



Zoe Leonard, *Analogue*, 1998–2009, 412 C-prints and gelatin silver prints, each print 28 × 28cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Goats, Lamb, Veal, Breast: Strategies of Organisation in Zoe Leonard's *Analogue*

– Sophie Berrebi

Ironing boards come in fours, but mattresses and washing machines in threes, toeing the sidewalk and teasing the passer-by. TV sets regularly show up dumped in wheelbarrows. Chests of drawers, still wrapped in plastic, are heavily discounted, already obsolete. Shop windows flaunt spectacular compositions of washing-up liquid and Kleenex boxes, while white pumps (once-worn wedding shoes?) are a constant of market displays, like a muted running gag.

Sophie Berrebi looks at the structure of collage that informs Zoe Leonard's *Analogue* in its reflection on the history of documentary photography.

And so unfolds the world of Zoe Leonard's *Analogue* (1998–2009), a collection of over 400 photographs documenting small-scale local commerce and parallel circuits of global exchange. The significance of the project has been recognised since its first presentations at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio and at documenta 12 in 2007, yet what the series addresses, beyond the sheer breadth of the investigation, can only be recognised by exploring all of its modes of presentation. Existing concurrently as a book of colour plates, an archive installation of images and a series portfolio of individual prints, *Analogue* can be understood as a critical reflection on the history of photography and even more pointedly, on the history of documentary photography.

Leonard has traced the origins of her project to 1998, when she began to record on camera the local shops gradually disappearing from the streets of her New York neighbourhood. From there she moved to a systematic exploration of a visual language of retail that ran parallel to the world of high-street chains and logos.

Exhibited together in image sequences of varying number – most often twelve prints and above – the photographs all display a black edge that indicates the negative of the print. This acts as a frame enclosing the shop fronts and the seemingly unlimited permutations of everyday objects within their displays. The square prints are arranged in grids, allowing the eye to travel up, down and diagonally, noting recurrences and subtle visual puns. So pervasive is the format that when Leonard's camera moves from urban window display to warehouses and then to rural market stalls, the black edge continues to suggest an invisible shop window, home to an intricate and ever varying assemblage of forms, textures and colours. Individual pictures respond to one another – up, down and across – revealing uncertain combinations of words, absurd poems and illogical slogans.

GOATS
LAMB
VEAL
BREAST

A list of goods on offer in a butcher shop's window reads as arbitrarily as those ready-made poems that Louis Aragon found on the walls of cafes in the soon-to-be destroyed Passage de l'Opéra, and which he meticulously reprinted in his novel *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926). Collage, however, is not just absurd or poetical. Another French writer, Georges Perec, likened the technique of collage to the form of the grid and invested it with an exploratory potential: in his words, 'a promise and a condition of discovery'.¹ Perec's proposition invites the viewer to read *Analogue*'s grid-like collage of photographs as a research project investigating the changing forms of commercial display from 1998 to 2009 along with its local economics and (geo)politics: recessions and

¹ Georges Perec, cited by David Bellos in *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, Boston: David R. Godine, 1993, p.347.

rehabilitations, shops closing down and moving out.

Having begun with recording the changing situation of local shops in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Leonard eventually trailed off to pick up a different yet contiguous strand. In this second narrative, she followed bundles of used clothes collected in Brooklyn and sent off to other parts of the world. She observed and recorded second-hand retail in places such as Kampala, Mexico City, Warsaw and Budapest. From charity shops to market stalls, her photographs track an economy derived from gleaning akin to what Agnès Varda began to explore in her film essay *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000). In Leonard's project, that ancestral rural tradition of picking up wheat left over after the harvest, which Varda chronicled, has taken on a global and economic turn and, moving from warehouses in Brooklyn to markets in Uganda, *Analogue* follows bundles of clothes from charity to re-sale. In this strand, the project invites comparison with that great narrative of global economic circuits: Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1990–95). There, following cargo ships in different harbours and the sailors who worked on them, Sekula provided a tangible view of the globalising economy. But where *Fish Story* is driven by an interest in global capitalism and its effects on people, and is underpinned by a didactic narrative and militant tone, the story recounted in *Analogue* progresses sideways, through analogies of forms and repetition of objects, through interwoven thematic strands that occasionally come together or dissolve altogether. And while Sekula's story is truly global, Leonard's project is steeped in New York, and more specifically even in that great portal for immigration that had been the Lower East Side from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. The circularity of the journey made by these goods — sold in shops set up by immigrants from around the world and resold or donated to some of the countries where those shop owners originate from — is suggested by the juxtaposition of displays of New York shop windows and Polish or Ugandan market stalls.

