

Interview with Zoe Strauss, photographer in the Whitney Biennial 2006: Day for Night

Clare Hurley
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Photographer Zoe Strauss was one of over a hundred artists selected to be in the *Whitney Biennial 2006: Day for Night*, the major exhibition of American art work. Her straightforward photographs of the largely poor, working class area of South Philadelphia where she lives and works, were striking in the context.

Much of the artwork in this year's Biennial was hailed as being more directly political than in previous years; however, few works other than Strauss's actually portrayed life as it is experienced by a majority of Americans in the present period, a period characterized by the illegal and widely opposed war in Iraq and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Together with the attacks of September 11, these events have had a profound effect on the lives of millions, but the experience finds little honest or insightful expression in the official outlets of the media. Artists have also been strongly affected, as Strauss describes, and this is beginning to surface in their creative work.

Strauss began taking photographs for her "Under I-95" project in 2000 and received a Pew grant in 2005. The project was conceived not just as the taking of photographs, but includes a yearly exhibition of more than a hundred of them on the support columns of I-95, the elevated highway that cuts through South Philadelphia. The vast space is accessible on all sides to the surrounding neighborhood, and the photographs are available for \$5. The project is meant to continue over the course of 10 years, with the body of photographs refined and added to annually. The photographs in the *Whitney Biennial 2006* are selections from this body of work.

Strauss recently spoke with WSWs correspondent Clare Hurley.

Clare Hurley: What has been the response to your appearance in the Whitney Biennial?

Zoe Strauss: I have had a great response from the people who have seen it, and a fairly strong critical response as well, which is very interesting to me because people generally hate the Biennial and like to go at every single thing, so it's been really shockingly well received.

CH: The greater political and specifically antiwar nature of the artwork in this year's Biennial has been noticeable and remarked upon. Was this something you encountered among the artists, something that you shared and do you think there has been a change in the political situation to account for this?

ZS: Yes, to all of those. It is evident in a great deal of the work, and especially in the curation of the show, the way it's laid out and with the artists I've spoken with. We are living in very dangerous and difficult times and there is no avoidance of what is happening with the Bush administration. I'm happy there is so much explicit political work in this Biennial, and that they thought it was fit to actually

include work that was much more direct.

CH: Do you think this was work that artists had been doing, and had just not been acknowledged by the art world, or do you think that artists themselves have changed what they are doing?

ZS: I think it is both, actually. Chrissie [Iles, one of the Biennial's curators] said that part of their decision as to what was included was just a survey of what they kept seeing when they were searching for artists. I think there has to be a shift in one's own feelings because of what is happening now. Again, it's unavoidable. Some of the artists were included on the basis of past work, and this is new work for them. There are a hundred different artists in the Biennial, and a lot of different trends, but it has come to a critical point in the United States, which is really infiltrating art as well as everyday life. So if you are making work, you have to address it. I can't see that you'd be living in the world and not include it in your work somehow.

CH: How did you come to take the kind of photographs that you take?

ZS: I thought of the "Under I-95" project and then I started to take the photographs for it, and it was really just things that were close to me, literally geographically, things that were in my life, my neighborhood and places that I know in Philadelphia, and that's the genesis of it. Even though it's expanded to include different places that I traveled to, it all comes back to that initial project, to things I know and feel.

CH: Who are other artists who have influenced you?

ZS: I would say the most important is Anselm Kiefer. And that's for a number of reasons, but one being the structure of his paintings, the layering of ideas in his paintings. He had a very direct influence on my work. I like a lot of the WPA [Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program] photographers, though I am more interested in the history of photography at that time, rather than any specific work. And also 1970s feminist art, which has influenced me in terms of ideas, not necessarily production.

CH: Which particular artists?

ZS: Nancy Spero, and I would say Walker Evans. Together with Anselm Kiefer.

CH: Your work has also been compared to Diane Arbus. Do you think this is accurate?

ZS: No, I don't, not at all. I'm a great admirer of Diane Arbus, and I think her work is beautiful, and can often be transcendent, but I can't even begin to understand where the comparison comes from. Maybe because they are portraits of people, and that they involve intimate things? Or that these aren't people the way they are presented on television? There's always a kind of voyeurism in photography—it's unavoidable, but I would hope that I would present

these people with a great affection and as part of an interaction I've had with them. Not in a moment of grotesqueness, which is also possible, but that's not how I see any of them. And I would hope that most others would also see it like that.

