

Viewer's Guide

PERIPHERAL
VIEWS STATES OF AMERICA

July 13–September 30, 2012

Featuring works by: Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin; Veronica Corzo-Duchardt; Nico Krebs & Taiyo Onorato; Liz Magic Laser; Object Orange; Martin Hyers & William Mebane; Michael Mergen; Doug Rickard; and Harry Shearer.



Martin Hyers & William Mebane from the series
Empire, 2006

As we debate our country's economic and political course in this election year, *Peripheral Views: States of America* brings together artists grappling with the difficulty of picturing the United States in our time. This guide, which contains a curatorial essay, information on the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, activities, and a list of suggested readings was created as a viewer supplement to the exhibition and may be downloaded from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources. A PDF with images for classroom use may also be found there. Free docent-led tours of this exhibition are available. For more information see mocp.org/education/viewings or contact Allison Grant at agrant@colum.edu. To learn about public programs related to this exhibition see mocp.org/events.

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PERIPHERAL VIEWS STATES OF AMERICA

As we debate our country's economic and political course in this election year, *Peripheral Views: States of America* brings together artists grappling with the difficulty of picturing America in our time. Authoritative images and grand narratives give way to malleable viewpoints, as each artist uses photography to take measure of our bearings and locate certain markers—past, present, and future—within the American Dream. By using diverse and fragmented images of America as barometers of the social climate, might we create a larger view of the state of our nation? Through focusing closely on the everyday objects, places, and images of our present and immediate past, is it possible to reveal the latent hopes and desires for an America full of opportunity buried within them?

A team of curators conceived and developed this exhibition, and likewise many of the artworks were created collaboratively. The multiplicity of creators and imagery reflects the contemporary American experience as something larger than any single person or community. While photographs have the power to influence social and political change, traditional documentary practice seems to have a limited capacity to capture the turbulent spirit of a nation amid divisive politics and economic recession. The work in this exhibition underscores the cultural and economic divides, as well as the anxieties that have come to dominate American politics, commerce, and home life. Some of the artists in *Peripheral Views* approach issues of class, race, power, and social justice indirectly—as many of us do—by using information from influential institutions like Google, television, advertising, and government. Other artists reflect a nostalgia unique to our time, where our current anxieties coexist with a longing for a past ideal. As the artists try—and sometimes fail—to bring forward a clearer understanding of the United States today, their photographs operate as synecdoche, or fragments attempting to represent the whole, while recognizing the ultimate impossibility of creating an encompassing picture of contemporary America.

—Alicia Chester, Barbara Diener, Jess Dugan,
Natasha Egan, Allison Grant, Karen Irvine, Josh Poehlein

About the Works on View

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin (South African, b. 1970, British, b. 1971)

***American Landscapes*, 2009**



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin
Guitar World, Jack Nicholson, 2009

For their series *American Landscapes*, collaborators Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin photograph in commercial photography studios where prominent celebrities and brands have shot promotional advertising campaigns and editorial portraits. Their pictures of the undulating surfaces of all-white backdrops and the seams of emptied floors appear nearly abstract. Inviting viewers to ponder the intersections of diverse fantasies and popular culture from behind the scenes, Broomberg and Chanarin question the role images play in the formation of a contemporary American identity. With their photographs, they assert that, “Just as the American West came to represent unbound possibility in the minds of early pioneers, so these studio walls act as a blank screen on which any sort of fantasy may be projected.”

Veronica Corzo-Duchardt

***Chronicle Device*, 2012** (Cuban-American, b. 1978)



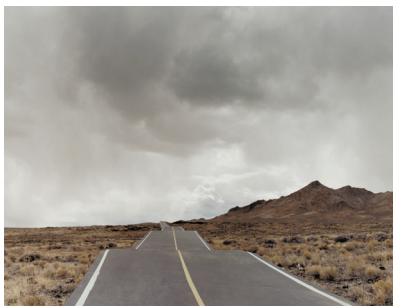
View of MoCP Installation

For this newsprint take-a-way, Veronica Corzo-Duchardt photographed obsolete technological devices that she has used over the course of her lifetime. Most of the items pictured were once widely used by the general public, and thus speak to an experience of technology both common to many contemporary Americans and specific to Corzo-Duchardt. This intersection of the personal and the collective is magnified as Corzo-Duchardt weaves her own written memories about these objects into the artwork, along with advertisements and information that date back to each device’s original release. By juxtaposing images of the old and new, the obsolete and the slightly outdated, Corzo-Duchardt investigates the impulse to collect and archive the past as a means of mitigating accelerated technological change and information consumption. The final product is presented on newsprint, referencing the newspaper as yet another form of communication that is rapidly becoming outmoded. The original offset printing plates used to produce the work are also displayed, romanticizing the analog mechanisms of a production system that is rapidly disappearing as our consumption of information becomes increasingly digitized.

