

PRESS COVERAGE



## Public Works

April 29 — July 17, 2011

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06.07.2011

## REVIEW > HARDWORKING BEAUTY

*Public Works* at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.



HUBERT BLANZ, *X-PLANTATION*, 2008.  
HUBERT BLANZ

### **Public Works**

Museum of Contemporary Photography  
Chicago  
Through July 17

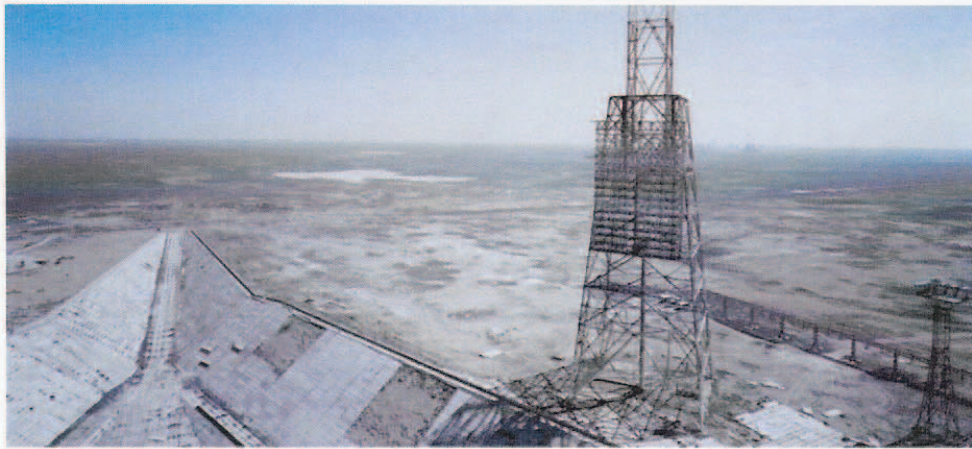
The Museum of Contemporary Photography, housed by Chicago's Columbia College, has just opened the doors of *Public Works*, a comprehensive and diverse showing of built infrastructure captured by mid-20th century to contemporary photographers. If you ever wondered what Hoover Dam Bypass looked like mid-construction, this is the place to see it in striking detail.

The show begins with extremes, kicking off with Armin Linke's photographs of vast infrastructural projects at all ends of the world. For example, the Cosmodrome in Baikonur, Kazakhstan is the first and still the largest operational space complex, leased by Kazakhstan to Russia until 2050. Though in reality the Cosmodrome is a bustling spaceport with an active launch schedule, it appears otherwise in Linke's photograph—more like a bizarre relic of a time gone by, left untouched. In stark contrast is another Linke piece, a photograph of the Grande Dixence Dam in Switzerland, the tallest gravity dam in the world. The dam creates its own stunning landscape that looks almost natural: an extremely still mountain lake has pooled behind its concrete wall, with winding trails leading up the mountain to its edge. Next, comes an image of the 2001 Maha Kumbha Mela, a massive Hindu pilgrimage that takes place only once every 144 years. In the photograph, a sea of pilgrims flood the network of temporary pontoon bridges built over the Ganges river in Allahabad especially for the event. With 60 million in attendance, the 2001 gathering was the largest in recorded history.



Linke's images set a tone for the show: that infrastructure, despite its often massive proportions, is human. The motivations behind its construction may be spiritual as much as logistical, and it can be occupied at the scale of the human body even while it creates marks as large as the landscape. The Cosmodrome is a point of exit from the earth; the pontoon bridges serve primarily a religious purpose; and the Grand Dixence hydroelectric dam impacts domestic life as much as it does the scenery.

The potentially damaging effects of infrastructure on both land and culture are also addressed. Images like Alejandro Cartegena's *Suburbia Mexicana* series depict how fast growth, with little consideration for urban planning or resource allocation, results in the drying up of rivers in the otherwise scenic landscapes of Monterrey, Mexico. With a similar documentary spirit, Sze Tsung Leong's capturing of Ciqikou in Chongqing, part of the *History Images* series, depicts the clashing of an old culture with the new infrastructure of China's rapid economic boom. In it, temples and gardens sit atop concrete platforms that look more like the interstate of your nightmares than public meeting places. While Cartegena's images are unmistakably critical, Leong seems intent only on capturing a still frame of an intense transition.



ARMIN LINKE, *COSMODROME*, 2001.

ARMIN LINKE

An unexpected favorite is Greta Pratt's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, where local Pennsylvanians reenact the famous crossing by dressing up in revolutionary garb and marching across the bridge named after the same event, rather than clambering into boats and rowing across the river's breadth. The show is full of surprises like this, picked from the repertoires of artists who may not necessarily be known for their love of infrastructure. The images chosen illustrate all the scales of its use, construction and interpretation. In the case of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a warped sense of US history is superimposed onto a bridge that's otherwise relatively unspectacular.

The only complaint is that the show is rounded out with too much of a nod to American nostalgia. As important as Lee Friedlander, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans may be to the documentation of early American infrastructure, there are too many images of this ilk included, weighting the show largely towards the early United States and undermining some of the more bizarre, contemporary pieces. Even so, among these, Berenice Abbott's *The O-Line, Pier 11, East River, 1930* is a stunning reminder that ports with passenger ships used to be as much a part of our international infrastructure as airports and their fleets of airplanes are now.

