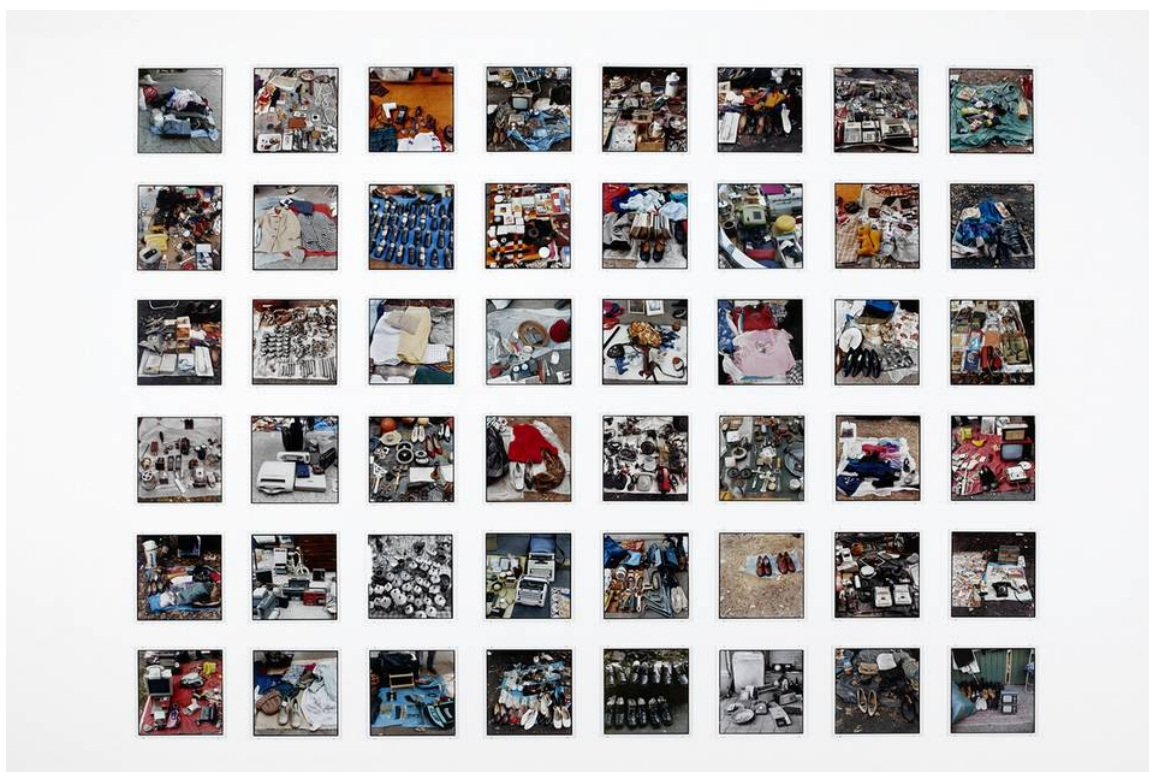


# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## ‘Zoe Leonard: Analogue’ Review: A Eulogy for Photography

In a series of 412 prints, Zoe Leonard captures a disappearing New York using a technology that is also dying off.



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‘Analogue’ is a word that once represented the buzzy future of technology and now connotes a past that may soon be as dead as the Sony Betamax.

Zoe Leonard: Analogue  
Museum of Modern Art  
Through Aug. 30

As the title of Zoe Leonard’s marvelously plain exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, it refers on one level to the nondigital processes by which the artist stubbornly made these photographs. Between 1998 and 2009, sensing that the way she had always worked was becoming outmoded, Ms. Leonard traveled with a 1940s Rolleiflex camera, taking thousands of pictures on film, in black-and-white as well as color.

Her loosely defined subject—small-scale manufacturing and salesmanship—seemed likewise to be under threat. An activist in the 1980s on New York’s Lower East Side, where she fought for the rights of women and AIDS patients, Ms. Leonard saw first-hand her neighborhood’s gentrification and the steady displacement of low-income immigrants and their family-run businesses. The unassuming outcome of her project, first exhibited in 2009 at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, is a set of 412 prints (342 chromogenic, 70 gelatin silver) that are arranged into 25 grids. These vary in number, from as many as 54 prints to as few as four. In all but eight of the grids, color and black-and-white commingle.

