

ARTFORUM

MARCH 2008 I N T E R N A T I O N A L

DE RIJKE/DE ROOIJ
KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN
ZOE LEONARD



\$10.00



Mirror displacements: Mark Godfrey on the art of Zoe Leonard

Artforum March 2008

WITH ONE EYE ON WALKER EVANS and the other on Eugene Atget, Zoe Leonard began in 1998 to document a passing era of material and retail culture. For her monumental archive of some four hundred photographs, cannily titled *Analogue*, 1998-2007, she took frontal photographs of small independent stores, first around her home in Brooklyn and then in other parts of New York and in Chicago. She was particularly attracted to shops with deteriorating signage, quirky window displays, and an often seemingly random array of products. Especially compelling to her were handwritten signs whose wording, frequently misspelled, announced closing sales and rock-bottom bargains. In the resulting images, there are hair salons, clothing stores, television repair shops, and butchers selling goat meat. None of the American shopwindows Leonard selected displayed massive commercial logos, and noticeably absent from her archive are large supermarket chains and dazzling bargain stores--nothing was further from her concerns than producing a spectacle of cheap shopping in the vein of Andreas Gursky's *99 Cent*, 1999. If the larger context of commerce, or of global economics more generally, figured into her work, it remained steeped in a gritty vernacular. Leonard became interested in the way in which the products she saw in these shops could unravel stories about the connections between New York and other countries--how immigrant storekeepers import products from the countries of their birth, and how used items are exported to developing countries. She traveled to Kampala, Uganda, to photograph clothes bundled in packages and hanging on racks, never indulging in the National Geographic exoticism that typifies most images of this continent's markets. In cities that are hubs of anti-American sentiment, such as Ramallah and Havana, she took pictures of the trademarks of American brands--Coca-Cola and so on--sometimes handpainted on wooden slats. *Analogue* exists both as a large installation of almost four hundred C-prints and gelatin-silver black-and-whites and as a forty-part sequenced portfolio of dye-transfer prints; the final image shows two pairs of brown shoes in a Warsaw market, off-center in the frame, crudely displayed on tatty sheets of blue plastic. Two shoes have no laces, and one has been patched up with leather that's too dark; yet further use awaits.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Exhibited at Documenta 12 last summer, *Analogue* was one of the few projects that rose above the generally negative reviews. Yet weirdly absent from the approbation was any mention of Leonard's previous appearance in Kassel. During Documenta 9 in 1992, she installed in the city's Neue Galerie nineteen close-up black-and-white photographs of vaginas between old-master paintings of (often nude) women taken from the Galerie's collection. The work still seems audacious, and all the more potent for its succinctness. With these relatively modest prints, simply affixed to the museum's papered walls, Leonard managed at once to underline the chauvinism of bourgeois eighteenth-century painting (which idealized and objectified women while shunning direct portrayal of their sex) and to substitute for these idealized figures images of women made by a woman. At the same time, the prints were assaults on more recent traditions of fine-art nude photography, from Man Ray to Irving Penn. Instead of photographing naked bodies to capture elegant curves or fascinating skin texture, Leonard shot crotches straight on, close-up, and in direct light, letting most of the rest of the subjects' bodies fall out of the frame.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The two Documenta contributions differ in radical ways: In *Analogue*, Leonard paid homage to previous photographers, while in the 1992 project, there was a strategic and critical departure from art history; the *Analogue* prints are finely crafted, whereas the vagina photographs could be said to be "de-skilled." And of

course the overtly confrontational earlier project evinces a political sensibility in more immediately discernible ways than the recent one. If the contrast between the two projects might now provoke some consideration, warranting a look at their context in Leonard's photographic practice (the central thread in a body of work that spans many mediums), their commonality becomes apparent if we place them against the still-larger framework of other, contemporaneous photographic practices. When Leonard began making and showing photos in the 1980s, many artists around her were finding new ways to approach the medium. Some (Cindy Sherman, for instance) set up elaborate scenes to be photographed, or had third parties take shots for them in studios (e.g., Christopher Williams); others appropriated existing images from ads or art history (notably, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine). Many turned to nascent digital modes of photographic production and explored new methods of display, making prints as large as grand paintings or working with supports previously associated with commerce (Jeff Wall's light boxes, for instance). In the face of these shifts, as both Documenta forays show, Leonard developed an approach that could seem exceptionally traditional, whether one focuses on how she takes pictures, the materiality of her photographs, their appearance, or their iconography. Her pictures, unlike many of those produced by the artists cited above, make no effort to avoid, disguise, or call into question the kinds of disclosures one conventionally expects from a photograph. Every image of Leonard's presents itself as a record of something she has seen and taken in interest in, indicating the physical conditions in which she set up her camera and, often, her bodily proximity to the subject. Hers are photographs that declare their status as paper objects, proudly wearing the scars won during their time in the darkroom: the stains left behind after chemical baths, the small piercings received while being hung up to dry. Pixels never appear. Some images are inky black, or exceptionally grainy, and many are out of focus, recalling the work of figures such as Robert Frank. Others are supersharp studies in the vein of Evans. In addition to her documentary images of storefronts, there are nude studies, fashion shots, pictures of trees and derelict walls, and aerial views of landscapes. None of these subjects are particularly new to the history of photography. However, for all her insistence on traditional ways of handling a camera, her almost-obsolete photographic processes, her formal affiliations with canonical twentieth-century photographers, and her choice of practically stock subjects, Leonard has made a critical contribution to the medium. Her work can always be placed in dialogue with and against established positions, and it finds its own space against orthodoxies.

