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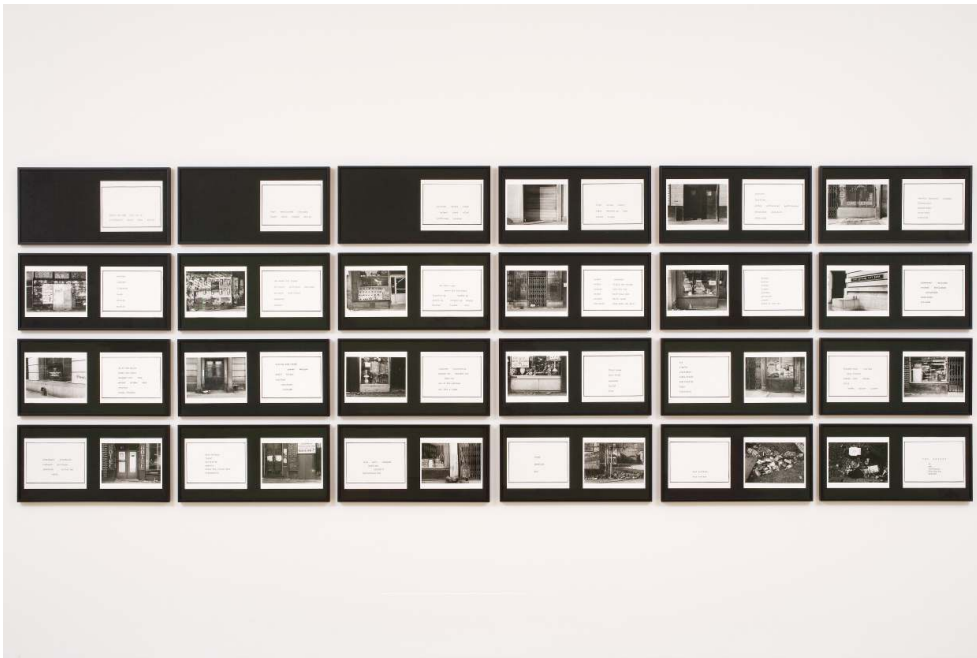
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Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-1975.



© Martha Rosler; courtesy of the artist.

- 1 Martha Rosler, born in 1943, a radical feminist art critique and photographer, is well-known for her photcollages but maybe less so for some of her earlier work, in particular the set of photographs this paper aims to study, entitled *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*. This is a set of forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and image mounted on twenty-four backing boards associating twenty-one photographs of the Bowery and twenty-four photographs of text. It is now part of the Whitney Museum collection, among many others, but has been shown on many occasions since it was first exhibited in 1974-1975.
- 2 Rosler and Jeff Wall, a photographer and art historian, born in 1947, belong to the same generation of artists who engaged with various forms of conceptual art in the 1970s. Wall is often identified with his large-scale light-boxes also known as backlit transparencies, the first of which he exhibited in his hometown of Vancouver in 1977. The Jeff Wall photograph discussed here is entitled *Approach* (2014)¹ and is one of his more recent works.
- 3 Whereas Rosler has made her use of photo-collage intentionally obvious over the years, Wall, on the other hand, has employed digital photo-collage since the 1990s to create the impression of a unified photograph. Only a very close reading, and sometimes not even that, will reveal the montage, an example of this technique being *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* produced in 1993. In 1996, he created his first black and white monochromes printed on silver gelatin paper, five of which he exhibited at documenta X, Kassel, in 1997, among them *The Passerby* (1996), that already shows the careful staging at work in Wall's photography. More recently, along these lines, *Approach*, a black and white five square meter photograph was exhibited for the first time at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, in 2014.

