Zoe Strauss, I-95 (Ice on Stairs), 2001—10, photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.
The ongoing economic crisis in the United States has imposed a double bind upon those who wish to further the legacy of socially engaged photography, whether through art, documentary or any of the other fields that traffic in photographs. Apart from its substantial impact on education, arts funding and individual livelihoods, the so-called Great Recession, which is now thought to be the most severe crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, has induced a parallel crisis of representation. Photography has come under intense pressure to depict the slowdown that has pervaded US public life since 2008, deciding numerous elections and dominating the news cycle. As public opposition to the continuing causes of the Recession gathered, crystallising in late 2011 with the emergence of the Occupy movement, photography took on an increasingly central role, most paradigmatically in the images of violent police repression of protesters; the viral distribution of these images helped widen the movement while galvanising its base.

But while many who work with photography feel compelled to act, this task would also seem impossible in light of the dimensions of the crisis. Consider the collateralised debt obligation (CDO) — the financial derivative whose abuse triggered the meltdown of the US sub-prime mortgage market in 2007. As many have noted, the mechanisms governing CDOs were so intricate that their function often eluded the understanding of the investment bankers who devised and sold them, not to mention the credit agencies and government regulators supposedly supervising such transactions. Much the same is true of the financial crisis on the macroeconomic level, where the links between different domestic sectors, or those joining the US to global credit markets, only became apparent in retrospect. This opacity ultimately resembles the extreme abstraction of advanced capitalism, which continues to operate with ever more incomprehensible scale, speed and complexity.

How could this conjuncture be persuasively represented through photographic images? This question instantly raises others, which collectively trouble our notion that such representation is even possible. Can any image depict the causes of increased income inequality? The influence of corporate money on electoral politics? The likely consequences of a ‘lost generation’ crippled by spiralling student-loan debt? What about the structural conditions that bind these phenomena together, or the logics by which they reproduce themselves? Some sceptics might ask whether people in the US could ever be relieved of their profound misconceptions regarding class, government and social mobility, whether through photographs or any other form of rhetoric. Others might claim that the obstacle to such persuasion isn’t misplaced idealism, but rather cynicism, apathy or a type of learned helplessness: the right facts, arguments and images are out there, but people don’t care enough to act on them.

Such doubts arise at a moment when photography already appears vulnerable, in that its unprecedented ubiquity seems to have come at the cost of its persuasive power.

Andrew Stefan Weiner gauges contemporary photography’s capacity to react to the Great Recession.

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1 My use of the generic term ‘photography’ is meant to refer not only to art photographers, but also to photojournalists, activists and documentary producers, as well as curators and critics who use such images in their work. ‘Photography’ is also meant to refer to photographic images produced and distributed through both analogue and digital technologies, or some combination of the two.

2 Among the more widely circulated images were those depicting Scott Olsen, an Iraq War veteran injured by police at an Occupy Oakland protest, and those picturing the pepper-spraying of peacefully protesting students at the University of California, Davis.

3 The best-known advocate of such position is likely Thomas Frank. See, for example, his What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America, New York: Henry Holt, 2004. For recent analysis of popular misconceptions regarding economic mobility, see Chapter 2 of Timothy Noah, The Great Divergence, New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.
The number of photographs now taken yearly rivals the number taken during the entire history of predigital photography. Any reasonably adept (and sufficiently affluent) child can now capture, process and distribute images with an ease and power that would have been astonishing only decades ago. However, our attitude towards images still often verges on boredom, nonchalance or fatigue, a wooziness that resembles an intensified version of the anaesthetic effect that Susan Sontag famously attributed to photography some forty years ago.

All this would seem to add up to an impossible mandate: photography must act; photography can’t possibly act. Under such conditions we can imagine a retreat into formalism, a surrender to the melancholia of the Left or a move to ditch the studio for the street. But how could photography refuse these temptations and instead facilitate decisive intervention? And how might this apparent impasse instead serve as motivation, as a sort of enabling constraint? This essay pursues such questions by examining three recent attempts to photographically represent the US economic crisis: the 2011 exhibition ‘More American Photographs’, curated by Jens Hoffmann for the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco; the open-source photoblog We Are the 99 Percent; and Zoe Strauss’s I-95 photography project (2001–10). While disparate in their objectives and formats, each example engages photography’s constitutive hybridity: its compound status as both artistic format and social technology. The question of their effectiveness thus turns on their ability to operate on multiple levels — literal and abstract, factual and lyrical, autonomous and heteronomous — and to do so without falsely minimising the tension between these factors.

