

High Brow Low Brow Photography; Candida Hofer and Zoë Strauss at the ICA

The current photography exhibits at the ICA in Philadelphia explore the gamut of photographic practice and subject matter. German artist Candida Hofer photographs monumental interiors of cultural spaces (primarily in Europe). The large format color photographs are carefully composed and lit, with attention to perspective. Zoë Strauss' work is the antithesis of Hofer's. As a Philadelphia street photographer, Strauss shoots whatever captures her eye. While Hofer's photographs lack any human presence, Strauss' exude humanity. Strauss presents her work in slide show format; refuting photographs as precious objects. Although disparate in technique, training, subject matter and presentation, Candida Hofer's and Zoë Strauss' work examines the manifestation of desire in both high and low culture.

Aptly titled, *Architecture of Absence*, Candida Hofer presents 38 large-scale color prints, spanning thirty years of work. Focusing on cultural institutions such as libraries, universities, palaces, theaters and museums, Hofer's photographs expose the ornate opulence found in these spaces venerating high culture. Presented as a group, the images generate a rhythmic accord of geometry and design. The architecture juxtaposes ancient and modern styles. The spaces serve to house artifacts celebrating human civilization at its most refined. Pristinely austere, the photographs lack emotion. Hofer presents a distanced, disengaged viewpoint. The viewer is on the outside looking in. It is this distance, which reveals the sociological implications of the images. Devoid of human presence, I wonder who inhabits these lush spaces? Who has access? These questions disclose issues of class and imperialism. The interiors represent sites of desire; desire for wealth, status and privilege.

Hofer does not describe her own work in these terms. She stresses that her primary concern is formal aesthetics and not social critique. Hofer states that she seeks spaces that are free and open with a dominant organizing logic.¹ The precision

with which Hofer executes the formal elements in her photographs including attention to light, color, perspective and design only reinforces the inherent cultural elitism present in the images.

On the other end of the photography spectrum is Zoë Strauss, whose mission is to create art that's accessible and affordable to all in the community. Currently in year six of a ten year project entitled the Philadelphia Public Art Project, self-taught photographer Strauss documents the people and neighborhoods of Philadelphia. As the only Philadelphia artist in this year's Whitney Biennial, Strauss primarily showcases her work in non-museum settings. For the past five years, on the first Saturday in May, she has exhibited hundreds of her images under the ramp of I-95 in south Philly. Each unmatted, unframed photograph sells for \$5.

What happens to accessibility when Strauss brings her work inside the museum context? The ramp proves to be a perfect site for Strauss' intervention. Transient, it represents the journey, not the destination—connecting one place to another. The journey is important to Strauss. Her work results from daily forays into the streets, capturing irony, poignancy and joy in the people, urban landscapes and cultural signs of our everyday lives. The ICA installation includes a slide show, printed images mounted on plywood along the ramp wall and a large image of a girl smoking a crack pipe printed on translucent fabric hanging in the window. Viewers can see the image (and through the image) from the inside or outside, hence solving the problem of accessibility.

Whereas Hofer's photographs create a distance between the viewer and subject, Strauss' images confront the viewer. In her portrait work, the subjects stare directly at the camera. Strauss does not venerate or romanticize her subjects. She states that her work represents the beauty and struggle of everyday life.² The urban landscapes show evidence and artifacts of culture and humanity in decay. A theme of erasure is present in the

photographs of graffiti-covered storefronts, boarded up buildings and empty garbage-strewn lots. Desire stems from the broken promises of consumer culture—from an internally illuminated storefront sign proclaiming “Everything” with missing letters, to the ironic juxtaposition of a Marine recruitment ad promising “Change is Forever” suspended above a man walking with a crutch.

Through their disparate approaches, both artists seek to record culture. Candida Hofer’s photographs record culture through examining patterns of order, logic and design. Zoë Strauss’ photographs record culture through the discovery of disorder, illogic and unplanned moments. While Hofer’s

images pledge an unattainable desire, Strauss’ images reveal the dark side of desire, illicit and messy in their humanity.

Previously on exhibit at the ICA in Philadelphia through July 30, 2006, www.icaphila.org

(Endnotes)

1 Bader, Graham, *Candida Hofer*, Artforum 44, no. 7, March 2006: 287-288.

2 Gonzales, Elyse, *Ramp Project—Zoë Strauss Gallery Notes*, ICA



Detail I-95 (Daddy Tattoo)
Philadelphia, PA 2004,
Courtesy of the Philadelphia
Public Art Project
(original in color)



Palacio Real Madrid I 2000, 2000.
C-print, 60 by 60 inches (152 by
152 cm). © 2004 Candida Höfer /
Artists Rights Society (ARS).
(original in color)

Lonnie Graham—Conversations at the Table

Pennsylvania Artist of the Year Lonnie Graham Speaks to Fotophile Writer Colette Copeland About His Recent Collaborative Work on Exhibit at the Fabric Workshop

CC: "Conversations at the Table" is such an ambitious, multi-dimensional project. What was your inspiration for the project?

