





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

Previous spread:
Zoe Leonard,
Analogue,
1998—2009,
detail

The Archivist of Urban Waste: Zoe Leonard, Photographer as Rag-Picker

– Tom McDonough

Analogue (1998–2009), Zoe Leonard's decade-long survey of the landscape of small-scale commerce and urban services in New York and other cities around the globe, began with the simple choice to photograph the streets around her apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As she recently recalled: 'I began this project in an attempt to understand by observing and recording the very humble everyday surroundings of my everyday life.'¹ What would grow into an archive of more than 400 images, displayed in serial grids organised in loosely thematic

In this close reading of Zoe Leonard's *Analogue*, Tom McDonough considers its mapping of reclamation and exchange as a model for artistic practice.

groupings, originated with this impulse to document the changing texture of her traditionally working-class and ethnically diverse district as it was being overtaken by the deterritorialising force of capital: 'My own neighbourhood is filled with the signs of a local economy being replaced by a global one,' Leonard remarked, 'small businesses being replaced by large corporations, multinationals taking over.'² A relatively early photograph from the series (from 1999), depicts a small storefront, seen straight on, in a square-format black-and-white print. The address — on Ludlow just above Delancey Street — was occupied in the late 1990s by the Active Services Corporation, which performed a variety of functions for its primarily Spanish-speaking clientele, from income tax preparation to rapid divorces, all of which was spelled out in a patchwork of signage posted in its windows and hand-painted on the awning above.

The visitor to this address today will find instead its sickness, a boutique selling gifts and accessories loosely themed on addiction (the shop's website encourages users to indulge their 'obsessive behavior'). The transformation is indicative of the disappearing social world Leonard set out to capture, and of what is replacing it.

As a document of the contemporary urban landscape, *Analogue* could be said to stand at the intersection of competing regimes of representation. With their deadpan gaze, standardised format and gridded presentation, the photographs owe an obvious debt to conceptual precedents. They often have been compared, for example, to the industrial typologies assembled by Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the two bodies of work do indeed share a kind of archaeological impulse, a desire to picture what are often obsolescent forms before their final disappearance. But Leonard's focus on the city, and in particular on its working-class quarters, might also recall Hans Haacke's investigations of New York real estate as a 'social system', most famously in *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971). That controversial work, at the centre of the Guggenheim Museum's last-minute cancellation of Haacke's solo exhibition the year of its production, mapped out the transactions of a shadowy real estate firm centred upon one of the largest holders of slum properties in Manhattan. *Shapolsky et al.* consisted of 142 photographs of the buildings and lots owned by the firm — most on the Lower East Side and in Harlem — each of which was accompanied by a text panel describing its location and the financial deals involving the building, along with six charts cross-referencing the properties, an explanatory wall panel and

1 Zoe Leonard, quoted in Drusilla Beyfus, 'Zoe Leonard: Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2010', *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2010; see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/photography/7205995/Zoe-Leonard-Deutsche-Borse-Photography-Prize-2010.html> (last accessed on 24 May 2010).
2 Z. Leonard, quoted in 'Eminent Domain: Contemporary Photography and the City', at the New York Public Library, 2008; see <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/exhibits/eminent/leonard> (last accessed on 24 May 2010).

maps. The effect of the work was to make legible the opaque connections between various dummy corporations that together controlled an exploitive market for lower-income housing. There can be no questioning of the distance that separates Haacke's rigorous investigation of this particularised social system from Leonard's wide-ranging visualisation of the ecology of small-scale commerce, and it would be facile to locate a morphological similarity between the works by isolating Haacke's photographs and comparing them with Leonard's. Nevertheless, a connection between these two disparate works remains.

The conjunction lies less perhaps in Haacke's piece itself than in its reception in New York in the mid-1980s, when, in an influential reading, Rosalyn Deutsche argued that it sited itself critically within 'a specific interface between economic and artistic concerns — the relations between dominant aesthetic discourses and the interests of real estate capital in New York'.³ *Shapolsky et al.* held particular resonance in a city that was finally absorbing the successful outcome of a half-century of efforts by large landowners to rid it of industrial employment as part of a broader reorganisation of the division of labour on national and international scales. By the end of the 1980s manufacturing had given way to the characteristic contemporary mix of jobs in services and finance, insurance and real estate, a process that was accompanied by the marginalisation of the people who had been employed in small industry as low-rent properties disappeared. 'The latest phase of urban redevelopment,' Deutsche concluded, 'also engineers the destruction of the material conditions of survival — housing and services — for those residents no longer needed in the city's economy.'⁴ In this manner *Shapolsky et al.* was articulated as a precedent for projects by Group Material and Martha Rosler, which took up gentrification in 1980s New York in a similar manner, critically engaging both the urban landscape and a cultural apparatus that all too often was complicit with the redevelopment process. *Analogue*

