

Press release

## Rich Pickings. Displaying Wealth

Press preview: 16 October 2014, 11 am

Opening: 16 October 2014, 7 pm

17 October 2014 until 11 January 2015



Juergen Teller, Ed's Godmother, Stephanie Simon Hale and Artur Teller, advertisement for Phillips de Pury & Co Magnificent Jewels, London, 2005, offset print, 76 x 115 cm, © Juergen Teller, Courtesy Lehmann Maupin, New York

The exhibition “Rich Pickings” at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MKG) is devoted to the display of wealth and the self-presentation practices of the super-rich in photography and the mass media. As the gap between rich and poor widens, wealth is flaunted in increasingly excessive forms. This phenomenon has never before been the subject of a comprehensive exhibition. “Rich Pickings” brings together twenty contemporary approaches from a wide range of countries – artworks, journalistic photography, film documentaries and video works by Tina Barney, Gabriel Mascaro, Martin Parr, Julika Rudelius, Juergen Teller, Paolo Woods and others. These are joined by amateur shots from the Instagram photo-sharing portal and excerpts from the reality TV show “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills”. Thematically arranged, the various sections of the show are moreover supplemented by thirteen historical counterparts dating from before the turn of the century to 1960s photojournalism, including works by Jacques Henri Lartigue, Lisette Model, Regina Relang and Edward Steichen. Encompassing 150 objects, the exhibition approaches the topic from a sociological perspective. It looks into cultural imprints and national differences with regard to wealth, investigates the impact of globalization on the depiction of luxury. The show sheds light on the motivation and the roles of those showing their wealth and those looking at it, and reflects on changes taking place in the pictorial media.

“As far as I know, no one has ever photographed the social phenomenon of wealth”, observed Dorothea Lange – a photographer who devoted her career to the documentation of poverty – in 1964. And in comparison to poverty, wealth has indeed been much less frequent a subject of socio-documentary photography. One reason for this discrepancy is that the privileged classes escape the photographers’ searching lenses and steer pictorial production more consciously than the poor. Since the 1980s, however, well-known photographers – often from upper class circumstances themselves – have been pursuing the theme with socio-documentary interest. In addition to socio-documentary and artistic projects, the exhibition also takes a look at photojournalistic conventions and the self-presentation of young rich people in photo-sharing portals and TV formats. Reality TV shows such “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills” and the smartphone and diary photography practices that have emerged over the past years to be shared, displayed and commented on in blogs on web portals such as “Rich Kids of Instagram” are characterized by a gesture of ostentation. With the new circulation possibilities provided by the media, everyone can be the reporter of his own life circumstances; the blogger is a paparazzo in his own interest. Print media, Internet and TV present the insignia of a new ultra-rich stratum of society: golden mobile phones, a golden Kalashnikov, or a receipt for a 100,000-euro bottle of champagne. The exhibition poses questions as to the role played by photography for the staging of the self and how the photography medium calls attention to the phenomenon of wealth.

People respond ambivalently to the wealthy. On the one hand the latter are envied for their prosperity; on the other hand, hardly anything is as fun as the sight of the nouveau riche and their supposedly bad taste, which is displayed in reality TV formats they produce themselves, such as “Die Geissens”. The exhibition also examines the needs of the rich for representation, their cultural imprints and their habitus as mirrored in portraits. Photos from China, Russia and Brazil draw on colonial portrait conventions of the nineteenth century, thus addressing the impact of globalization. The spatial isolation

of the wealthy and the demonstration of power structures are put up for discussion with the aid of the “Venues of Wealth”. At these venues of power, photographers and filmmakers are called upon to invoke the authority of the camera.

## Rich and Poor

The exhibition gets underway with American photographer Jim Goldberg’s project “Rich and Poor”. In this portrait series (1977–1985) he juxtaposes the two and inquires into the status of money in society. The comments by the portrait subjects, which can be read on the photos, testify to the fact that money plays a fundamental role in where people see themselves on the social ladder and whether or not they consider their lives successful. The portraits by the Briton Bill Brandt (b. in Hamburg) serve as a historical counterpart to this series. For his 1936 book “The English at Home”, he contrasted the social hardships of the English working class with the fashionable lifestyle of the upper class. Within the framework of the exhibition, Goldberg’s and Brandt’s works are the only ones that directly juxtapose rich and poor. At the same time, they are paradigmatic of the aim of socio-documentary photographers to shed light on societal phenomena, an intention that also informs many of the other works on view.

## High Society

Balls, operas, and horse-racing are traditional occasions at which the high society gathers. Photographers point their lenses at the elaborate and expensive dresses, opulent jewellery, and boisterous parties. Their works take an ironic perspective on the beau monde that also mirrors the ambiguity of wealth. The Swiss photographer Jakob Tuggener, for example, is fascinated by the glamour of high society’s balls but also shows still lifes of rowdy pleasures that invite a socio-critical reading. The portraits taken by the American Lisette Model on the “Promenade des Anglais” in the seaside resort of Nice in France are likewise equivocal. They turn the subjects’ faces into veritable caricatures of the rich. The Briton Martin Parr and the Dutchman Otto Snoek likewise set their sights on the high society, amplifying it in the process. As if to expose its truths, they zoom in on skin, hairdos, clothing and jewellery and capture the instances in which the carefully applied make-up turns out to be a mask, and body language and facial expression become a travesty of demonstrative display.