Veronica Corzo-Duchardt was commissioned by the MoCP to produce this work specifically for the exhibition *Peripheral Views: States of America*.

Nico Krebs and Taiyo Onorato (Swiss, both b. 1979)

The Great Unreal, 2005-2008



Nico Krebs and Taiyo Onorato
From the series, *The Great Unreal*, 2005-2008

Swiss artists Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs travel the United States creating photographs that offer a contemporary view of a longstanding photographic tradition—the American road trip. Their pictures of unpeopled landscapes reflect the artists' highly interpreted and personal experience of place, which is at times actively shaped through their use of staging and manipulation. In several photos, pieces of Americana appear in unusual or lighthearted configurations, revealing the artists' active consideration of American cultural clichés that seem formed in equal measure by the landscape before them and their impressions of the country as foreigners. A number of the photographs have discoloration that was produced by placing filters in front of the camera as the picture was shot or by shining light through the backside of prints and then rephotographing them.

These aberrations and manipulations break with to work of preceding influential artists, most notably Robert Frank, who, as a foreigner used the photographic road trip to document America in the late 1950s without overt intervention. As Onorato and Krebs look out onto the American landscape and culture, they craft a narrative about their experience that reveals subjectivity even as it ponders and parodies cultural cliché.

Liz Magic Laser (American, b. 1981)

I Feel Your Pain, 2011

Single-Channel Video, 82 Minutes



Liz Magic Laser
I Feel Your Pain, 2011

Liz Magic Laser's video restages political interviews and press conferences from broadcast media in a live performance that mimics the progression of a romantic relationship. The actor's transformation of rhetorical language questions the significance of authenticity and originality in politics and love—two subjects that elicit genuine emotion, but are also deeply influenced by mediation. During the performance, three cinematographers filmed footage that was directly projected onto a screen at the front of the theater, with Laser acting as a real-time editor. The project's freeform structure is in part borrowed from the Russian constructivist idea of a "live newspaper," a movement from the early 20th century that sought to make viewers active participants in theater by incorporating spontaneous elements.

The School of Visual Arts Theater in Manhattan staged the original presentation as a part of the Performa 11 biennial, but the piece was also intended to exist as a stand-alone video after its original performance.

Object Orange (American, b. Undisclosed)
Auburndale Site #4, Highland Park, MI, 2006



Object Orange
Detroit, MI, Auburndale Site #4, 2006

Object Orange is comprised of five anonymous activist artists who respond to widespread blight in their home city of Detroit, Michigan, by painting the facades of abandoned houses bright orange. The group began with the aim of drawing attention to the social effects of long-term neglect in a city that is beset with financial depression and dotted with more than 11,000 abandoned buildings. Their endeavor became more actively political as the City of Detroit began to raze the painted buildings, which neighbors and community members had previously petitioned the local government to demolish, to no avail. The photographic documents are now the enduring remnants of the project, evidencing a complex negotiation of resources and power often experienced by communities in economic decline. The scale of the Detroit's collapse is particularly acute and the city can be seen as an extreme reflection of the broader housing crisis that is still unfolding in the United States. To this end, the group views the project as an open source platform for community engagement and invites others in Detroit and across the country to borrow their methods and take up their cause. The shade of house paint used by Object Orange is called "Tiggerific," which is trademarked by the Disney Corporation and available at most hardware stores. This choice of color further amplifies a contrast between the ideal American family home and the harsh realities many face during economic recession.

Martin Hyers and William Mebane (American, b. 1964, 1975)
Empire, 2006



William Mebane and Martin Hyers
8034-2006-70, 2006

In their extensive body of work *Empire*, Martin Hyers and William Mebane collaborated to create a collection of photographs taken on road trips throughout America. Their images focus on the interiors of homes and workplaces, of people from a wide range of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The objects found therein serve as poetic indicators of not only their occupants' dreams and circumstances, but also of the United States as a whole. In order to gain access to locations of interest, Hyers and Mebane explain to the property owners that they are photographically collecting objects for a time capsule. The result is a visual investigation of thirty states at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In its entirety, *Empire* encompasses 9,000 photographs made with a 4x5 camera, and a camera-mounted flash. Each edit of the work varies to describe a unique view of American life and values. Though these images are made by professional photographers with sophisticated equipment, they mimic the look every day or "vernacular" images that we all make.

