Margin of Utility

DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL IMAGINARY

‘Democracy—this is what’s important—is a matter of educating citizens, something that does not exist at all today.’ - Cornelius Castoriadis

Urgency of an Untimely Question

The unprecedented and ubiquitous valorization of democracy in our day and age runs the risk of foreclosing any intense critical interrogation. A normative consensus has imposed itself with such force that it is extremely difficult today to talk about democracy without presupposing its intrinsic value, without accepting that it is indeed the only possible historical option, if not the “end of history” and the political endgame of humanity. We don’t have to accept Fukuyama’s demagogic and debilitating historical thesis to participate in the same political culture that produced it. Progressive lettuists have proven this again and again by playing a ‘good’ democracy against a ‘bad’ one, thereby confirming the unique option we have for thinking politics.

It is essential to remind ourselves that this political imaginary is only approximately 150 years old, and that the massive valorization of democracy occurred after the founding of the United States of America. Many of the “founding fathers” were indeed extremely skeptical of democracy, and the original documents of the country tend to refer to the U.S. as a republic instead of a democracy. However, as Thomas Paine acutely stated in one of the early defenses of democracy, “time makes more converts than reason.” And the last 150 years have converted almost everyone, especially in the wake of the supposed collapse of the socialist alternative in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Resisting Normative Blackmail

My objective here is to open space for a critical reflection on democracy. The first task that imposes itself is to resist the ideological blackmail of the current political imaginary, which tries to force us to be either for or against democracy. This is one sign among many others that democracy has become more of a value-concept, an emblem of allegiance, than an analytic notion simply used to describe a state of affairs. This normative blackmail is aimed precisely at dulling fears, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational? Although she avoids the pitfalls of depicting her subjects as victims and refuses that most liberal of sentiments, pity, she tends to avoid documenting any activities that could be conceived as political, favors the intimate portrait and often portrays acts of consumption. Furthermore, Straus often makes use of the photograph’s dramatic expressivity to aggrandize her subjects, to elevate them, making their struggle and forbearance “epic.” She routinely chooses compositions that soften the brutality of her subject matter or monumentalize her subject matter, and effectively excises from her ‘esthetic’ the cold, neutral and objectivising aspects associated with the photograph’s analytic power, stressing poetic expressivity. The desire to aesthetically elevate her character’s struggle betrays her belief in the redemptive and healing power of art. Her interest, to paraphrase John Szarkowski, is to renew the concerns motivating the critical representation that complicates its social reception. She insists that the annual installation—a photographic project, she has reopened the wound of social documentary that concerned the most demanding and exacting photographic practices in the 1970s. Social documentary, as Allan Sekula reminds us, challenges the “prevailing dogma of art’s fundamental ‘irresponsibility’” and, at the risk of “dragging in a dead cat,” forces art to confront the social reality and economic structures that conditions its production and reception. It thus provides a potent challenge to the attempt to maintain art’s autonomy with respect to politics and to the tendency to turn the photograph’s iconic power into an “anti-intellectual weapon.”

With the completion, on May 2, 2010, of Zoe Strauss’s decade-long I-95 photographic project, she has reopened the wound of social documentary that concerned the most demanding and exacting photographic practices in the 1970s. Social documentary, as Allan Sekula reminds us, challenges the “prevailing dogma of art’s fundamental ‘irresponsibility’” and, at the risk of “dragging in a dead cat,” forces art to confront the social reality and economic structures that conditions its production and reception. It thus provides a potent challenge to the attempt to maintain art’s autonomy with respect to politics and to the tendency to turn the photograph’s iconic power into an “anti-intellectual weapon.”

J-95 consists chiefly of photographs taken in Philadelphia, but in recent years Strauss has ventured further afield, including places such as Anchorage, Biloxi and Las Vegas. Her interest in the social function of the document is not merely reflected in her choice of subject matter and the place indexed by the photo, but also in her concern with the presentation of the photographic series, often favoring the format of the slide projector or site specific installation. She insists that the annual installation—photographs displayed for 3 hours on the pillars under I-95—is the work. Thus her concern is not merely with the document as such, but also with the politics of representation that complicates its social reception. On the surface, her interest in the politics of representation would seem to renew the concerns motivating the critical assault mounted by Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, for example, on the pernicious characteristics of the new documentary practices of artists such as Diane Arbus, Gary Winograd and Lee Friedlander, championed by John Szarkowski. Rosler and Sekula were concerned with how these new documentarians made use of the genre in a manner that actively stripped it of its progressive agenda. By directing “the documentary approach,” as Szarkowski puts it, “towards more personal ends,” the documentary practice, as Vito Acconci has suggested, failed to achieve the social-political to the personal-religious. Her vision of art is thus thoroughly romantic. Straus attempts to resolve the tension between the aesthetic and thus formal elevation of her subjects and their literal poverty by emphasizing the site specificity of the work’s presentation. Her insistence on I-95 being the proper place for the work’s exhibition thus tacitly acknowledges the problems associated with the romantic elevation of her subject matter. This gesture is cruelly populist, deceptively democratic and unintentionally condescending, the equivalent of selling designer brands in Wallmart. We thus see the danger of reducing photography to “irresponsibility” and, at the risk of “dragging in a dead cat,” forces art to confront the social reality and economic structures that conditions its production and reception. She insists that the annual installation—a photographic project, she has reopened the wound of social documentary that concerned the most demanding and exacting photographic practices in the 1970s. Social documentary, as Allan Sekula reminds us, challenges the “prevailing dogma of art’s fundamental ‘irresponsibility’” and, at the risk of “dragging in a dead cat,” forces art to confront the social reality and economic structures that conditions its production and reception. It thus provides a potent challenge to the attempt to maintain art’s autonomy with respect to politics and to the tendency to turn the photograph’s iconic power into an “anti-intellectual weapon.”

Furthermore, Straus often makes use of the photograph’s dramatic expressivity to aggrandize her subjects, to elevate them, making their struggle and forbearance “epic.” She routinely chooses compositions that soften the brutality of her subject matter or monumentalize her subject matter, and effectively excises from her ‘esthetic’ the cold, neutral and objectivising aspects associated with the photograph’s analytic power, stressing poetic expressivity. The desire to aesthetically elevate her character’s struggle betrays her belief in the redemptive and healing power of art. Her interest, to paraphrase John Szarkowski, is to renew the concerns motivating the critical representation that complicates its social reception. She insists that the annual installation—a photographic project, she has reopened the wound of social documentary that concerned the most demanding and exacting photographic practices in the 1970s. Social documentary, as Allan Sekula reminds us, challenges the “prevailing dogma of art’s fundamental ‘irresponsibility’” and, at the risk of “dragging in a dead cat,” forces art to confront the social reality and economic structures that conditions its production and reception. It thus provides a potent challenge to the attempt to maintain art’s autonomy with respect to politics and to the tendency to turn the photograph’s iconic power into an “anti-intellectual weapon.”

I-95