can be seen as marking the latest, and perhaps last, movement in this arc: by the early 1990s the deindustrialisation of Manhattan was a *fait accompli*, and the housing battles of the previous decade had been lost. What remained was to capture on film a residual environment of cheap clothing shops, appliance stores and the like that served a surplus population, before it, too, was obliterated by the bubble economy of the late 1990s and 2000s.⁵

However the factographic rigour of these conceptual precursors of *Analogue* coexists — rather uneasily — alongside a more poetic lineage of street photography, which constitutes another crucial interlocutor for the project. Lee Friedlander's 1960s photographs of shop windows might come to mind, although his interest in the ambiguity between reflection and actuality is largely foreign to Leonard's series. We do occasionally glimpse her mirrored image in a store's glass frontage, standing at a certain distance from her subject — as in the photograph showing the corner of Ludlow and Rivington Street (from 1999), in which we can just make her out, perching at the edge of the curb as she peers down into the focusing screen of her Rolleiflex camera. Her form, silhouetted dimly against the empty jackets arrayed in the window, creates that intermingling of outside event with inside displays so typical of Friedlander. But this is something of an anomaly; throughout *Analogue* Leonard generally avoided these sorts of effects, photographing in the cool, even light of early morning and minimising reflections. A closer parallel might be found in the rather lesser-known colour photographs of working-class storefronts taken by Harry Callahan in Chicago in the mid-1950s. Like Leonard's, these pictures were motivated by knowledge of the impending doom of the spaces depicted, slated as they were for 'renewal' at an earlier moment of municipal reorganisation. Callahan was teaching at the time at the Institute of Design, where he had befriended Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; the modest vernacular commercial architecture captured by Callahan's photographs, and the fine-grained urban texture it established, stood as an implicit



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riposte to the latter's crystalline vision of a city purged of density — a vision that was built, in the form of his Lake Shore Drive apartments, only a mile or so away on the affluent Gold Coast from the strip shown in Callahan's photographs. They confront the subjects straight on, the door positioned at the centre of the picture, so that the image became an intricate composition of squares and rectangles. Leonard's photographs of Pitt Street or of Clinton Street (both taken in 1999 in New York City) echo, perhaps inadvertently, Callahan's formats in their compositional rigour.

But of course the great photographic precedent for *Analogue*, as so many of its commentators have remarked and as Leonard herself has attested, lies in the documentation of 'Old Paris' undertaken by Eugène Atget at the start of the twentieth

century. The photographs of Broadway and Grand Street or of Orchard Street (both 1999), with their stacked bolts of fabric or groaning racks of dress shirts, bear close comparison to the series of photographs taken by Atget in 1910 and 1911 at the Marché des Carmes on the Place Maubert, where clothing merchants displayed their wares. What Leonard sees in the French photographer is neither the celebration of the 'social fantastic' lauded by Pierre Mac Orlan nor the revelation of the uncanny admired by the Surrealists, but the documentation of a particular kind of selling: that of secondhand goods, of salvage, of reutilisation. Atget's market, or his dealers in used wares, depicts a form of commerce that developed out of necessity to serve the Parisian underclass, and stands in sharp distinction to the

3 Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate and the Museum', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, New York, Cambridge, MA and London: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1986, p.23.

4 *Ibid.*, p.24.

5 For a complementary reading of this work, see Jenni Sorkin, 'Finding the Right Darkness', *frieze*, issue 113, March 2008; also available at http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/finding_the_right_darkness (last accessed on 24 May 2010).



spectacle of the department store and its deployment of the narcissistic mirror of consumption.⁶ So too Leonard's small shops are counterposed to those national chains, unseen, that were spreading throughout New York in those years, choking off this local ecology of family businesses. This aspect of *Analogue* only became more pronounced as the project developed, and assumed an increasingly self-reflexive quality: one significant subset of images depicts shops selling and repairing obsolescent visual technologies — as in Roger's TV Service in the photograph of Avenue B (2000), seen from a slightly oblique angle with its array of

televisions, stereo equipment and radios posed in its window and on the sidewalk. (Roger's has since given way to Shampoo Avenue B, a hair salon boasting Lady Gaga as a client; cuts start at \$80 for women.) These disappearing visual technologies, and the material spaces that sold and repaired them, are indemnified in memory through another threatened technology — Leonard's Rolleiflex camera — producing a kind of triangulated mirroring between the camera lens, TV screens and the shop window.