Being immersed in New York and its history, Leonard's project is also infused with earlier photographic documentation of a mutable city. *Analogue* evokes those photographers from the 1930s, such as Walker Evans or Berenice Abbott in her

book *Changing New York* (1939), who, already at that time, aimed at recording a vanishing popular culture and architecture — both following in the footsteps of Eugène Atget in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Leonard, however, does not cater to the American fixation on the vernacular.

This distance may account for her absence from the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition 'Walker Evans and Company' (2001), which sought to present the artistic legacy of Evans precisely along those lines, turning him into a vivid hero and herald of North American culture. And there is nothing elegiac or fetishist in the references to earlier photographers that some critics of *Analogue* have noted. Indeed, streams of artists come to mind when leafing through Leonard's collection of images, from Ed Ruscha to Claes Oldenburg and Barbara Kruger (witness the sign reading 'TRUE DESIRES FOR BEAUTY' in the window of a beauty parlour).

Leonard's allusions to Abbott, Atget, Evans and others do not form a surplus of references but rather point to something that runs deeper throughout *Analogue*: a reflection on the photographic document, and beyond, on documentary photography and its history. This concern can be traced in Leonard's essay for the book version of *Analogue*. Written in the first person singular, 'A Continuous Signal' — a title that refers to a dictionary definition of 'analogue' reproduced in the essay — is made from a collage of quotations from writers, photographers and art historians. The text steers through the history of photography, beginning with early definitions of the medium as document and moving through to its applications. Charles Marville and Atget's work on Paris are evoked through their own words and that of their exegetes, alongside texts about the exploration of the territory of the United States through photography in the nineteenth century. Photography's role in colonialism and its use in ethnography are evoked by academics alongside writers such as Aimée Césaire and V.S. Naipaul, and are followed by reflections by modernist writers and photographers on their skill and trade. The words of Berenice Abbott and Gisèle Freund intertwine with those of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and James Baldwin in a fascinating kaleidoscope in which recognisable citations alternate with lesser-known ones. All similarly

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Medium.
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Zoe Leonard,
Analogue, 1998—
 2009, 412 C-prints
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constructed in the first-person singular, these quotations take on an oddly personal character, as if they were voice of the artist herself.

The literary form used by Leonard, with its strange mix of intimacy and distance, recalls Perec's exploration of impersonality in his novel *Un Homme qui dort* (1967), an autobiographical work paradoxically composed entirely from literary quotations. 'A Continuous Signal' is evocative in many ways of an impersonal autobiography à la Perec, above all in the way quotations provide an invitation to read and apprehend Leonard's manifold artistic production through the voices of multiple photographers and artists. But one may also read the essay as a textual analogue to the photographs in the book, in short, as *their* autobiography. The quotations propose a reflection on the definition and purpose of photography in different periods and places. More than the variety of sources as with the photographs, it is the very principle of collage that is significant here in the fragments of texts. To the idea that collage, like the grid, offered a 'promise and a condition of discovery', Perec added that collage underscored 'the will to place oneself in a lineage that takes all of past writing into account. In that way, you bring your personal library to life, you reactivate your literary reserves'.²

Such appears to be the self-assigned task of *Analogue*. As 'A Continuous Signal' integrates literally the voices of past photographers, Atget, Abbott and others from Leonard's personal library are 'brought to life', and appear to speak through Leonard in her particular choices of subject matter, editing and framing. As she takes in the history of documentary photography, she similarly takes on and interrogates the visual conventions that make up its history and have come to define the document, the documentary and the archive.

To the question of what documentary photography is today, *Analogue* answers that above all it is a genre permeated by its history, in which photographers fit into one another like Russian dolls. It is a genre

in which Walker Evans discovers Eugène Atget through Berenice Abbott and in which Abbott notes that she wanted, in what eventually became *Changing New York* (1939), to 'do in Manhattan what Atget did in Paris', equipping herself with a view camera similar to his.³ Decades later, picking up after Abbott and Evans, Leonard returns to Atget, making perceptible both a layering of references and a process of historical and cultural translation from one vision to another. The images that make up *Analogue* suggest both the nineteenth-century French idea of 'documentary', as well as its much later Anglo-American counterpart. The French notion derived from physicist François Arago's report to the Chamber of Deputies in July 1839, submitted to help fund the development of the Daguerreotype by having the French government purchase the patent. The report emphasised the purely descriptive qualities of the photographic image, putting forward the belief that photography could provide a more accurate visual descriptions of monuments than drawing. The Daguerreotype, Arago argued, provided an even scanning of surfaces that would show a greater fidelity of detail and a 'true reproduction of the local atmosphere'.⁴ This idea of faithfulness to reality reappears several decades later in the first uses of the term 'documentary' in the French language, when in 1876 it was to characterise the Orientalist paintings of Eugène Fromentin and their ethnographic exactness.⁵ Long before documentary became an actual genre, mostly photographic and cinematographic, the term documentary thus served to describe images or texts that provided information. Only much later did the term move from adjective to noun and become, thanks to film-maker and critic John Grierson, and subsequently Walker Evans and the WPA photographers in the United States in the 1930s, a genre. And documentary as genre also brought forth a set of issues about aesthetics and morality that would eventually prompt Evans, in the 1970s, to coin the ambiguous formula 'documentary style'.

