EXHIBITION REVIEW

HERE IS NEW YORK. IMAGES FROM THE FRONTLINE OF HISTORY: A DEMOCRACY OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Reviewed by Kathleen McLean, Director of the Center for Public Exhibition and Public Programs, The Exploratorium.

On a cold December afternoon, having just made a pilgrimage to my old New York neighborhood—the site of the World Trade Center collapse—I was desperate for some place warm and lively. Yet as a long-time advocate of more populist perspectives in exhibitions, I knew I had to experience *HERE IS NEW YORK. Images from the Frontline of History: A Democracy of Photographs* on display in a small storefront on Prince Street in Soho. I had heard that this was a truly democratic exhibition: all photographs related to September 11, 2001 and the World Trade Center would be included in the exhibition, no matter who submitted them.

People filled the sidewalk in front of the gallery, and as we waited in line, we watched video images of the event on a screen in the window. When we entered the exhibition, a volunteer asked that we start at the very back of the room and work our way forward, following the natural flow of people. Signs explained that the photographs were for sale, each for $25.00, with the proceeds going to the Children's Aid Society WTC Relief Fund.

All photographs were treated as equal: all were scanned and digitally printed, all the same size, with only numbers for identification. They were attached with black metal binder clips to strings stretched in rows three to four high along every wall surface, as well as across the width of the room. At the back of the gallery hung a large, eerily prescient quote, also clipped to a string:

> *The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.*
> —*E. B. White,* Here Is New York. *1949*

I joined the rest of the visitors as, shoulder-to-shoulder, we shuffled along walls, back and forth across the silent room. Every so often, a story would float up, as someone recounted personal events of that day. Viewing the too familiar and horrible images was oddly comforting, as if our presence amidst these slips of paper, only blocks from the actual site, was a collective act of witness. The anonymity and simplicity of the installation made it possible for us to own and share the burden of the experience for the brief time we were in the room together. No voice of authoritative interpretation interfered with our viewing; no name of a valued maker spun our attention.

In one corner of the room, folding tables held computers, monitors, and scanners—a workspace for those who brought their images to the collection.

Several flyers described the exhibition origins and intent, explained the process for purchasing photos, and announced a second version of the exhibition concurrently on view in Berkeley, California. One of the volunteers told me that literally hundreds of photographs had been submitted in the few weeks the exhibition had been open, way too many to display in the space. All the images were being collected nevertheless, and were included in a growing archive that will be used for research purposes. He gave me the Web site address to access from home <*www.hereisnewyork.org*>.

Back in Berkeley a week later, I visited the same exhibition at the University of California's Center for Photography. The morning I arrived, there were only two other people in the exhibition, which was installed in the Graduate School of Journalism. The photographs were similarly displayed with binder clips on string along the windowed walls of an L-shaped hallway. An introductory statement described the project and included a photo of the New York installation with visitors. One addition to the exhibition, "Bay Area Photographers Shoot 9.11," was installed on a small bulletin board nearby. The only entry when I was there contained three small photographs and a note:

> *It is hard to explain why I have felt so compelled to get these photos into the HERE IS NEW YORK show, but seeing the pictures you have up only reinforces that feeling for me. I'm really glad you brought them here. I hope you can include the(se) photos in the show.*

By midday, the hall had more visitors, and the space took on some of the character of the Soho space—the whispers, the pointing and lingering, the stories. A receptionist told me that this was the most well-attended of all their exhibitions, and a number of people who visited this show had been to the one in New York as well.

I couldn't resist comparing the two exhibitions. Although both exhibitions displayed the same material, the contextual psychology of each situation had a marked effect on my experience. In New York, the solemnity of waiting in line, the density of people inside the gallery, and the proximity to the actual site all contributed to a sense of focus I did not experience in the Berkeley exhibition. By comparison, the lack of people in the Berkeley exhibition, the animated conversations in adjacent offices describing holiday vacations and shifting class schedules, the bright sunlight streaming through the wall of windows, which looked out onto a garden courtyard, all distanced me from the event. Certainly, a more contained exhibition space would have lessened the problem. But even the signs hung every few feet between the photographs—"Please respect the community spirit of this exhibit. Do not touch or remove any photos."—reflected an emotional dissociation. By comparison, I saw no such signs in New York, even on the curbside shrines sprinkled with coins and jewelry. For me, there was just enough distance in New York, and too much distance in Berkeley.

But the distance didn't seem to matter to the visitors I spoke with. They were simply grateful for the opportunity to see the exhibition, were focused enough to stay in the exhibition for an hour or longer, and were eager to talk about their experiences afterwards. In both exhibitions, the images told unimaginable and still unfolding stories, in portraits,

still-life, and landscapes. Some were clearly works of art, while others served as evidence of the event from every perspective, every second documented by hundreds of photographers.

The scope of the event compelled such image-making, just as the exhibition required an egalitarian contribution of images. It was a profound example of the power of collective expression: all perspectives were valued equally, without the intense emotional spin from television anchors, and without the dense art world commentary that tends toward abstraction. The unmediated images, as visual remains, truly spoke for themselves.

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