## Global Wealth

How is wealth depicted in different countries? Is the way rich people display their prosperity in industrial nations different from that in emerging or developing ones? How are changes in earning capacity mirrored in the everyday life and the self-presentation of the general public? In countries such as Brazil, Russia and China, where processes of political and economic transformation are bringing about major changes in the distribution of income, the topic takes on particular virulence. In her project “The Europeans” begun in 1996, the American Tina Barney documents the matter-of-fact sedateness of “Old Europe’s” wealthy families. The white moneyed elite portrayed by Lamia Maria Abillama in “Ladies of Rio” in the South American metropolis surrounds itself with the insignia of this old wealth – for example the Early Netherlandish paintings and expensive antique furniture with which the sitters decorate their apartments. Paolo Woods is concerned with the effects of globalized wealth. In his work “La Chinafrique” (2007) he exposes neo-colonial tendencies. The Chinese investors he photographed in Nigeria manifest their status by emphasizing their hierarchical relationship to the Nigerian workers. From 2009 to 2013, in a work entitled “Politics of Being”, the South African photographer Muntu Vilakazi focussed on the great longing of his country’s emerging middle class for material possessions.

## The Venues of Wealth

The venues of wealth are distinguished by their exclusivity. Numerous photographers have investigated their limited accessibility and the relationship between power and architecture. The U.S.-American Jim Dow takes us into the club rooms of private circles in New York City such as Harvard Hall or the Metropolitan Club with their exquisite furniture and fabrics. Gabriel Mascaro, in his documentary “High-rise“ of 2009, interviewed nine wealthy Brazilians on their penthouses and their lives “at the top”. The American photographers Julius Shulman and Slim Aarons photograph the elegant architecture of private estates, and from 2005 to 2008 the French paparazzo Sébastien Valiela used drone cameras to gain insights into the properties of Californian stars. In “Can I?“, Giacomo Bianchetti focused on the means of access to abstract venues of money by placing his camera in front of the entrance areas to market-listed companies in Switzerland and recording conversations he conducted with the security personnel there.

## Born Rich

In its early days, photography was an expensive hobby for the well-heeled. From the beginning of the twentieth century onward, Jacques Henri Lartigue – the son of prosperous parents – photographed his friends and relatives in the pursuit of their extravagant and exclusive hobbies. Fascinated by the new speeds that could be attained, he captured tempo and motion in aviation and car-racing on film. Wealthy amateur photographers of today are content to document their lifestyle with quick cell-phone snapshots that are assembled in a Tumblr-Blog on the Internet portal “Rich Kids of Instagram“. There typical luxury items represent “demonstrative consumerism”: expensive watches, sports cars, sweeping stairways, swimming pools, champagne receipts. In both cases it is the rich people themselves who give insights into their world, in which context they assign the majority of viewers the role of voyeurs on the outside looking in. To be born rich also means to learn a certain habitus in a playful manner. In her 2009 video “Dressage“, Julika Rudelius addresses these rituals. Young girls dress in pricy brand-name fashions and skilfully apply their make-up. Then, however, the role play takes a turn and develops into a futile attempt to escape from a predetermined world.

## Prestige Objects

Paintings and other objects are another typical form of status symbol. They are found in many depictions showing rich people in their domestic surroundings, for example photos by Tina Barney or Lamia Maria Abillama. A number of contemporary artists have moreover explored the theme of art’s function as a prestige object. Louise Lawler, for example, examines what changes come about when a work is placed in a collector’s home and questions the decorative character of art. How does our way of looking at a Jackson Pollock change, for instance, when a porcelain tureen with décor in corresponding colours is placed beneath the painting? Artworks can generate cultural capital, thus elevating the buyers above the level of conventional taste and purely material consumption. The point of departure for Christian Jankowski’s work “The Finest Art on Water“ was the arrival of Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich’s super yacht in Venice for the 2011 Biennale. In cooperation with the boat-builders Riva and CRN, the artist offered two luxury yachts for sale at the 2011 Frieze Art Fair in London, thus casting typical toys of the mega-rich as sculptures. The potential buyer had to decide whether he would purchase the boat as a utilitarian object or as an artwork. The boat as artwork was the more expensive of the two options.

Contemporary artists: Lamia Maria Abillama (LB), Tina Barney (US), Giacomo Bianchetti (IT), Jim Dow (US), Francesco Giusti (IT), Jim Goldberg (US), Lauren Greenfield (US), Christian Jankowski (DE), Louise Lawler (US), Gabriel Mascaro (BR), Martin Parr (GB), Julika Rudelius (NL), Anna Skladmann (US), Otto Snoek (NL), Juergen Teller (DE), Sébastien Valiela (FR), Muntu Vilakazi (ZA), Paolo Woods (NL), selected photos by various amateurs from the blog “Rich Kids of Instagram“ (US), selected excerpts from the TV format “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills“ (US) | Historical exhibits: Slim Aarons (US), Bill Brandt (UK), Thomas Hoepker (DE), Jacques Henri Lartigue (FR), Robert Lebeck (DE), Lisette Model (US), Regina Relang (DE), Julius Shulman (US), Edward Steichen (US), Max Scheler (DE), Jakob Tuggener (CH), Emil Puls (DE), Hermann Rückwardt (DE), Weegee (US)

Cooperation partners: In cooperation with the magazine “POP. Kultur und Kritik“ a special issue will appear in September 2014. A project day will be carried out in cooperation with the Institut für Kunst und visuelle Kultur of the Universität Oldenburg.

Catalogue: A catalogue with contributions by Thomas Hecken, Ernst-Ulrich Huster, Monica Tilton, Christoph Ribbat and Esther Ruelfs is being published by Kerber Verlag, 200 pages, 24.90 EUR.

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*Opening hours: Tue – Sun 10 am – 6 pm, Thu 10 am – 9 pm*

*Admission fees: 10 € / 7 €, Thu evening from 5 pm 7 €; free to the age of 17*

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