Leonard's first major body of work comprised a number of aerial views (1986-90), some looking down onto cities, some across suburban landscapes. To assess these, it is helpful to consider that historically, aerial photography has been structured by two poles. On the one hand, the aerial shot can survey terrain and provide information (this goes right back to Nadar's mid-nineteenth-century photographs of Paris). On the other, it can be the most seductive of images, reducing landscape to pure pattern and reveling in the beauty of cloud formations. Leonard steers away from both positions. Certainly, she refuses aerial photography's affiliation with surveillance and control. Her photographs are grainy, the view to the ground usually partly blocked by wisps of cloud, and we see the frame of the plane's window and odd reflections off its surface. Sometimes the ground is blurry, and in one image of Paris the streets are so overexposed that the Arc de Triomphe becomes a smear of white. These images tell us about the physical situation of the photographer and about what she took pleasure in photographing. In 1989, Leonard made a photograph of a model of New York City, and the previous year, another of a map of Paris. Lit from one side, the model appears less a schematic record of an urban center than a real, eerie terrain. The map, ripped and creased, is shown not so much as a rendering of Paris but as a testament to its own use. The point seems to be this: Maps and models and aerial photographs are usually thought of as instruments that provide objective and orderly representations, but in Leonard's hands, all three become opaque and mysterious. Yet it would be inaccurate to say that the aerial shots trade in pure seductiveness, whimsy, or willful subjectivity. Leonard focuses on banal arrangements of suburban houses and expanses of railway sidings, using her lofty vantage point to record social and industrial realities.

When we think through their angles and focus, as well as their imagery, the aerial photographs can certainly be read in terms of a politics of form, and they stage a simultaneous critique of empowered and socially aloof vision. But as she made these works in late-'80s New York, they might have looked overly distanced--indeed literally so--from matters that faced the artist on the ground. Leonard became active around this time in ACT UP (attending her first meeting with David Wojnarowicz on the day he told her he was HIV-positive) and in the early '90s was a cofounder of the queer feminist collectives Fierce Pussy and Gang. Anticipating the imagery of her Documenta 9 installation, her most notable project for the latter

group was a poster designed with her friend Suzanne Wright featuring a close-up of a vagina around which ran the text READ MY LIPS / BEFORE THEY'RE SEALED / REVERSE THE SUPREME COURT'S BAN ON ABORTION INFORMATION. These posters were wheat-pasted to city walls, prompting predictable right-wing outrage while at the same time inspiring other activists with the simplicity and force of their conception and design. They signaled one way of instrumentalizing artistic labor and disseminating art outside the gallery system.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

But Leonard did not stop producing more traditionally printed and distributed photographs. During these same years, she photographed wax anatomical models in a museum in Florence, Italy, a "Beauty Callibrator" in Hollywood's now-defunct Max Factor Museum of Beauty, a chastity belt in Rome, blond wigs and makeup pencils, and women parading on fashion-show catwalks. Collectively, these photographs document the various instruments to which the female body has been subjected, in times past and present, and the violence perpetrated on women to make them satisfy patriarchal expectations of beauty. The wax models are particularly strange. One figure has flowing hair, painted lips, and even a pearl necklace; another raises her hand as if to shield her nakedness from the gaze of a nearby assailant. Yet both have their torsos splayed open to reveal lungs, intestines, and wombs. Why had their anonymous fabricators found it necessary to create such sexualized figures if they were to serve the purpose of anatomical instruction? Leonard raises such questions as she locates horrific artifacts from the barbaric histories of fashion and medicine, but, importantly, her photographs cannot be taken merely as records whose simple aim is to condemn. Indeed, she refuses the totally critical position of feminist artists of an earlier generation (say, Martha Rosler, who addressed similar issues in *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977) and begins to indulge in the gruesomeness of her subjects. She does this mostly by using bizarre, noirish camera angles and lighting--picturing one recumbent wax model as if "she" were standing up, and the other as if she were cowering in the dark. This is not to say that Leonard enjoys these subjects but that she recognizes that photography has unique facilities for creating melodrama and that melodrama, even though or because it can be disturbing, has its uses. Two photographs that she took of eighteenth-century mirrors in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1990 may seem disconnected, in terms of their subject matter, from the images of models and instruments, but they clarify how the artist approached nonactivist photography at this date. A clean mirror would function as an obvious analogue for a documentary photograph, but Leonard's mirrors are tarnished, scratchy, murky, and fail to reflect anything clearly. In the same way, her photographs of this period steer away from the transparency of documents and create an atmosphere of the macabre, the better to describe historical oppression.