As its title suggests, ‘More American Photographs’ was conceived after the fabled precedent of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography programme, which ran from 1935 to 1944 as part of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration’s New Deal, the set of economic and social programmes put in place to combat the Great Depression. The FSA subsidised fifteen photographers, including Ben Shahn, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. This group collectively shot some 250,000 negatives, a few of which have become the pictures by which many in the US remember (or imagine) the Great Depression. Hoffmann’s concept was to exhibit selected FSA photographs — now freely available online through the Library of Congress — alongside commissioned work from artists including Martha Rosler, Stephen Shore, Larry Clark, Catherine Opie and Collier Schorr. The commissions were intended not so much as a re-enactment or re-make of the FSA project, but rather as an experimental enquiry into the resemblances between that era and the present.

In evoking a sense of historical repetition, the show intended to appeal to its audience’s sense of a zeitgeist. Apart from references to the Great Depression, the past several years have witnessed protracted debates over the legacy of Keynesian economics, as well as the emergence of populisms on both the right and the left. While it might be too soon to tell whether such comparisons are historically meaningful, they nevertheless appear to be a promising point of departure for photographic exploration. Although today’s cloud-dwelling Instagrams and Twitpics seem worlds removed from the medium-format film Lange loaded into her bulky Graflex camera, images continue to play a crucial role in picturing class in the US, a subject which is pervasive, fraught and contested, yet still often addressed with tortuous indirection. Given that the FSA photographs remain the best-known images of US poverty, a re-evaluation of them as a precedent had the potential to expose how public policy is mediated through representation and perception, as in the case of pictures that differentiate between the supposedly ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.

Despite this promise, ‘More American Photographs’ invites certain obvious criticisms, the first of which is curatorial overreach. Hoffmann has now staged exhibitions around numerous historical subjects, including canonical American literature (a trilogy exhibition

6 To the extent that class is discussed at all in US politics, it is often in the pejorative sense, as in the common right-wing claim that discussion of income inequality or tax reform constitutes ‘class warfare’. | Afterall
at the Wattis Institute of ‘The Wizard of Oz’ in 2008, ‘Moby-Dick’ in 2009 and ‘Huckleberry Finn’ in 2010) and artists’ work, such as that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (at the 12th Istanbul Biennial in 2011). Though this approach surely has merit, it also risks fetishising the historical or becoming a new traditionalism. In Hoffmann’s case, it further threatens to elevate his professed commitment to auteurist exhibition-making over a show’s actual contents, producing something like the sort of curatorial overreach that Anton Vidokle has denounced as ‘art without artists’.8

Other potential criticisms of the show take up its relationship to its renowned but problematic precedent. Despite the enshrinement of the FSA as an icon of US progressivism, the programme was premised on extensive censorship; it is estimated that nearly half of the negatives shot by FSA photographers were cancelled with a hole punch by the project’s

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7 Subsequently, Hoffmann staged an exhibition at the CCA Wattis Institute meant as a response to Harald Szeemann’s seminal 1969 show ‘When Attitudes Become Form’: ‘When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes’ (2012).

director, Roy Stryker. The subjects of famous pictures have also complained that the programme did little to alleviate their poverty, while granting them a questionable sort of fame. If we might question the implications of reproducing such a project — issues which ‘More American Photographs’ largely skirted — we must also ask whether such an analogy can persuade, given the deep gulf separating Hoffmann’s re-commission project from the FSA’s original. The most obvious differences concerned scale, distribution and, above all, objectives, all of which necessarily fell far short of the New Deal programme. Compounding these is the fact that photography has transformed in countless, profound ways over the last eighty years. The documentarism pioneered by the FSA or the New York Photo League became gradually aestheticised and institutionalised, as could be seen in John Szarkowski’s landmark ‘New Documents’ exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1967, which showcased documentary photographers who gravitated toward demotic subjects previously thought off-limits. Commercial photography and photojournalism


have undergone successive waves of critique, beginning with 1960s photoconceptualisms and extending through the gender- or race-informed work of artists such as Sarah Charlesworth or Lorna Simpson. Since the 1990s, digital and analogue technologies have intertwined to the point that purely analogue photography is something of a curiosity, while large-format neopictorialism à la Gursky has conquered the museum. These changes are evident in the fact that most of the commissions for Hoffman’s exhibition were given not to photographers but to ‘artists who work with photography’ — a descriptor that would have made little sense to Lange or her colleagues.