Michael Mergen (American, b. 1978)
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, 2008



Michael Mergen
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, St. Petersburg, FL, 2008

Michael Mergen travels the United States photographing buildings and homes that share the White House's iconic street address, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The structures he finds across the country highlight various economic and social markers that are characteristic of American life. One of our democracy's founding principles is an equal and fair distribution of government power among all American citizens. Mergen interrogates this ideal by creating a typological study that intentionally excludes the White House, in effect isolating the president from the general populace and questioning the extent to which direct lines of communication can be drawn between the two groups. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue brings to our attention ways our leaders stand apart from us even as they represent the principals that unite us.

Doug Rickard (American, b. 1968)
A New American Picture, 2008-2009



Doug Rickard
#35, 113025, Memphis, TN, 2009

Combining the tradition of street photography with the technology of Google Street View, Doug Rickard virtually explores some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the United States. "Driving" through these neighborhoods via his computer screen, Rickard selects scenes that strike him as beautiful or interesting, and photographs them using a digital camera. Rickard's method of image-making both honors and expands the long tradition of American documentary photography, invoking the classic idea of the photographic road trip seen through modern media, while also raising issues of economics, class divisions, technology, and modern surveillance.

Harry Shearer (American, b. 1943)

***Silent Echo Chamber*, 2008**

Multi-Channel Video



Harry Shearer
The Silent Echo Chamber, 2008

Harry Shearer's *Silent Echo Chamber* presents footage of political pundits, newscasters, and other on-air personalities who are waiting to appear as guests on live television broadcasts.

Shearer tapped into satellite feeds to capture the footage, allowing us to watch professionals negotiate their postures and facial expressions as they prepare to perform live, as themselves, for a viewing audience. *Silent Echo Chamber* removes the script from broadcast news, and in doing so undermines the potency of positions these silent talking heads have come to symbolize.

At times, the videos humanize the characters, pointing to their vulnerabilities, while in other moments the figures appear distant and impenetrable. As the subjects' appearances fluctuate, Shearer reminds us that their personas are, in many ways, manufactured, throwing into question our reasons for so wholly trusting them in the first place.

Questions for Looking and Discussion and Activities

Note to Teachers: Use the questions below as you guide your group through the *Peripheral Views* exhibition or to consider artists, artworks, and questions explored in the show in your classroom. There are many more questions and activities here than could possibly be addressed in one session. Select the ones best-suited to your subject area and curriculum. It is advised to start with the simple looking protocol below to encourage students to slow down, be concrete in their interpretations, and to build up to the more complex questions that follow.

1. Look carefully at the works on view:

- What do you see or notice?
- What can you tell about how this image was made?
- What is the mood or feeling of the work? How is it expressed?
- What do you think this work is about? Why?

Also consider:

- If the work is a part of a series, how are the individual works alike? How do they differ?
- What does each individual piece contribute to the larger body of work?
- What do they contribute to the exhibition?

2. Consider the exhibition title, *Peripheral Views: States of America*

- A.** What symbols and iconography do you notice in this exhibition that represent or evoke American culture?
- B.** What issues—cultural, political, social, economic, or other—are explored in this show?
- Are there issues that multiple artists in the exhibition consider?
 - How does each individual artist approach that subject? What are similarities and differences in their approaches?
 - Taken collectively, what might the works included in this exhibition reveal about the current moment in America?
- C.** Several of the artists in this exhibition address the notion of power.
- How is power expressed, depicted, or symbolized in the works on view?
 - What is suggested about who holds or does not hold power in American culture? How is that expressed?

- D. Why do you think the curators titled this exhibition *Peripheral Views: States of America*?
- E. What works in this show seem to suggest a collective American experience? How? What works seem more personal? Why? Do any works seem to suggest both personal and collective experience? Describe.
- F. Why do you think that Doug Rickard named his series “A New American Picture?” In what ways might his work provide a “new” view or picture of America?

Activity: What would you create?

Are there issues that concern or interest you that are not represented in this show? If you were the curator of *Peripheral Views: States of America* what themes or ideas would YOU include in the show? Can you think of artists or artworks that you might include? Why?

Variation: If you were to create a work in any media that might fit in the *Peripheral Views* exhibition, what idea(s) might you explore? How might you represent that idea? Write about the work you would create or make that piece.

3. Collaboration and Authorship

There are three collaborative teams who have created works for this show (Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs; Martin Hyers and William Mebane; and Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin); one anonymous artist collective (Agent Orange); one performance artist who engages actors and her audience in the creation of her work (Liz Magic Laser); and an artist who appropriates imagery from Google Street View (Doug Rickard).

- The projects included in this exhibition incorporate multiple levels of collaboration. How are these works collaborative? Who are the collaborators? Think broadly. Who might be considered the author(s) of each work? Why?
- What questions regarding authorship are raised by the works in this exhibition?