CH: One of the photographs that I was most struck by was of one of the New Year's mummers, a close-up of just a white mask and the person's eyes. There is something very off-putting about this white, hard, scuffed up looking mask, and then there are these eyes that are just warm, and human. For me that summed up a lot of what your work is about. There are these externals that are alienating or artificially imposed on us, and then looking beyond that.

ZS: Yes, that is one of the most important photos, it would have to be in the "gender" section.

CH: How would you say the events of the past five years, from September 11 to the war in Iraq, impacted your work?

ZS: I think a big part of my work is being actively engaged in the world and thinking about things and so of course all of these things have had the biggest impact on my work in terms of how people relate to what is happening in the world, to these events.

CH: But in much of the work I have seen post 9/11, the reaction to these events is generally one of confusion, or despair, or both. That doesn't seem to be happening in your work.

ZS: No, I don't think it is. Not that they aren't a part of it. Or that it's an avoidance of either one because they are certainly in the mix, but I feel that my work is more about the day-to-day getting by of people in relation to these things that are happening outside of one's life. There's more hope and perseverance, just because it is not an option to *not* have it. There is not a whole lot of luxury for endless despair, because you have to keep going, despite these horrific things that are happening.

CH: I think that comes through, that you are photographing people that don't have a whole lot of luxury for any number of things. [Woman with television set on table]

ZS: It can be kind of short sighted, but you have to just do it, you have to get through it.

CH: But in your pictures the larger situation is often reflected in that ironic statement that you find in our environment. The Marine billboard poster, for instance, looming over a poor man walking by.

ZS: Can you believe that? Your options are so limited as it is, in terms of everything, and then here's what you're presented with, these slogans.

CH: Basically "Try Prayer" or "Join the Army." [*"Troubled? Try Prayer!" billboard*]

ZS: That's about it. And it's sad, but people buy into it because your other option is so difficult. What it would mean to really examine what is happening, and then the commitment to doing that means invalidating a lot of things that you hold dear in your life. And that's really hard for people.

CH: What made you decide to travel to Biloxi, Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina?

ZS: Well, the hurricane happened, it was totally predictable, and then you saw the biggest national disgrace in my lifetime, the worst-case scenario in every sense. There were hundreds and hundreds of miles that had been decimated. I wish this didn't have to happen for people to see the devastating times in which we are living with the Bush administration. It was just unbelievable. Thousands of people died, millions of people were displaced, and are going to suffer the impact forever. They are told, you are going to have to move and get a whole new life, and for most people that is just not an option. Once

you are done with your FEMA trailer, then what? Your family's gone, your whole community's gone, and there's no industry. And you're told, "Sorry."

CH: What role do you think photography, and art in general, plays in social change?

ZS: I think an important role of art is to mirror what is happening in the world. Sometimes looking through the lens of somebody else's concept will allow you to see things in a different light and that will sometimes cause social change. Like the example of the Marines billboard. Although it's not the only thing going on in that picture, ideally it will allow you to see the way the war is being sold to Americans and who it is being sold to. With art in all aspects, there are different levels that mirror how things are, and that are intended to make you think. One's greatest hope is that thinking will cause social change, and allow the world to move into a place that is not as horrific as it is right now.

CH: Why do you sell your photographs for \$5?

ZS: Because that's an affordable price. That's something I could afford, and a price that often the people in my neighborhood could afford, and one that would allow my work to be accessible to most people who come to the show. That's a big part of the project, allowing the art to also be out in the community. That's how it should be; you should just be able to buy it. What's the big deal? Photography is a reproductive medium. It can be reproduced and sold for \$5.

CH: One last thing. After I left your under I-95 show and had spent the day in South Philadelphia, on my way back I went through the wealthy area around Rittenhouse Square. Even though it is a very obvious realization on one level, I wondered, how can one make sense of the one world, the world in your photographs without the other? On the one hand you see this environment that is degraded in every sense—physically, aesthetically—and then on the other there are stretch limousines, fancy weddings, and lush gardens. There's a connection between the two that people don't always make. Can it be brought out in artistic work without being heavy-handed and polemical?

ZS: I think that's the hardest thing, when it is too heavy-handed it is not absorbed. It's not something that is mulled through, and that's the key part—thinking about the image past the initial seeing of it. That is often my problem with political art. I need something that is more complex and challenging. Political work is really important, it's imperative because you have to be able to talk about stuff. But I don't necessarily know if it's the kind of work that resonates over time. And that's what I'm thinking about.

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