Clearly no exhibition could hope to overcome such large discrepancies regarding the production and reception of images between the 1930s and now. The challenge facing ‘More American Photographs’ was thus to illuminate and engage these differences, rather than to awkwardly speak around them. Unfortunately the latter approach was more evident, as was immediately apparent in the layout of the exhibition, which situated modestly-sized reprints of selected FSA photographs on free-standing panels in the centres of the galleries, with the contemporary, mostly landscape painting-sized works on the outer walls. While there were some formal or thematic connections between older and newer works — such as in Alec Soth’s efforts to remake Dorothea Lange’s iconic *Migrant Mother* (1936) — these were the exception. Under different circumstances, such a hang might have clarified or interrogated the relation between two discrete historical moments. However, almost all the commissioned work for the Wattis was highly aestheticised; few pieces would have looked out of place in a commercial gallery. Against this backdrop the FSA images came dangerously close to looking like ‘inspiration’, or like mere raw material for more sophisticated artists to refine.

As for the commissions, most failed to exhibit the sort of thoroughgoing social and political investment characteristic of so much FSA photography, whether on the level of form, content or concept. Instead, many of the new works seemed unnervingly complacent about their own status as autonomous art, displaying little sense of tension between the street and the gallery. Neither did there seem to be much awareness of nor interest in the history of radical experiments with photographic form. While this might not have been surprising with the roster Hoffmann assembled, it nevertheless generated a certain dissonance given the exhibition’s subject. Apart from a rather flat piece on the gentrification of Brooklyn by the usually redoubtable Rosler (*Diptych: Storefronts, 2011*), none of
the commissions sought to mediate the image with text. A series of three photomontages (Americans #1—3, 2011) by Schorr came off as observant but overly polite, lacking friction or disjunction. In some cases, one got the sense of an instinctive aversion to anything that might be perceived as didactic, as if an artist’s stated commitment to ‘process’ masked a disavowal of political engagement. Something like this was the case in Sharon Lockhart’s Visalia Livestock Market, Visalia, California (2011). The photograph subtly distinguished itself from the picture-making of Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson — eschewing narrative, allegory and staging — to display concern with presenting an unposed group of subjects, rather than exploring the economics of agribusiness. This apolitical aestheticism was similar to the film and photographs that Lockhart shot in 2008 at a shipyard in Maine (Lunch Break), which recalled Allan Sekula’s landmark photo-essay Fish Story (1995) — only without the essay, or some alternative mode of sharing research.

Other commissions were more effective, like a series that Roe Ethridge shot around the small city of Belle Glade, Florida. Along with predictable scenes from an exurban backwater — discarded soda cans and fast-food packaging, a ditched truck — the photographs depicted an abandoned house and a local bank. These were the show’s only images that explicitly represented the US foreclosure crisis. At their best, such images began to suggest the pervasive, malign function of disposability within advanced capitalism, asking what happens when meals, cars, homes and whole sectors of the workforce become someone else’s problem. At other times, Ethridge’s work recalled Bertolt Brecht’s timeless comment about photographs of the Krupp factory, which merely depict their objects and generate little more than a passing sense of prevailing economic conditions.11

Brecht’s remark has always been held to mean that photography must do more than simply reflect; it must analyse, shock, educate or agitate. Yet what if a photograph limits itself to reflecting its subject, but still manages to incorporate subtle forms of mediation?