The format allows for numerous variations within the illusion of a master plan. Arranged on the three walls of the museum’s second-floor atrium, the project moves around the world. We are asked to imagine the economic lives of people, nowhere visible, by the things they have to sell—another meaning of the word “analogue.”

One grid consists of Lower East Side storefronts, each one closed by a metal security shutter. Other grids show the windows when the stores are open for business. Ms. Leonard acts like an impresario, her photographs guiding the viewer past a wide array of services (hair cutting, check cashing, picture framing) and goods (fruits, meats, stoves, mattresses, T-shirts). Her eye is as beguiled by the surrealist messages in the hand-drawn signage (“Mr. Shoe,” “True Desires for Beauty,” “Infinity 99¢”) as by the items for sale.

The series ends with a grid of 48 photographs of sheets and blankets strewn with used stuff, everything from soup ladles and screwdrivers to paperback books and crucifixes. Many of these pictures were made in Eastern Europe, where the freelance sellers likely could not afford rent for a store.

The wall text by senior curator Roxana Marcoci and curatorial fellow Drew

Sawyer locates Ms. Leonard's project "in the genealogy of grand visual archives that extends from Eugène Atget's compendium of Paris to Martha Rosler's photo-text work on New York's Bowery."

Neither of these analogies for "Analogue" is quite right. By comparison with Atget, who photographed with abandon for over 30 years, Ms. Leonard's purview is consciously limited. Nor do these grids, without captions, share much with Rosler's 1970s Conceptual projects, which exposed the fracture zones between photography and language.

Closer relatives are the typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their view-camera photographs of industrial sites, incomparably more elegant than Leonard's low-budget shots, were nonetheless systematic and governed by the idea of the defunct. While the German couple documented obsolete coal- and iron-mining machinery in the Ruhr Valley, Leonard has noted the cast-off fates of plastic model airplanes, rotary telephones and Zenith TVs.

Nor is the wall text correct when it says that "Analogue" reveals "the homogenization of diverse geographical locations in the twenty-first century." If anything, it does the opposite. Each of the four photographs here, of shacks selling Coca-Cola, has individual character, despite the fact that all are clad in the beverage giant's red colors and swirling logo.

The four battered Kodak shops on wheels—three decked out in the corporation's trademark yellow, one in black-and-white—seem to be sorely in need of customers. But each can be distinguished from its neighbor by the sags and wrinkles in its advertising banners, the result of the local economic climate. Any "homogenization" in these pictures is mainly Ms. Leonard's doing. It was she who framed these scenes frontally and chose to display them in rigid blocks.

It may be easier to study the loving detail of Ms. Leonard's pictures in her book than within the crowds milling around MoMA's atrium. Reading at home also can assuage the guilty thought that many of the people whose tattered lives we are staring at would be hard pressed to pay the \$25 admission to visit the museum. "Analogue" is one of several projects that in the past decade have eulogized photography as it used to be practiced. Adam Bartos's book "Darkroom" (2012) offered pictorial last rites over the developing trays, bottles, safe lights, and enlargers, equipment that he and his colleagues once needed to make their pictures and that now looks as quaint as the wax cylinders in Edison's laboratory. Robert Burley's book "Disappearance of Darkness: Photography at the End of the Analog Era" (2012) chronicles the destruction of factories (Kodak, Agfa, Ilford) that supplied the products for his livelihood. Tacita Dean's 16mm film "Kodak" (2006) is in a similar vein. She recorded the last time that Kodak film was made at a company plant in France—final moments that she captured on Kodak film. Fans of "Analogue" have claimed it somehow opines on the punishing effects of "global capitalism." Globalization has existed since antiquity, however, as shown by the Roman coins and beakers unearthed from Britain to North Africa. The

flow of money, the lifeblood of the world economy, was hard to illustrate when gold bullion underlay transactions; in the electronic age the subject is impossibly elusive.

What's remarkable about photography is its ability to record changes in the material world. It can register the tiniest differences in the color and shape of waves within the sea of humanity.

Throughout her career Ms. Leonard has used her camera to empathize with disregarded things. Like Walker Evans, whose late Polaroids of manhole covers and traffic signs "Analogue" most closely resembles, she is an artist of a rare and endangered order.

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