LG: "Conversations at the Table" is a continuation of a previous project called "Conversations with the World". This work had to do with how I locate myself in various regions of creation and within immediate proximity to certain individuals. Each individual responded to 8 questions. I transcribed their reactions and put them next to a portrait that I rendered of them on the spot. That goes back to a kind of basic access that I find is necessary in the arts these days, which addresses the larger issues of humanity and commonality that I try to address in my work and have been after for decades.

CC: What do you mean by access in the arts?

LG: Inclusion. When the Fabric Workshop asked me to do an exhibit, it seemed like a good place to do something that was inclusive on a larger scale. Most of the projects at the Fabric Workshop are very ambitious, but focus on one individual's work. I was interested in creating a work that went outward and involved many people and organizations.

CC: Working with 50 different artists and arts organizations sounds daunting. What was your role in the collaborative process and how did you select the organizations and artists?

LG: The first people I invited were Kimberly Camp, who is an artist and very good friend of mine, and Clarissa Sligh, an artist that I had collaborated with on a number of other projects. I was thinking of a project about humanity, as it exists in its universal and common attributes; the basic human elements of the mind, body and spirit. Clarissa was interested in addressing issues related to the mind and Kimberly suggested working with the spirit. That left me with the body. Within each of those elements, the artists began to collaborate with other artists and organizations. My overall interest resided in

projects, which would help or benefit the community. Clarissa started to work with a number of artists from the community on the mind project. Exploring issues surrounding the spirit, Kimberly was interested in working with the Clay Studio to build clay vessels, which were metaphoric remnants of our spiritual self. Amy Sarnier Williams (Director of the Clay Studio) was enormously generous in allowing the artists full access to all of their resources.

I started to work with the Asian Arts Initiative, Taller Puertorriqueno, and Arts Sanctuary on issues relative to the body. Gustavo Boada from Taller was incredible. Within the first 10 minutes, he completely understood the whole concept and had come up with an idea for an improvisational performance for opening night. Four weeks later, the artists came back to rehearse a few times and that was it. It was the same process with the Arts Sanctuary. I spoke with Lorene Cary, we decided on the choir. Criseeda Seals gave a beautiful a cappella performance with the "Expressions of Love" choir, who passed out seed bowls containing a wish or heirloom seeds meant to be planted and shared.

I worked with Rodney Camarce and Rana Sindhikara at the Asian Arts Initiative. One of the Asian Arts Initiatives involves young people. They were interested in producing something tangible about ancestors. They wrote down all the names of people who they wanted blessings or prayers bestowed upon. I had the names embroidered upon a cloth, which covers the large table in the exhibition.

Another body project is called "Secret Family Recipes". The young artists collected family recipes from around the community, which were put on signs and posted around the community. Then napkins were printed with maps to locate the signs. The recipes were written in Tagalog, Indonesian, Chinese and English, which ironically meant that they remained secret to many people.

Always the artists and organizations were thinking about how they might help someone else. There's the inclusion.

As individuals learned about the project, they contacted me about participating. For example, Sophie Sanders originally wanted to do a dance. I asked how that would help someone. After a half hour conversation, she threw that idea out the window and came up with a different idea, where she video-taped interviews with people about the first person they had ever loved. I thought the idea was touching, poignant and provocative. The project resonated with Andrea Poulsen's project "First Memories". (The project provides viewers with a place to record their first life memories)

Robert Martin and Tara Tallman did a piece called "Respond in Kind", where they gave patrons stamped postcards, allowing them to send an acknowledgement of appreciation to someone important in their lives. Mary Graham (Lonnie's daughter) did a piece called "Political Fruit" with a St. John's Hospice, a homeless shelter down the street. She wrapped beautiful silk-screened scarves around fruit and distributed them among the homeless people with the suggestion that they keep the scarves to keep warm.

All of these issues of food, housing, clothing, education, enlightenment, the mind, body and spirit came together opening night at the Fabric Workshop.

CC: Traditionally, an artist creates an art object, which if successful facilitates a dialogue with the viewer. Your project ruptures this traditional paradigm. Many of the works in the exhibition document an intervention or act as evidence of a collaborative performance. How does this affect the viewer's experience with the exhibition?

