williams has said that "traditionally photographic practice associated with leftist politics approached the muteness of the photograph as a problem. The problem was solved by using the language or the caption as a corrective to this muteness (this approach comes directly out of Brecht and Benjamin). Treating this muteness as a basic material element not as a structural flaw, I have attempted to construct meaning through the use of negative form or absence much like a dub producer."[37] Williams wants to agitate this sense of blankness before his images, deliberately aiming to generate an initial moment of confusion as to the identity and history of the pictured object. This moment of blankness, he continues, "reflects or could represent a viewer's relationship to the world outside of the pictures."[38] In other words, just as we do not at first recognize the history and identity of a particular bar of soap, model of camera, bicycle, and so on, in his photographs, we do not consider the history and identity of the things we use everyday: toothbrushes, cell phones, canned beverages, all of which have arrived in our hands after manufacture and transportation that we rarely consider.

Separating images from titles and working with the "muteness of the photograph," Williams thus represents the structure of the relationship between human

36. In passing, it is worth noting that Williams is relatively unconcerned with the two kinds of separations that are often discussed in photographic theory—the separation of an image's content from its unexpected effect on the viewer (Barthes's theory of the punctum) and the separation of image from its referent (Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum).

37. The connections to dub exceed the parallel that exists between Williams's use of separation and the space a dub producer inserts between beats and notes. Dub producers use the analog technology of recording studios to rework audio tracks, playing this technology against itself to achieve results it was never supposed to produce. This is analogous to Williams's attempt to play camera technology against photographic programs. Thanks to Simon Baker for this insight.

38. These comments underline Williams's distance from Allan Sekula, whose photographic representations of industrial society function precisely through the combination (rather than separation) of text and image. Williams's presentation of blunt, initially confusing images suggests a skepticism about the idea that photography could ever provide transparent access to the world, and a doubt that a viewing subject implicated in the world around him or her could ever occupy a neutral, privileged position from which to see and understand works critical of that world. On this second point, see Martin, "Undressing the Institutional Wound."

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beings and objects as it persists in industrial society.[39] We might have supposed that the "separations" in Williams's exhibitions functioned to stop the shows from becoming didactic and ploddingly thematic accounts of industrial society. However, now we realize that his series of separations guarantees that his work constitutes a profound representation of industrial society on a *structural* rather than just on an *iconographic* level. To recall the centrality of separation to the Cold War, we can turn to one of the key texts of the period, *The Society of the Spectacle*. For Debord, the "spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[40] This social relation is one of separation—the distancing of producer from product, of worker from fellow worker, of urban resident from neighbor, and so on. "Separation," Debord continues, "is the alpha and omega of the spectacle."[41] In Williams's "collection of images," the separation at the center of spectacular society is represented every bit as much by each individual photograph and by themes that join them, as by the spaces within them and the gaps that keep them apart.

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But crucial questions remain. To be sure, Williams's work amounts to an act of critical revelation, but does it also suggest alternatives to the situation it describes? Is this a multi-faceted representation of industrial society, showing how it *works* as well as what it comprises? Or does Williams also offer suggestions on how such conditions might be challenged? And to reprise a question posed earlier, if Williams illustrates how photography functions within industrial society as a generator of separation and spectacle, does he also allow us to think about how the photographic program might be resisted?

I believe that Williams sets in motion two processes of contestation. One of these processes involves play. Towards the end of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, having argued that photographic programs leave almost no space for human agency, Flusser held out for "experimental photographers" who "are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information, i.e., to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program. They know they are playing against the camera."[42] Williams plays various games "against the camera." He plays by creating photographs that manifest a flagrant self-reflexivity that is sometimes deadpan (photographs of camera lenses) and sometimes absurd (the photograph of the

39. Buchloh has written that it would seem "unthinkable to use photography to recognize a subject's relation to objects under the conditions of an advanced universe of reification," but I suggest that this is exactly what Williams has managed to do. See Benjamin Buchloh, "Cosmic Reification: Gabriel Orozco's Photographs," in *Gabriel Orozco* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2004), p. 76.
40. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.
41. Ibid., p. 20
42. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p. 81.

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corn); he plays by deliberately approximating photographic genres while disturbing them. He invites his viewers to play too, when, for all the seriousness of his work's content, they find themselves linking disconnected images because of absurd reasons, such as the predominance of yellow things or the recurrence of circular forms. Williams therefore works out a way of turning photographic regimes or programs against themselves, even while he reveals how they work.

The mnemonic activity of Williams's work is its second challenge to conditions of spectacle. Certain photographs in the series, such as the yellow-toweled woman beside the 1968 Kodak guide, may suggest that the memory of historical radicalism has been muted because of the ways in which photography has packaged it, but, in general, Williams's project is less pessimistic about the potentiality of memory. Williams explores the past in various ways, picturing objects bound up in particular histories and making installations which resuscitate the achievements of architects such as Pancaldi and cities such as Bologna.[43] Memory is also put to use against the present. Williams's entire representation of the Cold War in *For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle* serves as a subtle provocation to consider the connection of that era with our own. Since 2001, to what extent are we witnessing the reemergence of the conservatism and nationalism that marked those postwar years? In raising this question, Williams not only describes "industrial society," he makes its memory *work* against the politics of the present time.

I want to conclude with a passage from another recent work on the period, Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000). This is a passage that serves as a description of her working method, which closely resembles Williams's own, as it speaks not only to his notion of a photographic constellation, but to his approach to history as well:

> Although historically grounded, these constellations are not history in the traditional sense. They are concerned less with how things actually were than with how they appear in retrospect. They reshuffle the usual ordering of facts with the goal of informing present political concerns. Such constellations rescue the past, but not for nostalgic reasons. The goal is to blast holes in established interpretations of the twentieth century, liberating new lines of sight that allow for critical reappropriations of its legacy.[44]

43. It is also important to note that Williams selects for historical scrutiny many objects which historically had been associated with a release from the past. Ross comments that car consumers desired "something absolutely (and eternally) new: the object outside of history, untouched by time," in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 106. Williams photographs objects looking brand new, thus representing the very idea of newness, but situates this "newness" as part of Cold War ideology, countering this ideology, firmly returning things that once promised to stand outside history to it.
44. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Massing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 97.

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