It is well known that shortly after her success at Documenta 9, Leonard retreated to Alaska for about two years. There she produced another important body of work, this time comprising mainly landscapes. Again it is productive to recall historical precedents. Many photographers of the American wilderness (most famously Ansel Adams) placed their subjects in the far background of their shots, distancing the viewer from "nature" and representing it as dramatic spectacle. Others, uninterested in capturing a sense of living habitat, used extreme close-ups to reduce flora and fauna to photogenic near-abstract forms. Leonard, by contrast, took photographs within the landscape. Her Alaska images, in their intimacy, tell us that the photographer was living in the terrain rather than just visiting it, and we are given concrete proof of this in shots of butchered bear and moose carcasses--clearly hunted for use, not as trophies. Leonard's capacity to resist spec-tacularizing the landscape is also indicated by her first color photographs, stunning pictures of fruit trees. Others might have isolated the objects or made their fruit a clearer focus: Leonard shot the trees in the middle distance, against countless other trunks and branches, with long grasses in the foreground. And though she used color, she did so with complete restraint. Only after looking for some time can one see the tiny dots of bright red fruit against the blackish-brown wood.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Trees continued to fascinate Leonard following her return to New York. They figure in the photographs she made in the late 1990s, but instead of showing them surrounded by other plant life, she depicted them in their situations in the urban landscape, growing around chain-link fences and spilling over concrete paving slabs: For Leonard, wood is a slow and slouching liquid. An extraordinary set of images shows the bases of

trunks surrounded by metal cages. Presumably the cages were built to limit the trees' growth, but the wood, despite being the softer substance, has overcome the iron. Some bars are buckled, others buried under new bark: The trees have continued to grow however they can. Relinquishing the graininess that characterized her early work, Leonard placed most of her subjects in crisp focus in these photographs. The shots are as beautifully textured as classic modernist images, and the nodules and folds of bark would surely have captured the attention of Edward Weston. Yet Leonard was clearly drawn to these subjects for reasons other than their aesthetics. Recalling her chastity belts and beauty calibrators, these photographs can be read as celebrations of the unruly trees' ability to break their cages--as testaments to the power of slow resistance. Leonard's ability to produce works that are at once formally compelling and politically charged is further underlined by Wall, 2002, and Red Wall, 2001/2003. Both images show a single continuous wall in sharp focus. The brick surface of each is interrupted by a smoother cement section where a window once had been. These shots recall figures such as Aaron Siskind, who pushed architecture toward abstraction, but, as ever, while displaying her affiliations with photographic history, Leonard shows her differences. If these pictures are animated by the formal juxtaposition of brick and cement, one cannot forget that windows bricked or boarded up typically speak of a neighborhood in recession. In Leonard's photographs, textural contrasts are actually records of economic deprivation.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