Zoe Leonard began *Analogue*, as stated earlier, by walking through her neighbourhood and similar working-class commercial districts in Manhattan

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6 See Clive Scott, *Street Photography: From Atget to Cartier-Bresson*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007, p.74, for a useful discussion of Atget's images of Parisian commerce. Leonard's primary reference was to Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992.

and Brooklyn. Favouring the morning, when the sidewalks were empty of pedestrians, she photographed those derelict or down-at-heel storefronts that caught her eye. Her peripatetic gaze is a distant echo of one of the founding paradigms of modernist artistic production: that which compared the artist to the *chiffonnier*, the rag-picker who scavenged the daily cast-offs of the great city:

Here is a man entrusted to gather up the remains of a day in the life of the capital. All that the metropolis has rejected, all that it has got rid of, all that it has scorned, all that it has broken, he catalogues, he collects. He examines the archives of debauchery, the capharnaüm [a dump, a pigsty] of trash. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; he gathers, like a miser a treasure, the refuse that, when ground again between the jaws of the goddess Industry, will become objects of utility or of delight.⁷

That was Charles Baudelaire writing in his 1851 essay 'On Wine and Hashish', at the very dawn of those forms of consumer capitalism that today flourish

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so abundantly. Perhaps the most radical aspect of this profile of an 'archivist' of urban waste was its implicit redefinition of art-making under the transformed conditions of modern urban life and the incipient regime of the commodity, which would now of necessity become a labour of scavenging, of making meaningful what happened to be left at one's disposal.⁸ Baudelaire sensed this to be the case already in his lifetime, and eulogised the rag-picker in his poetry: the two shared a secret complicity, as the discarded clothing the latter collected was sold to be remade

into paper, the very physical support for the poet's work; but more importantly, Baudelaire positioned his writing in an analogous relationship to the city, salvaging bits of urban detritus in his poems. 'Lumpensammler oder Poet — der Abhub geht beide an,' Walter Benjamin remarked in regard to this Baudelairean analogy: 'rag-picker or poet — refuse concerns both'.⁹ We might say something similar of *Analogue* and its maker, that *Abhub* — refuse, garbage, the discarded and scorned — is at the centre of their concerns.

These connections are perhaps most clearly articulated in a series of photographs that began in 2001, when Leonard was exploring the streets of Williamsburg in Brooklyn. Walking through a district of warehouses, small-scale industry and wholesalers found just north of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, she found large bales of used clothing stacked up on the sidewalk, of which she made a number of colour and black-and-white images, such as the photograph of Leonard Street, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (2001), with its sculptural array of bundles shot at an angle against the red-brick wall of the building behind. Three years later, Leonard was able to trace the itinerary of these

used clothes, which — like the majority of garments donated to charitable organisations in the US — were destined for markets in the

developing world. In 2004 she visited Uganda and photographed the stalls and displays of local vendors, the end point of a long trajectory that began in donation bins in New York, to the kind of wholesaler she encountered on Leonard Street in Brooklyn, through worldwide buyers, and on to the streets of cities like Kampala. What is unwanted trash in the US returns as coveted goods in the Global South, in an early twenty-first century update of Baudelaire's *chiffonnier*. For this trajectory is indeed very contemporary: only since the early 1990s, and the imposition by the US

7 Charles Baudelaire, 'On Wine and Hashish', *Artificial Paradises* (ed. and trans. Stacy Diamond), New York: Citadel Press, 1996, p.7. Translation modified by the author.

8 These terms are derived from Ewa Lajer-Burcharth's outstanding discussion of this Baudelaire essay, found in her 'Modernity and the Condition of Disguise: Manet's "Absinthe Drinker"', *Art Journal*, vol.44, no.1, Spring 1985, pp.21—22.