Could such an approach suggest different ways to order the visible world, as if viewing it from a slight angle? Such was the proposition made in a compelling series of prints by Katy Grannan, shot along Highway 99 in California’s Central Valley. Her picture of

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bathers (*Kern River, Rosedale Highway, Bakersfield, CA, 2011*) was one of the few in the show to recognise that more than a third in the US are overweight — an epidemic enabled by an economy in which opportunity is scarce while cheap processed foods are abundant. Here the contrast with the FSA photographs was brutally effective, in that such a toxic surplus might nevertheless have seemed a paradise to the famished sharecroppers of the Depression, who worked under essentially feudal conditions. Grannan’s achievement was to register this without pity, condescension or other emotional biases — her approach set her apart from photographers like Lange, who took pains to elevate the dignity of their subjects. In an exceptional quartet of portraits (*Untitled, Bakersfield, California, 2011*), Grannan captured expressions that ranged from stoic resolve to incipient panic, uncannily resembling many of the FSA pictures. Set against a featureless backdrop and sharpened by a harsh, raking light, the photographs began to assume an austere, almost allegorical dimension. In doing so, they suggested that sometimes the most compelling abstraction is that found within relatively conventional figurative photography.

In a flash of curatorial good luck, the installation of ‘More American Photographs’ coincided with the emergence and rapid proliferation of Occupy Wall Street in the autumn of 2011. If this development underscored the urgency of representing the economic crisis, it also indicated that the problematic for doing so had shifted. As critics have noted, artists and arts professionals have been disproportionately active within Occupy, helping generate many of the forms by which the movement has become known: guerrilla projections, open-source poster design, flash mob-style protests and handheld signs that recall the critical semiotics of various conceptualisms. This impact has not been limited to the aesthetics of politics but has extended to the politics of aesthetics, in the form of actions against Sotheby’s, MoMA and the Whitney Biennial.

While Occupy has placed a premium on mediating itself — a crucial part of the Zuccotti Park encampment in Lower Manhattan was a bank of laptops — it has been less clear how photography might contribute to a movement that also highly values embodied presence. Perhaps the most promising example of such a response has been the photoblog *We Are the 99 Percent*, which compiles testimonials from people worldwide who identify with Occupy’s message. The blog’s format is simple: anyone is free to contribute a picture of him- or herself holding a note that explains and affirms membership in the class of the 99%. People are typically pictured at home before their computers, sometimes in their parents’ basements. Though the blog asks that people picture themselves, many choose to screen their faces; a number wear Guy Fawkes masks. There are pictures of amputations, ultrasounds, children born with disabilities. The diversity of testimonials defies summation, and is best experienced first-hand. Suffice it to say that it reflects the number of contributors, which is in the thousands.

Clearly it adds nothing to our understanding of this project to identify it as art. Even so, it is hard to see the blog without thinking of similar attempts to use photography as a vehicle of collective portraiture: not only that of the FSA, but also August Sander’s series *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of Our Time, 1929*) or Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959). The apotheosis of this tendency was the 1955 Museum of Modern Art, New York exhibition ‘The Family of Man’, whose universalist humanism was deftly satirised by Douglas Huebler’s *Variable Piece #70: In Process — Global* (1971), which set out to photograph everyone alive. The substantial differences amongst these examples notwithstanding, they manifest a common structural asymmetry, insofar as their subjects never photographed themselves. *We Are the 99 Percent* neutralises this polarity, removing the mediation of the professional photographer or curator, and distributing authorship across a heterogeneous body. In doing so, it realises something close to the ideal of de-hierarchised mass communication, first articulated by Brecht and Walter Benjamin as intrinsic to the medium of photography.
and subsequently reiterated by generations of artists and activists, ranging from the video underground of the late 1960s to the tactical media campaigns of the 80s and beyond.

The photoblog’s crowdsourced model of production responds to what has been a crucial problem for Occupy, namely its difficulty in mobilising three key demographics: those living outside urban centres; those who can’t afford to leave work and protest; and migrant labourers who can’t risk being arrested at a demonstration. This atomisation is resisted in every photograph on the blog that asserts ‘I AM THE 99%’, a levelling of self-representation that performatively produces a type of class-consciousness. But of what sort exactly? Here is where the blog encounters difficulties, ones that are symptomatic of the larger problems facing Occupy. The most glaring of these is the digital divide: while one needn’t own a computer to contribute, one needs access to one, along with a certain level of skills and cultural knowledge. The two sides of this divide more or less track a social rift that dogged Occupy encampments, with members of what has been called a ‘proletarianised middle class’ on one side and the chronically poor and/or homeless on the other.15 As Occupy ran into problems — winter weather, mainstream media distortions, police repression — these divisions hardened, making it clear that the idea of the 99%, so central to the movement, might function as a demand, a wish or a norm, but not always a sociological reality. In this respect, the blog’s shortcomings seem telling: despite its unifying intentions, the constraints of its format and its lack of a discussion forum risk encouraging a homogeneity averse to the work of mediating difference.