**Lisa Smith**

**Lisa Smith is a Chicago-based writer and designer.**

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## Public Works

05/03/2011



**Armin Limke** (his photograph of site workers praying at the Ghazi Barotha hydroelectric scheme in Pakistan is above) is one of more than 50 photographers represented in **Public Works**, the new exhibit at the **Museum of Contemporary Photography**. "*Public Works* examines geographically and chronologically diverse examples of built infrastructure captured through the lenses of mid-20th century to contemporary artists," says curator Natasha Egan. "Generally regarded as profoundly boring, infrastructure, we see through this work, has complex political, economic, and social dimensions." Egan gives a tour of the exhibit Wednesday, May 4 at 12:30 p.m.

# Art & Design

## Public Works at the Museum of Contemporary Photography

Berenice Abbott and other photographers celebrate infrastructure. *By Franck Mercurio*



Hubert Blanz, still from *Roadshow*, 2009.

Time Out Critic

Users (0)

### Categories

Arts + Culture, Film/video, Photography

### Keywords

Free, Stormy/cold weather

Museum of Contemporary Photography, through Jul 17.

### Good For

Experimental, Going solo, Historical, Notable talent, Students, Taking the parents, Tourists

It's difficult to make infrastructure engaging, let alone sexy, but "Public Works" curator Natasha Egan succeeds. Drawing almost all of this large exhibition from the MoCP's collection, Egan combines photos of bridges, dams, roads and other public projects with images that take viewers into more metaphorical territory. The resulting show reveals infrastructure's social and political dimensions.

Frank Breuer devotes a series to the American telephone pole. By focusing on these ubiquitous but overlooked objects, burdened with masses of wires, the German photographer generates a humorous commentary on society's ability to ignore visual pollution for the sake of convenience.

Another German artist, Hubert Blanz, uses satellite images gathered from the Internet to assemble photocollages of fantastic infrastructure projects. The layered runways and aircraft in his dizzying, beautiful *X-Plantation* (2008) evoke the Italian Futurists' early-20th-century *aeropittura*. Blanz's video installation, *Roadshow* (pictured, 2009), superimposes highway cloverleafs in an unending cycle, fulfilling the Futurists' prophecy of a modern society that continuously builds, demolishes and rebuilds again.

The narrative power and cinematic lighting of O. Winston Link's 1950s photographs give his images of the Norfolk and Western Railway's last working steam trains a nostalgic air. Egan also incorporates historical works such as Berenice Abbott's 1930s series capturing New York City and Dorothea Lange's Farm Security Administration images into the exhibition. All of them reflect the importance of infrastructure to our collective well-being: a timely topic, given our current reluctance to fund high-speed trains and the other public projects needed to carry us into the future.

May 18, 2011

# Art & Design

## Matthew Coolidge ✓ Critics' pick

**Museum of Contemporary Photography, Thu 6pm. Columbia College, 600 S Michigan Ave (at Harrison St)**  
(312) 663-5554 [mocp.org](http://mocp.org)  
Subway: Red to Harrison [Get directions](#)

The founder and director of the Los Angeles-based Center for Land Use Interpretation identifies some innovative projects affecting America's landscape and built environment in conjunction with the MoCP's "Public Works" show. A Q&A with Graham Foundation director Sarah Herda follows.

**Categories**  
Art & Design

**Keywords**  
Free, Lectures & panels,  
Stormy/cold weather

**Good For**  
Educational, Experimental,  
Going solo, High design,  
Notable talent

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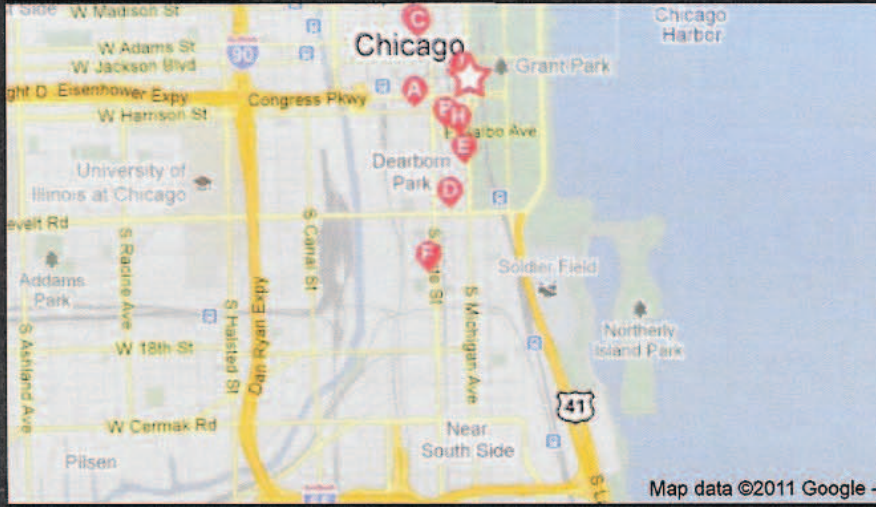
"Public Works" | Today, Tomorrow, Thu 26, Fri 27, Sat 28, Sun 29, Mon 30. Through Jul 17.

[Matthew Coolidge](#) | Thu 26

[Bruce Mau and Armin Linke](#) | Jun 7

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			<p><b>A Hackney's</b> 733 S Dearborn St between Harrison and Polk Sts</p>
			<p><b>B Canady le Chocolatier</b> 824 S Wabash Ave between 8th and 9th Sts</p>
			<p><b>C The Plymouth Restaurant</b> 327 S Plymouth Ct between Jackson Blvd and Van Buren St</p>
			<p><b>D Opera</b></p>

## Comments

There are no comments

### Also check out

**Bruce Mau and  
Armin Linke**