9 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (trans. Harry Zohn), London: New Left Books, 1973, p.80. Translation modified by the author.

and the IMF of trade liberalisation on the formerly protected economies of much of the developing world, has this trade in used clothing flourished. What Leonard captures in her Kampala photographs is in a sense the opposite of what she had been documenting in New York — not a residual economy being eradicated by global capital, but an emergent formation linked precisely to those transnational flows of money and commodities.¹⁰

This is not to claim that the politics of this global trade appears as Leonard's 'subject' in these photos, much less that she is offering a critique of this dynamic; the rise of an international trade in used clothes constitutes the horizon of possibility for these images, but their resolute focus on the point-of-sale in conjunction with the earlier images of bales in New York perhaps suggests her interest lies in what Arjun Appadurai has called 'the social life of things', or in a 'biographical approach to things' (a particular approach that has long existed within Leonard's oeuvre, from the *Trophies* and *Wax Anatomical Models* to *Strange Fruit* and *1961*, works spanning the late 1980s through the later 1990s).¹¹ In this sequence of *Analogue* she takes a processual view of her subject, tracing something like the life history of this commodity; we grasp the passage from clothing-as-use, to its withdrawal from usage, to its re-inscription within a commodity circuit, and a presumed second life in Africa. *Mitumba* and *salaula* (Swahili words for 'used clothing') become the latter-day echo of New York's *schmatte zamlers* — as the used-clothing dealers were known in this predominantly Jewish neighbourhood — and Paris's *chiffonniers*. And once again a self-reflexivity — an analogy between clothes and photographs — can be apprehended here: the circulation of these used garments stands in some relation to the circulation of her images. (And wasn't there something fated in the coincidence of encountering the used-clothing processor on a street name, Leonard, that is also hers?) 'Images' is

the wrong word in any case, since she insists on the materiality of the photograph and its support, in distinction to the contemporary turn toward digitised mobility and the dematerialisation of the image in projection: 'I [...] love how tactile a photograph is; [its] physical presence is very beautiful to me.'¹² Hence her predilection for the postcard — whose collection and display has occupied her almost exclusively in the years since completing *Analogue* — in which the photograph becomes a physical means of exchange and communication through space, a kind of token passed from hand to hand. It is perhaps relevant to add here that, in addition to its presentation as a large-scale installation and as a smaller portfolio of prints, *Analogue* exists as an artist's book, whose buckram cover recalls the standard library binding of older volumes and hence emphasises its passage among multiple readers.

Appadurai, in tracing the social life of things, was interested not only in their movement along well-trodden paths of commodity exchange but also in the possibilities for more eccentric diversions or subversions. Take the collector, for example, who removes or protects objects from the commodity context, who 'enclaves' them in a special zone outside the regulated flow of things. But that gesture, as he notes, is fundamentally ambivalent, since 'such diversion is not only an instrument of decommodification of the object, but also of the (potential) intensification of commoditisation by the enhancement of value attendant upon its diversion'.¹³ The rag-picker as an analogue of the artist contains something of the same duality, on one hand embodying devotion to what has been rejected, cast off from the circulation of the capitalist economy — since 'it is precisely when they no longer circulate, as well-behaved commodities should, that things begin to give signs of a more subversive potential' — while on the other hand occluding what Theodor Adorno called, in a famous riposte to



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Benjamin's characterisation, 'the capitalist function of the rag-picker — namely, to subject even rubbish to exchange-value'.¹⁴ If poverty is not exactly made beautiful in *Analogue*, the dereliction of the urban landscape is brought within the precincts of the museum, where it coexists uneasily with its surroundings.

One more word is in order, however, before we leave this account of the artist-as-*chiffonnier*. For the analogy has been, throughout its history, a resolutely masculine one, closely bound up with that literature of modernity that has characterised the modern city as a male preserve and

relegated women to the domestic sphere.¹⁵ Indeed, such an explanation of *Analogue* risks separating it entirely from Leonard's longstanding queer and feminist practice, but there are compelling links between this project and the larger concerns of her work that allow us to see it, too, as somehow continuous with her gender politics. Most notably, the elegiac quality of *Analogue* — the mourning for a lost city — binds it to other works of mourning tied to the AIDS crisis; this is clearest in the photographs depicting abandoned storefronts where just the ghost of old signage remains, such as the image of Grand Street in Brooklyn (2001)

10 The best account of this trade is found in Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000, although its focus on identity formation and consumer choice obscures the broader political dynamic. A good, journalistic account may be found in George Packer, 'How Susie Bayer's T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back', *The New York Times Magazine*, 31 March 2002. For the context of post-1989 trade liberalisation, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, New York: Picador, 2007.