4. Harry Shearer, Liz Magic Laser, and Performance

Compare and contrast the work of Harry Scherer and Liz Magic Laser. Note: This is best done in the context of the exhibition so that you may see these works installed and in their entirety.

- How does each artist consider aspects of performance in the political realm?
- Shearer appropriates footage of political figures and television commentators to create his work. How do these clips differ from the clips we typically see broadcast in the media? In what ways are these figures performing? In what way are they breaking character?
- Even though we don't see or hear Shearer's subjects speak, how are their politics or public persona evoked or communicated?
- How do the actors in Liz Magic Laser's video confuse or shift the language they recite away from its original intended meaning?
- Can you identify Harry Shearer and Liz Magic Laser's point of view regarding the figures they depict and reference in these works? If so, how?

5. The Object as Subject: Mebane and Hyers and Veronica Corzo-Duchardt

The works in Mebane and Hyers' and Veronica Corzo-Duchardt's projects use photographs of objects to make suggestions about the wider culture in which they are found.

- What objects do we see represented in Mebane and Hyers series, *Empire* and in Veronica Corzo-Duchardt's *Chronicled Device*?
- How are the approaches of these artists similar or different?
- What might you learn from each individual image about the people who own the things or occupy the places represented? How?
- Considered collectively, what might the photographs in each body of work suggest about contemporary American culture?
- Why do you think Mebane and Hyers named their series *Empire*?
- Do you have associations with any of the objects in these photographs? Describe.
- What do you collect? What might those objects reveal about you?

Activity: Create a Persona Based on a Photograph

Select an image in Mebane and Hyers series *Empire*. Look carefully at details within the image. What person might be represented by this image? How old might they be? Why do you think that? Where might they live? What might they do for a living or for fun? Who else do they live with? What are those relationships like? What might be visible beyond the edges of the frame? What might have happened before or after this picture was made? What might you see, hear, smell if you were in this scene? What else could we guess about these people? How?

Consider the above questions as you create a story based on the persona you have created. Include the object represented in the image you have selected as a part of your narrative.

Activity: Create a Self-Portrait Still Life

If you were to create an image of objects or a scene that represents you in the style of Mebane and Hyers *Empire* work, what would you photograph? Create that image. Rather than setting up a still life, look carefully around your surroundings and capture a still life that already exists in your environment, such as the things that happen to be sitting on your bedside table.

Look carefully at the camera's viewfinder, change your position, and play with how to best frame your image. You could also look for arrangements of objects in spaces that are not your own that might somehow represent you. What did you choose to show or capture? Why? How did you choose to show it?

Do this activity with others such as friends, or classmates. Post the images and examine them together. What do we learn from each individual photograph? What might we learn when we consider the images collectively? Together, what do they suggest about this peer group or community or about the nature of community? What might they say about the wider culture in which they are found?

6. Onorato and Krebs, Mebane and Hyers, and the American Road Trip

Onorato and Krebs' series *The Great Unreal*, and Mebane and Hyers' series *Empire* were both created in a tradition pursued by artists of many generations who have worked in a variety of media: the road trip. A few significant examples in this genre are photographer Robert Frank's 1957 monograph, *The Americans*, Beat Poet Jack Kerouac's seminal work, *On the Road*, and Ridley Scott's 1991 film, *Thelma and Louise*.

- What other works can you think of in the road trip genre?
- What subthemes, imagery, and clichés do you associate with this genre?
- How does the work of Onorato and Krebs and Mebane and Hyers connect to or differ from those traditions?
- What role does manipulation play in the work of Onorato and Krebs? Why do you think they choose to modify many of the images? How does their manipulation shift the appearance and possible meanings of the original images?

7. Broomberg and Chanarin, *American Landscapes*

- Without reading the title, look carefully at one of Broomberg and Chanarin's images:
- What do you see, notice, or think about? What are your impressions?
- Read the title and look again. Now what do you see or imagine?
- Why do you think the artists titled this series, *American Landscapes*?

Suggested Readings

Abrahamsky, Sasha. *The Other America*, *The Nation*, May 14, 2012.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, Print, 2001.

Dionne, E.J. *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent*, Bloomsberry USA Press, 2012.

Friedman, Howard. *The Measure of a Nation: How to Regain America's Competitive Edge and Boost Our Global Standing*, Prometheus Books, 2012.

Gopnick, Adam. *Decline, Fall, Rinse, Repeat: Is America Going Down?* *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2011.

Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990. Print.

Rodgers Daniel T. *The Age of Fracture*. Bellknap Press at Harvard Press, 2011.