Sarah Pickering: Incident Control
April 9-June 20, 2010

Geissler/Sann: the real estate
April 9-May 23, 2010

Additional Information for Viewers
This resource packet, which contains curatorial essays, additional information on the artists and works on view, and questions for looking and discussion, was produced as a viewer supplement to the MoCP’s current exhibitions. To schedule a free docent led exhibition tour, contact Allison Grant at agrant@colum.edu. For more information visit mocp.org.

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Sarah Pickering: Incident Control
Sarah Pickering’s photographs depict environments and events crafted for the purpose of training police officers, firefighters, and soldiers for calamities such as terrorism, civil unrest, fire, and war. By exposing the absurdity and controlled nature of these environments, Pickering reveals our predilection to deflect fear by trying to anticipate and plan for it—and our tendency to process it by turning it into narrative. Her work raises questions about the efficacy of preparedness, and reveals the psychological effort needed to combat and recover from trauma—the struggle to live with the anxiety that accompanies security.

Pickering’s photographs are documents, yet they are complicated by the fictitious, theatrical nature of the subjects she records. She not only documents the physical structure of the locations, but also the aspects that reveal their artifice as places designed to indoctrinate the men and women in training. In the fictitious rooms and cities that Pickering photographs, street signs, shop names, and furniture betray a subtle, but deliberate, positioning of the identity of the imagined occupants and perpetrators. This need to humanize the trauma, to make sense of it, might promote more empathy on the part of the police and forensic trainees, or it might distance them from events perceived as existing in the realm of the Other. This dilemma raises the question of translation, and how well all of this preparation will serve the trainees under the stress and psychological trauma of a real situation.

By revealing the slippages between reality and artifice in these environments, Pickering’s work hints at the unreliability of seemingly objective historical accounts, such as news reports and photographs that influence how traumatic events are communicated, processed, and remembered. Ultimately, her photographs address the unsettling revelation that preparedness can be futile and illuminate our struggle to cope with traumatic events that are beyond our control.

Karen Irvine
Curator

**Sarah Pickering**

**Works on View**

*Public Order (2002–05)*

Pickering’s *Public Order* photographs depict various locations used to train specialists from the British Police Service. Charged with maintaining public order, the specialist officers respond to terrorism and mayhem such as football riots, protests, and altercations involving armed suspects. The training locations are completely fabricated, large-scale backdrops that simulate urban environments. The largest of these, Denton, where Pickering shot most of these pictures, is a huge network of fake streets and cinder-block facades, with all of the hallmarks of a midsize British working-class city, including a football stadium, a nightclub, and a Tube station. Pickering’s pictures of Denton and similar training centers are straightforward, mirroring the unembellished design and pragmatic nature of the locations. The staid and cartoon-like atmosphere, in addition to the overall cleanliness, contradicts the reality of acts of public disorder or terrorism and their inherent disarray.

*Incident (2009)*

Pickering’s *Incident* pictures, like *Fire Scenes*, are shot at the Fire Service College, in facilities designed for logistical and tactical training. Everything there is a rough approximation—sparse rooms built of concrete and metal contain simple forms such as a steel framed bed, filing
cabinets, and human-shaped dummies made to withstand fire for future use. The only evidence of human presence is seen in finger and foot prints in the ash, traces of life that activate these charred, minimal spaces. Pickering takes inspiration from the grayness of the scene by pushing the contrast of her matt silver gelatin pictures to emphasize the expressive markings and their relationship to drawing. These markings, in turn, draw our attention to the surface of the photograph, heightening the slippage between positive and negative, illusion and reality.

Fire Scene (2007)
Pickering’s Fire Scene photographs document fires set in containers at the British Fire Service College that are used to train forensic teams and crime scene investigators. Outfitted as home environments, the interiors are staged as elaborate, crammed domestic spaces, heavy with social stereotyping. The spaces are typically untidy, chaotic environments that include items such as empty bottles of alcohol and worn furniture that suggest that the occupants are unruly and probably low income. Each fire has been designed according to a specific cause, such as a space heater being used to cook a meal, or a glue-sniffing escapade gone wrong. The fire investigators must decipher the origin of the blaze. Pickering photographs just as the fire catches, and there is a captivating beauty in the flames and a thrilling quality in the danger and implied rescue they represent.