11 See Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.13.

12 Z. Leonard, quoted in 'Zoe Leonard Interviewed by Anna Blume', in Kathrin Rhomberg (ed.), *Zoe Leonard* (exh. cat.), Vienna: Secession, 1997, p.12.

13 A. Appadurai, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, p.28.

14 See Irving Wohlforth, 'Et Cetera? The Historian as Chiffonnier', in Beatrice Hanssen (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, London and New York: Continuum, 2006, p.15. For the Adorno quote, see Theodor Adorno and W. Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928—1940* (ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker), Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p.284.

15 The classic analysis remains Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol.2, no.3, 1985, pp.37—46.



Zoe Leonard,
*The Fae Richards
Photo Archive*,
1993–96 (created
for Cheryl Dunye's
film *The Watermelon
Woman*, 1996),
78 black-and-white
photographs, 4 colour
photographs and
notebook of 6 pages
of typed text on
typewriter paper.
Installation view,
Whitney Biennial,
Whitney Museum
of American Art,
New York, 1997.
Photograph:
Geoffrey Clemens.
Courtesy the artist



or Manhattan Avenue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn (2006), which recall the dried husks of *Strange Fruit* (1992–97), a body of work begun in the wake of David Wojnarowicz's death. Something similar may be detected in the prevalence of analogues for the human body or, to be more precise, for absent couples — pairs of empty chairs in the image of Rivington Street or of Avenue A, or two pairs of shoes in the photograph of Praga Market in Warsaw (all 1999). But we could say that there is something generally queer about the archive constituted by *Analogue*, that its conjunction of conceptual documentation and personal idiosyncrasy derives precisely from an awareness that lesbian and gay history has made clear that an archive 'must preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling', that in fact the archive is a site of 'profoundly affective power'.¹⁶ *Analogue*, like her explicitly queer documents such as *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993–96), mobilises memory and affect to compensate for institutional neglect, now on the urban scale itself.

stark dichotomy of small business/large corporation implies what we might call an ecological view of the urban economy, with local stores that created a responsive, equilibrated ecosystem being eradicated by the invasive species of multinational brands, the 'honest' commerce of the former undone by the wastefulness of the latter. These views were already taking shape upon her return from a trip to India in late 1992, where she 'was impressed with how each scrap of paper [...] was used to its maximum, to the very end of its possible useful life', and further elaborated during her long sojourn in backwoods Alaska.¹⁷

The link is made clear in a recent interview, in which Leonard elaborates a series of questions implied in the photographs, and in her approach toward her subjects: 'How am I connected to people who make my clothes, to people who buy and sell my clothes and food? Who benefits from the connection? Who suffers from the connection?'¹⁸ But the contemporary urban landscape is no distortion, and the dynamic transformation of the city recorded in

Waste, ruin, destruction are constitutive of present order, not mere surplus negativity, and capitalism thrives on crisis, not equilibrium. Analogue brilliantly captures the surface of this world, the regrettable symptoms of an irrational economy.

If this series looks back to a longer history of recording the lived effects of capitalism on modern urban agglomerations, and constitutes one of the most challenging and remarkable photographic documents of the present, we may nevertheless discern some of its ideological limits in the quoted description with which we began. There is much force in the statement 'my own neighbourhood is filled with the signs of a local economy being replaced by a global one, small businesses being replaced by large corporations, multinationals taking over', but perhaps also as much misrecognition; it was not only multinationals that were pushing out her mom-and-pop businesses, but more typically, as we have seen, other small, entrepreneurial shops now serving an entirely different social class. Leonard's

Analogue is no alien excess imposed on a more natural arrangement. 'People who denounce incitements to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous in a society of economic abundance do not understand the purpose of waste,' noted Guy Debord some four decades ago.¹⁹ Waste, ruin, destruction are constitutive of present order, not mere surplus negativity, and capitalism thrives on crisis, not equilibrium. *Analogue* brilliantly captures the surface of this world, the regrettable symptoms of an irrational economy, but it cannot name the cause itself. And in that, it truly marks the ideological limits of a certain practice of photography as well.

16 Ann Cvetkovich, 'In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture', *Camera Obscura*, no.49, 2002, pp.109–10.

17 Z. Leonard, quoted in 'Zoe Leonard Interviewed by Anna Blume', *op. cit.*, p.17.

18 Z. Leonard, quoted in Beyfus, 'Zoe Leonard', *op. cit.*

19 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), New York: Zone Books, 1994, p.140.