In Leonard's marvelous photographic retrospective this past winter at the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland, curated by Urs Stahel, all these bodies of work were gathered together, with the exception of the poster projects and the Documenta installation (which was, however, represented in Steidl's elegant catalogue). The sequence of rooms--starting out with the aerial shots and moving on to the Alaskan images and New York trees--allowed one to trace the direction of Leonard's work over time. It was possible to chart a shift from high grain to sharp focus, and a literal movement from the distance of the elevated viewpoint to the ground shots' proximity to their subjects--the latter works testaments to everyday lived experience in rural and urban environments. Yet a kind of sidetrack to this narrative was provided by The Fae Richards Photo Archive, 1993-96, a work Leonard made with filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, displayed in a vitrine in the room with the anatomical models. This is a series of almost eighty photographs--family pictures, publicity stills, personal Polaroids--which collectively "document" the life and career of a fictitious black lesbian actress, a beautiful star of 1930s films. Leonard and Dunye made no attempt to conceal the artifice of the archive. Both in the Winterthur vitrine and in the book on the project published in 1996, credits are provided indicating the actors who played Richards, her family, and her costars. The artists did not intend to trick their viewer into believing that Richards existed. Rather, they understood that in declaring the project a total fiction they could provoke a realization of a greater truth: that so many similar actresses did exist and have been written out of history. The project is remarkable because of its tactical use of fiction to scrutinize reality (predating by around ten years some projects, by Walid Raad, Pierre Huyghe, and others, that use similar strategies to similar ends) and because of the dedication evident in each shot. Through their experience with theatrical apparatuses (costume, lighting, props, etc.) and photographic conventions (framing, focus, over- or underexposure), Dunye and Leonard together managed to fake the look of different kinds of photographic images, whether snaps, stills, or studio portraits. Equally impressive is the attention to the object quality of each photograph, all artificially aged. Some have yellowed borders; the late color pictures (supposedly taken in the late '60s) are faded and orangey; many are creased or marked with inscriptions.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

If one had thus far failed to notice the holes, the curved black borders, and the paper thickness of Leonard's photographs on the walls all around, The Fae Richards Photo Archive acted in the Winterthur show as an unmistakable reminder that the artist thinks of photographs as objects. But as it did so, the piece provoked the question of what it might have been like to see a larger exhibition including Leonard's more obviously sculptural work. Some interesting connections would have been evident: For instance, her fascination with the materiality of trees led her, in 1997, to chop one up and reconstruct it at the Wiener Secession. The resulting work, titled simply *Tree*, looked at first glance like a living organism miraculously transported into this historic white cube, but soon apparent were the plates, nuts, and bolts across various parts of the trunk and branches that revealed where the wood had been sawed and how it was reassembled. I never saw

this installation, but I imagine it as quite a mournful work: In contrast to Leonard's dedicated and periodic return to the heroic trees in their urban confines, here she had produced art that involved destroying a tree, as if to dramatize the natural cost of making objects with organic materials and of our daily abuse of environmental resources.

Tree is not Leonard's first or only work to involve the suturing of organic material. Predating it is *Strange Fruit*, 1992-97, probably Leonard's best-known sculptural installation, for which she collected (over five years) the skins and peels of just under three hundred bananas, grapefruit, oranges, and lemons. She sewed the rinds back together with sinew and string, often emphasizing process by leaving stretches of thread and still-attached needles hanging out of the husks. (In an interview from the mid-'90s, she suggested another kind of connection to photography here: Just as a photograph is a trace of an object that is no longer present, so the skins are a record of the fruit that has been consumed.) Begun after Leonard lost many friends to AIDS (and responding particularly to the death, in 1992, of Wojnarowicz), this is an extraordinarily moving work. Each act of stitching, painfully motivated by the desire to make the hollowed objects whole, can be read as a personal act of commemoration, but one that is tinged with the knowledge of its own futility. For what does it mean to repair something whose heart and substance and sweetness has gone, to mend an object that will necessarily wither and crumble? Though I sense that Leonard did not make the work with sculptural history in mind (whereas in her photography she seems to reference predecessors deliberately), the poignancy of *Strange Fruit* is also sharpened when we think of the way in which it, like her photographs, challenges historical precedents.

Strange Fruit could be seen as working in between three types of sculpture, one ancient, two more recent. While traditional monuments are built for the ages, this work, though it too is a memorial, refuses pretensions of immortality, acknowledging that memories of the dead, however deeply felt, are ephemeral rather than eternal. Unlike upright monuments, this one lies vulnerably at the viewer's feet. It thus invokes the first of the more recent sculptural models: scatter art as developed by Barry Le Va, Richard Serra, and others in the late 1960s. Leonard uses the distributional form of scatter sculpture in spreading the fruit across the floor but refuses scatter's nonreferentiality, making this arrangement a metaphor for the scattering of loss and memory. The final sculptural precedent is the organic sculpture of Dieter Roth and *arte povera*. But whereas Roth and others used foods as real substances to challenge sculptural orthodoxies, Leonard uses fruit for completely allusive purposes. Each withered peel is the remnant of something that was once ripe, precariously evoking the nourishment given by those who are now gone. The artist maximized the resonances by incorporating the memory of Billie Holiday's mournful dirge, and perhaps even allowed the song's meditation on lynching to suggest the guilt of the US government in the 1980s in failing to respond adequately to a more recent crisis: AIDS.