Explosion (2004–present)]
Pickering made these photographs at sites where fake bombs are deployed for military personnel interested in buying pyrotechnics. Manufactured by some of the same companies that make explosives for action/adventure and war films, the bombs are built for use in military training exercises. Made to imitate artillery, napalm, and land mines, these explosions are controlled, and like toys or fireworks, are much smaller in scale than their real-world counterparts. The Explosion pictures document the literal theater of war—the detailed level of artifice used to prepare men and women for combat on the front lines. They also reveal the practice of packaging war as entertainment.

The dual purpose of the explosives—training and reenacting—forms a fitting parallel to how we cope with trauma, a process of both anticipation and reconciliation. They also bring to light how our culture has the questionable tendency to process horror by creating varnished, somewhat detached re-enactments of real events in the form of movies and television docudramas—disaster as entertainment.
When the artists Beate Geissler (German, b.1970) and Oliver Sann (German, b. 1968) moved to Chicago from Germany in early 2008, the current economic crisis was well under way. Foreclosure rates were rising, while home prices, which had begun to fall in 2006, continued to plummet. In this disheartening environment the Geissler/Sann family began to search for a place to live. They saw many homes and apartments, some of them foreclosed properties. Eventually they felt a need to react to the situation and began photographing foreclosed homes all over Chicago, ranging from houses worth a few thousand dollars to 3.5 million–dollar mansions.

Feeling somewhat displaced as new arrivals to the United States, Geissler and Sann used the project as a way to reflect on what it means to be uprooted, and to explore the link between familiarity and feeling at home. While shooting they were preoccupied by the German words heimlich (canny/homey) and unheimlich (uncanny/unhomey), which have a complicated, dialectical relationship. Heimlich can mean both familiar and friendly, but also secretive, unfamiliar, and impenetrable—as the familiar would be unfamiliar to the person outside of the home. Unheimlich means unhomey, and can also translate as “eerie,” or even “unconcealed,” in the way that something that is supposed to be kept secret can be inadvertently revealed. In 1919 Sigmund Freud wrote about the complexity of the word unheimlich, and explored the idea that the uncanny provokes feelings of anxiety and dread because it stems from what is known. It was precisely the tension between the familiarity and hominess of the houses Geissler and Sann were seeing and the unsettling feelings prompted by the homes’ emptiness and sense that they contained untold, anxiety-ridden stories that inspired the couple to record these spaces. Ultimately, their photographs illustrate how ordinary places can be at once familiar and foreign—how easily a homely environment can transmute into something threatening and strange.

The artists sequence and adjoin the framed photographs based on compositional elements formed by architectural details in the spaces depicted in order to create the sensation of seeing new, illusionary rooms that may also provoke the uncanny. By suggesting that one location runs into the next, they discourage our fixation on one place, and by extension, one story. Indeed, the story is universal, as anyone can imagine how painful it would be to lose a home, and might perhaps fear being next in line for displacement. Geissler and Sann remind us that the very idea of ownership is tenuous and elusive, and ultimately, that life is disturbingly unpredictable.

Karen Irvine, Curator
Sarah Pickering: Incident Control

Geissler/Sann: the real estate

Questions for Looking and Discussion
1. Look carefully at each artists work.
   • What do you see in the picture?
   • What can you tell about how the work was made?
   • What do you notice about how it is presented (color vs. black-and-white, framing, scale, etc.)
   • What do you think this work is about? Why?

2. We do not directly see people in the work of Sarah Pickering and Geissler/Sann.
   • What do we see in these works that suggests human presence?
   • What do we learn about the people who once inhabited these spaces based on the details revealed within the pictures?
   • What is the mood or feeling of these images? How do you feel when you look at them? What do you see in the image that contributes to that mood?

3. Within the exhibition Incident Control, Sarah Pickering presents four related but distinct bodies of work: Public Order, Fire Scene, Incident, and Explosions.
   • What do these series have in common? How do they differ?
   • What do you notice about the presentation of the images? Why do you think she choose to differ the presentation (materials used, framing, scale, etc) of each body of work?

Activities
1. Select an image by Geissler/Sann or Sarah Pickering and write the story of the photograph. Describe who might have lived in this place. What were they like? How did they live?
   • What events might have led up to the state that we see these places in today?
   • What might we notice if we could see beyond the edges of the frame?
   • What might have happened after the picture was made?

2. If you were to photograph a place that would reveal information about you--who you are, how you live, and what you value--where would you photograph?
   • Without directly photographing yourself or friends or family members, what details could you show within the scene that would teach others about you? Would you move or group things within the scene to create the picture that you want, or would you photograph the scene as is? Why?
   • Photograph that place and scene and/or describe it in writing.