Feeding Lawrence/Work+Workplace

Commissioned by the Spencer Museum of Art in conjunction with the exhibition Lee Friedlander At Work.

EARL IVESSEN AND LUKE JORDAN are photographers by training but turned to digital video for the installation Feeding Lawrence/Work+Workplace to make what they call a “giant electronic sculpture.” Occupying the Spencer Museum of Art’s Central Court, their multi-channel video installation employs elaborate electronic equipment (four LCD projectors, twenty CRT monitors, four small speakers), mounted on intentionally crude supports with cords and cables in full sight.

Photography was once aligned with film (both used photo-sensitive materials on celluloid), but today, with darkroom chemistry rapidly becoming a relic of photography’s past, photography-turned-digital has more to do with video, itself now mostly digital. Everything that can be viewed on a computer gains kinship, with the result that video seems less an instrument in-law of photography and more a hip younger sibling. Compared to film, video is cheap, immediate, and, in the era of digitalization, allows for easy, computer-based editing.

In the 1980s photography with roots in lived experience fell from grace. Artists started using large-format cameras to pursue subjects that were fictional, fabricated, or intended to look that way even when taken from life. The resulting big color prints sold for enormous sums as “real” art in league with painting and sculpture and refused the label “photograph.”

Now, two decades later, the widespread use of digital cameras has reinvigorated small-format, hand-held, instantaneous photography. Like photographers of the 1970s, young artists today (photographer or not) keep cameras always at the ready, shooting constantly on the street, among friends, at parties, and sharing the resulting images freely with other photographers, through email, as cheap prints, or on laptops. This circle is made complete in Feeding Lawrence as Iverson and Jordan use full-color, multi-channel video to pay homage to Friedlander, an artist whose black-and-white photographs in Lee Friedlander At Work and elsewhere they both respect. For all three artists, Friedlander, Iverson, and Jordan, ambitious photography is a means of social commentary, with the medium inextricably linked to the message.

But when the camera pulls back or pans, or when one scene flows into another, we see how even in their isolation numerous individuals work jointly to produce results.

Work as a collective activity appears again in the artists’ working methods and presentation. Iverson elected to enlist his colleague Jordan in the project as an equal collaborator. They then enlisted some of their students to shoot additional footage, which appears on monitors in the installation. The student work serves as a counterpoint to theirs, with its own looser, quicker rhythms.

Feeding Lawrence/Work+Workplace challenges the notion that work in America has moved away from the production of things in factories to the manipulation of data and ideas in cyberspace. Its makers argue that even a service-oriented economy producing experiences—of food and drink, of news and communication—requires very real, very physical labor, be it driving the lift that wrestles mighty newprint rolls to a pressroom floor or mixing gargantuan portions of salad at a restaurant. The multiple channels of the installation suggest just how much, how constant is the work required to produce what we effortlessly consume: the bread we eat, the TV we watch, the broadband connection we use, the beer we drink. We can have all these things because, as Iverson and Jordan state, “Everyone works.”

The project makes no claim for penetrating the interior, private realm of its subjects. But even as it stays on the outside, Feeding Lawrence so reiterates the very real, very physical nature of work as to get under its subjects’ skin, and ours. We come to understand these workers, not intellectually, but through an empathetic sense of visceral bodily sensations. Watching their bodies, we come to feel ours; we leave the installation with something that exceeds commonplace expectations of visual experience and of art, having instead a renewed sense of our own body and its role in the performance of our work.

John Putz: Curator of Photography: Spencer Museum of Art
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