Different precedents--Minimalism's grids and stacks--seem much more obviously acknowledged in Leonard's next sculptures. In installations at New York's Paula Cooper Gallery in 2000 and 2003, Leonard appeared to deliberately invoke the work of Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and other artists associated with Cooper's space, using their forms while resisting their abstraction. For *Mouth open, teeth showing*, 2000, she lined up a crew of dolls in a grid, all facing forward and staring at viewers entering the space. In 1961, 2002 ongoing, 2003, she placed a row of mainly blue and gray suitcases in a straight line across the gallery. Just as Leonard unsettled Minimalist arrangements by using quirky, differently shaped (if typologically similar) objects, so too did she manage to use such arrangements to avoid the more obviously surrealist clichés of dolls and cases. The grids and lines meant that the aura of each object was not the point, and that viewers were not really caught up in imagining its previous user or the reasons it had been thrown away. Instead, the ordered arrangements suggested that the processes by which objects are deemed obsolete in a consumer society are planned out and regulated, even in the case of those objects that seem most attached to personal use and mnemonic associations.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Just as her acknowledgment of the object quality of photographs has an impact on her sculptural work, so Leonard's various sculptures can now be seen to relate in turn to her most recent body of images--not just because the sculptures use obsolete objects, but because they stage the desire to hold on to what is everywhere being lost. Considered in light of this genealogy of mourning, it becomes even clearer

(certainly, it seems clear to me) that *Analogue* is one of the major photographic projects of the past thirty years. The archive stands as beautiful testament to the small shops that seem certain to disappear from American urban centers as big business takes over, and as an elegy for and celebration of a world of retail not characterized by efficiency and branding. If it will prove a memorial to a passing era, it will also show the loss of places that themselves were mnemonic sites--for, unlike chain stores, with their universalized and ever-contemporary design, each of Leonard's shops tells tales about the past, revealing its owner's language and customs. But though charting the very loss of history, *Analogue* is never queasily nostalgic. The frontal viewpoint is rigorously repeated; images are kept to the same smallish size, grouped and sequenced with care. The self-discipline of such formal concerns prevents easy sentimentality. The repeated viewpoint is also part of another argument that the work makes: It gives us a sense of Leonard's own location before the shopwindows and lets us appreciate that these stores ground her, too: They anchor her to the world around. At the same time, the project shows the connectedness to places outside America where "obsolete" things that in the US would be consigned to landfills are reused while corporations spread their brands. In sum, the project addresses more than the specific shops, markets, and objects it documents, and can be seen as an analogue for the entire situation of low-end production and consumption today. Leonard has managed to produce an allegorical work with straight-on photography, something more astonishing when we consider that the "allegorical impulse" has usually been associated with postmodern photographic strategies of quotation, appropriation, and collage. *Analogue's* clearest connections are to other archival projects (the Bechers', for instance) whose focus has been disappearing objects and buildings, but the work should also be contextualized within the history of Pop art. Leonard's focus on small-time shop signs drives a wedge between *Analogue* and Pop's fascination with the trademark. The project also marks a rare contemporary engagement with run-down retail at a time when so many other artists (Takashi Murakami and Richard Prince, for instance) seem fixated on luxury. All of which is to say that despite the contrast drawn earlier between Leonard's first and second Documenta works, the latter embodies a continued position of urgent resistance.

Of course, like Tacita Dean's film *Kodak*, 2006, and Christopher Williams's series "For Example: Dix-Huit Lecons Sur La Societe Industrielle" (Eighteen Lessons on Industrial Society), 2003-, two other remarkable works of recent years, the main focus of *Analogue* is photography itself. Shooting with a Rolleiflex, Leonard pictures camera stores, photo labs, and painted signs in Mexico and Uganda bearing the brand name Kodak. Just like all the other small shops Leonard collected, these outfits will soon disappear, their fate the outcome of digital technology's onslaught. The digital will also finish off the analog photographic culture which now numbers Leonard as one of its last great contributors, and the artist shows her attachment to this culture not just through what she pictures but by how she photographs: The color saturation and sharpness of each image, courtesy of the Rolleiflex and the dye-transfer printing process, remind us of what is about to be lost. In the first photograph in the *Analogue* portfolio, Leonard can just barely be seen, reflected in the shopwindow as a kind of ghost. This is the nearest we get to any depiction of a figure in *Analogue*, and perhaps the artist's half-present image could be taken to suggest the approaching fate of the absent customers of such shops as well as the shops themselves. But there is another way to make sense of the reflection. Starting with this ghost, the series makes us see analog photography as an imminent specter, too, soon to haunt those who have consigned it to too early a death.