These internal tensions loom larger today, at a moment when Occupy is no longer ascendant. A glance at the archive of We Are the 99 Percent reveals that postings have dropped precipitously since their peak in late 2011. It would be mistaken to correlate such activity too closely with the status of the movement more generally, let alone to declare its eclipse. Having said this, the blog’s relatively brief efflorescence raises questions about the consequences of Occupy’s own rapid, intense exposure to mass-mediated publicity, especially the insatiability of the 24/7 news cycle. Unlike earlier activist movements, Occupy spent little time underground establishing organisational networks and alliances that could better ensure its long-term viability. As a result, the movement had a mass audience before it could refine its messaging (for example, to make precise tactical demands for reform while simultaneously rejecting the legitimacy of the prevailing political system). Occupy Wall Street was already under the spotlight before it could clearly articulate its relation to other potential allies: organised labour, anti-austerity movements in the European Union or the revolutions of the Arab Spring.

The examples cited above suggest that if photography is somehow to intervene in the ongoing crisis, it will have to mobilise the two antagonistic capacities that comprise its status as a social technology: on the one hand, its apparent immediacy and rhetoric of transparency; on the other, its capacity to signify variably or abstractly. One model for such an approach is Strauss’s I-95 project, over the course of which the self-taught photographer shot pictures of everyday precarity, many taken near her home in Philadelphia. While these relatively raw, straight images recall numerous precedents, they resist being subsumed under familiar headings like ‘street photography’. They affirm the importance of documenting their subjects, often depicting them frontally and centred in the frame, even as they consistently undermine the truth-claims typical of such representations. Strauss’s subjects aren’t made alien, as in Diane Arbus’s work, or glamorous, as in Nan Goldin’s. Rather, they engage us and the camera in a sort of encounter, making themselves public — and vulnerable — while still keeping something in reserve, and asking in doing so how we might respond. Another key element of the I-95 project was its means of distribution: the photographs were exhibited annually beneath a highway overpass, where they were distributed as photocopies for the price of five dollars apiece. Not only does such an approach revitalise site-specificity by extracting it from its typical association with institutional sponsorship, it also asks us to


rethink the exhibition as a mode of occupation. Most crucially, Strauss’s relative generosity with her own work subtly asks how images relate to debt, problematising the larger affective and material economies within which they circulate.

Strauss is one of relatively few photographers working in an art context to come to grips with what is arguably most distinctive about the current conjuncture: the phenomenon of precaritisation, or the sheer tenuousness of the conditions under which many live and work today. Capitalist crises are obviously not new in the US, and neither is neoliberalism or post-Fordism. The difference is the extent to which previously secure populations are exposed to dispossession, chronic un- or underemployment and lack of access to education and medical care. Apart from simply depicting or even analysing these conditions, photographs might find means to internalise them, elaborating their implications at the level of their own form and the viewer’s perception.

In order to do so, photography will have to harness the power of its constitutive antitheses without falsely reconciling them, or simply letting them cancel each other out. Instead, it might strive to be both reflective and opaque, analytical yet empathic, stimulating and austere. Photographic practices could seek out solidarities while interrogating misidentifications: for example, between Occupy and the movements in Arab and Middle East countries, rooted as the latter are in distinctly political and/or theological populisms; or with the alter-globalisation movements of the Global South, where the standards of precarity are markedly different. Such practices would have to avoid self-congratulatory enthusiasm, but they would also need to oppose the automatic cynicism of ‘capitalist realism’. They would do well to engage precedents like Sekula or Fred Lonidier, who experimented with photographic form – through slide shows, photo-essays and other hybrid modes – while also taking labour unions seriously, rather than adopting the reflexive autonomism of much current theory and criticism. Another priority could be the type of insight enabled by a long-term commitment to a specific community, of the sort Strauss has made to Philadelphia, or the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier has made to her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Ultimately, it might be that photography can contribute most effectively by acknowledging its own paradoxes as a form that is valuable but banal; redemptive but cheap; and ubiquitous yet somehow always shadowed by its own disappearance.
