

Emmanuelle Léonard: A Judicial Perspective
by Gaëlle Morel

In her most recent works, Montréal artist Emmanuelle Léonard explores forensic photography, and questions the value of proof, trace and information. Although her work focuses on representations of both real and symbolic violence, she excludes dramatic and sensationalist approaches. She probes the documentary and probationary values attributed to forensic photography images, anchoring her process in both the tradition of conceptual art and contemporary photography.¹ Well aware of the applications and formal principles of photographic media in the judicial system, Léonard demonstrates the paradox between the aesthetic neutrality of the images and the brutality of the facts evoked in them.

In the series *Une sale affaire* (2007), composed of four colour prints, the artist appropriated photographic practices of special events journalism as well as visual standards for photography in criminal investigations. By tuning in to police headquarters radio signals, she followed the work of a press photographer in order to study different modes of iconographic treatment.

From her distanced perspective, Léonard adopts an impersonal style. She offers a tempered and unexpected rendering of several dramatic situations: car accident, search, shooting, and drowning. The photographs combine architecture, vehicles and landscapes, revealing the coldness of urban spaces and their periphery. The series brings to light a contradictory phenomena: in the judicial system, images of crimes and accidents are characterized by the refusal or the impossibility of capturing the events themselves, which are simply suggested through the titles of the works.

Also produced alongside the event, the portraits in the series *Les citoyens* (2009) show close-ups of the faces of riot police during a protest in Montréal. Léonard uses a strict framing and shooting protocol, focussed on the concentrated and piercing gaze of these men protected by masks. The calmness and serenity of their expressions unveil a kind of melancholy. The environment is suggested through the reflections in the visors – trees and city buildings. The outdoor context is reduced to blurred shapes and bright patches. The artist takes advantage of a legal loophole that assimilates the figure of a police officer on duty to public space, which allows him to be photographed without prior consent. Léonard individualizes and humanizes each agent, separating each one from his job. The images stand in stark contrast with photographs usually published in the press to illustrate violent confrontations between protestors and the police force.

The project *Homicide, détenu vs détenu* (2010) is comprised of a drawing of a plan and forty-four photographs of a prison cell taken in 1997 by a police officer during a criminal investigation following the murder of a convict by his cell mate.

Preserved in the archives at the Québec courthouse, the photographs are reproduced by the artist without any modification, and presented on the wall in a uniform and symmetric grid. Léonard thus highlights the systematic nature of the archive and the aesthetic neutrality of the photographs. The clarity of the images, the use of black and white and the modest size of the prints eliminate any possibility for sensationalism. The shooting process adheres to visual codes that determine the value of images in a judicial setting: the confined space is divided methodically and each print is accompanied by descriptive specifications. Even though elements in the photographs are sometimes legible (traces of blood on the walls and floor, strewn clothes, furniture, dishes, books), some of them capture abstract and enigmatic shapes, implying a “reflection on the value of the image as evidence.”²

The appropriation of archival images seems to indicate a crisis of authorship.³ However, the artist’s process is compensated by the project’s conceptual value, the choice of the subject within the archive, and the presentation of the prints in the gallery setting. Having lost their function, these images produced in a judicial context have fallen into the public domain; they offer Léonard the opportunity to question their original qualities. The “aestheticization of documentation”⁴ rendered by the artist’s practice creates a shift, a profound modification of the archive’s status. The installation principal of the exhibition irreversibly reduces the documentary value of the selected corpus.

In her video installation *Guardia, Resguárdeme* (2005), Léonard focuses on the police officers, the military and security guards that wander through the streets and stores of Mexico. A small surveillance camera concealed in her hat allowed her to film these men in close proximity without them knowing. She interrupted recording as soon as they looked at the eye of the hidden camera. Three black and white projections alternate points of view and scenes, enclosing the viewer who is already plunged into the darkness of the gallery space. The procedure is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, an architectural structure that allows an authority to exercise a kind of omniscient control.⁵ In this instance, the power is reversed, as surveillance is exercised by the artist and the audience.

Léonard’s practice attests to a conceptual approach inherited from the sixties and seventies and questions the formal codes at play in documentation. Serialization, installation, the artist’s apparent withdrawal, use of archive, aesthetic appropriation and a contemporary interpretation of historical uses of photography are the framework

for her process. She also explores aesthetic criteria of the “tableau form” elaborated by French critic Jean-François Chevrier in the late eighties, who defended the autonomy of photographic art.⁶ The photographic tableau is defined by a strict use of the medium, a large format, the descriptive quality of the image, the flatness of the surface and the frontality of the print mounted on a wall. The tableau is carefully composed and relates documentary recording to pictorial tradition. Léonard’s proposals are rich with this hybrid, navigating her upfront conceptual lineage and the voluntary inscription of her practice within contemporary photography, now recognized by both museums and markets.

Notes :

1 Michel Poivert, *La Photographie contemporaine* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

2 Nathalie de Blois, *Emmanuelle Léonard: Un livre de photographies* [Montreal: Occurrence, 2005], 34.

3 Marie-Pier Huot, “Au revoir,” accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.emmanuelleleonard.org>.

4 Anne Bénichou, “Ces documents qui sont aussi des œuvres...,” in *Ouvrir le document - Enjeux et pratiques de la documentation dans les arts visuels contemporains*, ed. Anne Bénichou (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2010), 47.

5 André-Louis Paré, “Emmanuelle Léonard: une histoire de l’œil,” accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.emmanuelleleonard.org>.

6 Jean-François Chevrier, *Photo-Kunst: Arbeiten aus 150 Jahren du XXe au X/Xe siècle, aller et retour*, exhibition catalogue (Stuttgart: Cantz/Staatsgalerie, 1989). Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Une autre objectivité/Another Objectivity*, exhibition catalogue (Milan: Idea Books, 1989).