LG: After opening night, what remains is the evidence of these ephemeral activities, which are occurring or have occurred. It's a peculiar installation. There's not much to see. It's so much less about the ego and so much more about the evidence—what remains in the gesture that occurs when people attempt to give of themselves and share. In a way, I'm sad to go there. Normally the Fabric Workshop is filled with interesting and stimulating artwork. In this case, it's not. But what has happened (I hope) is another kind of gift and sharing that has taken place as we found artists and creative people working selflessly towards a particular end—sharing and enrichment of the community.

CC: How has your previous work influenced this project?

LG: In the early 90's, I was invited by the Fabric Workshop to do an exhibit. My friend Carrie Mae Weems suggested we do an exhibit together. I was a photographer and wasn't clear how photography fit within the Workshop's mission or how I would do a piece that would work. The gracious generosity of the staff helped me complete my first installation, which was basically to move everything out of my house and into the museum. The gesture was meant to elevate my experience as a metaphor for everyone's experience—the commonality between people. When visitors came into the museum and saw a couch, a TV and a radio, they could relate. The work validated the fact that the whole life experience is valuable enough to be isolated, seen and presented in this type of venue. I wanted to present something that was accessible to the community at large. This work was about the spirit.

A few years later, I was invited to do a piece about the body, which involved creating community gardens. All the work I did through the course of the 1990's built the foundation for this piece.

CC: What major obstacles did you encounter during the project?

LG: Ego.

CC: Individual artist ego or institutional ego?

LG: Mine—trying to suppress the desire and need to control. The lesson I learned was to trust my own instincts—not to second-guess myself. I believe that people need to have a voice. I believe that artists are the creative conscious of society. We have this burden of creativity and we have to use it in a constructive way and not duck out of our responsibilities.

CC: Please speak about the critical role of community and its relationship to the arts in your work specifically and on a more universal level.

LG: In 1976, I went out into the world to see what other artists were doing. Until the late 80's, I was hard-pressed to find traces of Western artistic practice in other parts of the world. Through my conversations with people I met in the Philippines, Japan, East and West Africa, I realized that traditional art in its essential and truest form has always existed and still exists in the methods which artists and artisans for example create a sculpture to venerate a deity or create a vessel to feed themselves or cloth to clothe themselves. Artists have been solving basic problems of humanity in ingenious and creative ways. The community validates their

contributions. The artists are wholly integrated, accepted and revered into the community, contributing to their culture in a constructive way. They are not individualists isolated in their studios creating 1 piece of idealism.

As a guy working in the US, I'm trying to figure out a way to transpose those ancient, traditional ideas into modern culture in a tangible way. That's the community I'm addressing.

CC: Many of the projects take place outside of the museum setting. What has been the response to the work from the community at large?

LG: When one person does something nice for someone else with dignity and respect, that's not a bad thing. You make a sacrifice and approach someone with generosity and honor. You engage someone thoughtfully with a gift—what you've got is reciprocity. It's not about benevolence. The way you achieve success in this communication is through engaging the other person with dignity—acknowledgement of their existence as a human being.

CC: I think the key word is reciprocity.

LG: Without reciprocity, it doesn't work. The person has to be a part of the process.

CC: Congratulations on winning the Pennsylvania Artist of the Year Award. How has this changed your life and/or artistic practice?

LG: To be singled out for your achievements is a great honor. To have someone say, "Great job" and that someone is the Governor is not bad. Because you feel like you are functioning in obscurity, fighting and scrambling to get money to do a

project. My family jokes that the Graham Family Foundation is funding another project. To be recognized makes the hard days easier to get through.

CC: How do you balance teaching with artistic practice and family life?

LG: My family is very generous and forgiving. The rest of it is logistics. Sometimes I don't sleep—trying to get everything done that needs to get done in the course of the day.

CC: What's next for you??

LG: Dr. Deborah Willis invited me to participate in a project in New Orleans entitled, "Engulfed by Katrina". I went and talked to people and took some pictures. It was heartbreaking. It's sinful...sinful the way the administration has neglected the people. Nothing has been done in nearly a year.

As intelligent, civilized individuals, we are supposed to be able to make informed and determined choices to advance culture, and it's not being done there.

On the last day, a minute before we left, with the car motor running (late for the airport), I took a portrait of a man named James and handed it to him. He looked at it and asked me if I knew what he was going to do with the photograph. He said, "I'm going to put a date on it, buy a book for it and put it in the book. This will be the first memory after the disaster, since all the rest of my memories were washed away. You are helping us rebuild our memories." So that's how I found out what I was doing in New Orleans.

Lonnie Graham and Colette Copeland had this conversation at her table in Media, PA on May 23, 2006.

Colette Copeland is an internationally established artist who teaches art writing and visual studies at the University of Pennsylvania and contemporary issues in photography at University of the Arts in Pennsylvania.



Conversations at the Table, installation Detail

Lonnie Graham



Conversations at the Table, Meditation room

Lonnie Graham