² *Ibid.*

³ Berenice Abbott, cited by Bonnie Yochelson in *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p.14.

⁴ François Arago, 'Report', 3 July 1839, quoted in Alan Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980, p.17.

⁵ Paul-Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, tome 2, Paris: Le club français du livre, 1957, p.1789.



While Leonard's work has been produced and circulated mainly within an art context rather than a documentary or photographic one, an ongoing reflection on the document and the documentary can be seen in many of her projects, such as the *Tree + Fence* (1998–99) series of photographs of trees growing around fences. More specifically, however, the very diversity of her photographic practice as a whole – from the aerial views she produced in the late 1980s to the *Bubble-gum* pictures of 2000 to 2003, or from her recording of street graffiti (1994–97) to the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993–96) – shows a consistent investigation of different forms of the photographic document.

Reading *Analogue* from this perspective, the title of Leonard's project may refer primarily to photography as a descriptive tool, one that provides a visual equivalent to the world around it. The display of *Analogue's* photographs shows the world mapped out and reconfigured into a series of visual signs on shop fronts, reduced to a similar format and arranged in a way that emphasises formal analogies and disruptions. Indeed, the systematised frontal shots and close-up views in sections of *Analogue* stress the images' flatness, and suggest an exhaustive scanning of the city for the purpose of a purely descriptive process.

Moving outside of the Manhattan grid and on to different geographies, the frame becomes looser, the viewpoint less frontal. The camera reveals here a little space around a market stall and points downwards towards the floor to record a disparate collection of objects scattered across an old blanket. In these surroundings, unfamiliar to the artist, the camera seems to search for a position, to hesitate between what would be a more informative shot, both contextual and focused on its object, and a more systematic frontal view reminiscent of the New York images.

The awareness of photographic conventions is also built into the three modes of existence of *Analogue*, as a photography book, an archive installation and forty individual dye-transfer prints. While this division might result from practical concerns, it also corresponds to historically significant modes of preservation and circulation of photography. The archive refers to the collecting of photographic documents for investigative and recording purposes that originated in the nineteenth century. The photography book is the format that enabled the widest distribution of documentary photography, as opposed, for instance, to reportage or studio portraiture in the twentieth century. The exhibition print, finally, points to the presentation

Zoe Leonard,
Analogue,
1998–2009, detail.
Installation view,
Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina
Sofía, Madrid.
Courtesy the artist

of photography as art in the museum space, and refers to the enlargement of photographs to accommodate the posture of the standing viewer and the scale of the museum wall – an argument put forward by Hilla Becher to explain the different sizes of the prints she made with Bernd Becher, where the size of the images doubled from grid assemblages to single pictures on the wall. By contrast, the dimensions of Leonard's images are

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relatively similar in each mode of presentation, suggesting that although *Analogue* reflects on the different purposes of photography, it ultimately locates itself beyond these different uses and concentrates instead on modes of circulation and distribution.

Testifying to this is the way in which *Analogue* reflects competing and concurrent ideas of the archive, from conventions of the nineteenth-century French *fond d'archive* to those of the contemporary database. The narrative that emerges through the dates given for each photograph and the temporally homogeneous sequences recalls the *fond d'archive's* classification by provenance and in order of collection of documents. But this organisation, which historically was believed to yield the most coherent information, is supplanted in other thematic series in *Analogue* that result from permutations and rearrangements of documents culled from various sources and over different periods of time. These later series open up wider potential readings and their instability – as opposed to the strategies of the stable *fond d'archive* – is reminiscent of the principle of the database, in which categories can be called upon for particular requests, creating ever-changeable orderings of documents. The integration of divergent forms of the

archive echoes the coexisting strands of a project that explores not only the historical and geographical mutations of capitalism but also a multitude of local and global micro-histories identified by collections of shop signs, advertising posters, US flags and hand-painted logos. In this, *Analogue* epitomises the changing idea of the archive from a closed body of information for select users to an open one, an archive whose existence is defined by and dependant upon its public visibility, as epitomised by the extensive presentations of the project in Kassel, Madrid and elsewhere. Out of this dialogue with photographic conventions, histories and definitions of the archive, Leonard emerges with a project that exceeds its documentary function. As she constructs *Analogue* as an art project, Leonard relinquishes any particular purpose other than to question, deconstruct and expose the ambiguities of the archive and its documents.