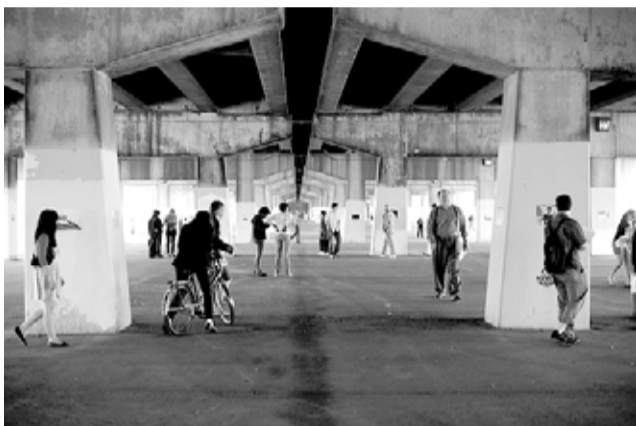


Calming the Rage of the Wounded and Defeated

All art, from the crassest mass-media production to the most esoteric art world practice, has a political existence, or, more accurately, an ideological existence.

-Martha Rosler

With the completion, on May 2, 2010, of Zoe Strauss' 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."



I-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 new documentarians no longer aimed to criticize the world in the interests of changing it, but to elevate and redeem the commonplace. By shifting the register of the documentarian from the political to the personal and self-expressive, Szarkowski restored a typically romantic conception of art, saving the pictorialist impulse and neutralizing the corrosive effects that Walker Evans' practice had, for example, for those interested in defending photography as an autonomous art.

There is no doubt much to commend in Strauss' ambitious attempt to construct an "epic narrative" (her words) that charts out a terrain between the clichéd and sentimental truisms of American life whose signs (literal and figurative) contaminate the urban landscape—e.g., the photographs "Together We Make Dreams Come True" and "If You Can Dream it You Can Do It"—and the brute reality of a country which does little to conceal its hatred of the poor, its racism and cruelty.

However close she comes to breathing new life into the *flâneur's* vocation—bearing considerable witness to Walter Benjamin's claim that "no matter what trail the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead to a crime"—her project seems deeply compromised by the kind of expressivity promoted by Szarkowski. Doesn't Szarkowski's description of the new documentarians serve equally well as a description of much of Strauss' work? Does her work not betrays "a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and the frailties of society"? Does she not "like the real world, in spite of its

terrors, 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.

Despite the fact that she sets the scene of her drama within the socio-economic desolation of the modern city, her focus is not on the rage that these conditions legitimately engender, but on the coping mechanisms of those who suffer its effects, the ways in which it is managed (hence her at times lurid interest in addicts) and the scars that are silently and resiliently endured. There is little interest in signs of agitation and rebellion but, rather, management and endurance.



Furthermore, Strauss 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 subjects, and effectively excises from her 'aesthetic' 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 and invert Jeff Wall's description of Roy Arden, is to 'calm the rage of the wounded and defeated.' She seems compelled to provide some meaning for suffering, effectively providing a religious framework for those imprisoned by the American dream. Her "epic narrative," therefore, shifts the register of social documentary from the social-political to the personal-religious. Her vision of art is thus thoroughly romantic.

Strauss 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. But this gesture is crudely populist, deceptively democratic and unintentionally condescending, the equivalent of selling designer brands in Walmart. We thus see the danger of that "courage" that Szarkowski praises, which consists in "looking at [the commonplace] with a minimum of theorizing." Populism becomes the populism of the market and politics becomes a matter of making people feel better about themselves.

-Alexi Kukuljevic