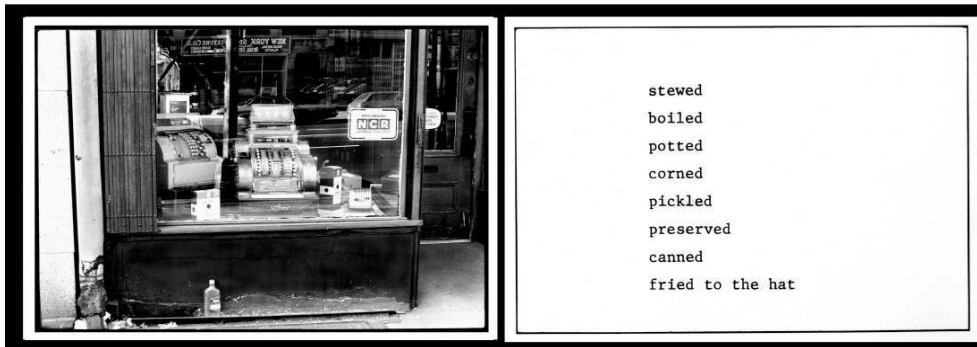
- 4 Both Wall and Rosler have, in their distinctive ways, opposed institutionalized photography such as the American social realist tradition of the 1930s that emerged out of the United States F.S.A. (Farm Security Administration) project (1935-1937). They share an interest in documentary photography, in reality and its representation, while rejecting the humanist/sentimentalist tradition of the late 1930s, early 1940s. Although the realism developed by one of the F.S.A.'s emblematic photographers, Walker Evans, at the beginning of the 1930s put the emphasis on a frontal and simple recording of the subject with a particular attention to the architectural, Olivier Lugon situates the emphasis on the human and the social as occurring some years later, rather in 1940 (Lugon, O., 2001: 102-3). Documentary photography during this period is, according to Lugon, increasingly associated with the representation of people in great need, suffering from social deprivation and poverty, but also becomes more and more sentimental². While the very notion of documentary photography will be increasingly subject to criticism after World War II, the 1960s see the re-emergence of an interest in Evans's "documentary style" defined, beyond an interest in the minute reproduction of the real, by a simple and unobtrusively efficient aesthetic, often associated with the dead-pan effect of his photographs (Lugon, O., 2001: 30-33). Through the introduction of text and photo-collage, Rosler aims at questioning the modalities of social commitment within photography. While Wall's appropriation of the light-box in the 1970s (a presentational device of the world of advertising) and staging of his scenes (Visser H., 2014: 14-15) can be seen as a move away from documentary concerns, the choice of black and white photography in the 1990s, on the other hand, revives the appeal of the notion of documentary.
- 5 In her preliminary definition of documentary photography which she introduces as a counterpoint to Jeff Wall's work, Estelle Blaschke emphasizes the transparency³ of the photographic process and the objectivity of the representation to the exclusion of staging, montage or other editing techniques (Blaschke E., 2009: §5). Although the very choice of the subject — life on the streets — could be seen as situating these photographs within the purview of traditional documentary, so does the interest of both photographers in the vernacular and the banal. Clearly, however, neither Wall's nor Rosler's works fall under the traditional defining criteria that Blaschke puts forward and yet both seek to approach documentary value, in the sense that they document the real.
- 6 This paper will attempt to explore the ways in which Rosler and Wall play with the codes of documentary photography forty years apart, respectively in the 1970s and 2010s. In both works, the dialectic of visibility and invisibility of the homeless or the derelict broaches on the problem of the representation of the socially invisible, while insisting on the visibility of the artistic process itself. The critique levelled at modernist photography is that aesthetic concerns overcast and sometimes obliterate the importance of the subject⁴. When, according to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the subjects are "victimized, marginalized, discriminated against, or even physically attacked (...) the political and ethical terms of their representation are inseparable" (Solomon-Godeau A., 1994: 55). What do the aesthetic choices made by Rosler and Wall, and more specifically their distinctive ways of framing the subject, tell us about the social aspirations of documentary photography?

The portrayal of life on the streets between visibility and invisibility

- 7 Although the use of the term ‘homelessness’ goes back to the 19th century (Oxford English Dictionary), it is more specifically understood today as a product of 1980s neoliberal policies and cannot therefore strictly speaking apply to the ‘bums’ in *The Bowery* series. All the more so as the actors ‘in’ these photographs did not sleep on the streets but “in very cheap housing, called SROa (single room occupancy) hotels that at the time lined the Bowery”⁵. Although the terms ‘homeless’ and ‘bums’ are the product of two different socio-economic contexts, they both refer to people who are seen as being “on the street”, as “occupying” illicitly a public space for activities that are deemed private (sleeping or drinking, eating, etc.). This act therefore, whether chosen or not, of being “on the streets”, blurs the supposedly neat distinction between the public and the private, between what can be shown and what cannot.
- 8 If photography can be defined as providing the world with an image of itself that would have remained invisible without it, then the dialectic of the visible and the invisible in the photographs presented here seems all the more relevant. What is shown, what isn’t and to what effect? The invisibility of those known, in the 1970s context, as ‘bums’, ‘drunks’ or ‘vagrants’ in Rosler’s work or of the homeless in Wall’s, is both quasi-literal and social. The staging of an absence in *The Bowery* and the hiddenness of the person in the cardboard shelter in *Approach* both point to the invisibility of the very actors represented.
- 9 This invisibility is more striking in *The Bowery* through the very absence of the Bowery bums from the photos. This absence reaches its climax in the first three pairs in the series. While 21 of the 24 pairs combine text and image, the first three pairs present only text and a blank space where photographs otherwise appear in the rest of the composition. The photographs are all taken frontally and for the most part represent storefronts after hours, or on the weekend, presumably, since they are all closed. Despite the lack of human presence, there are signs of the Bowery’s inhabitants in all the images: shops, empty bottles, shoes, cigarette packs, trash... all signalling the impoverished, the derelict. Rosler herself defines the photographs as “radical metonymy, with a setting implying the condition itself” (Rosler M., 2004: 195).
- 10 Both *Approach* and *The Bowery* are dark as they stage scenes of decrepitude and desolate landscapes which emphasize the contradiction between the affluence of late-capitalist societies and the persistence of poverty in its most dire forms. In *Approach*, a shelter is made of two or three cardboard boxes, partly laid flat on the concrete to insulate the sleeper from the cold and another against the wall probably serving the same purpose. The cardboard itself, the blanket worn by the woman standing looking at the cardboard shelter, the junk strewn on the ground, the stains on the concrete in front of the shelter; all is dirt, waste, junk, and excrement. Here, as in *The Bowery*, nothing, apart from the woman, seems alive or worth living for. Clearly, the protagonists in these photographs are shown as being excluded from the myth of affluent societies and as being reduced to its leftovers. In Rosler’s composition, this absence is emphasized by the text which reasserts a presence in the form of a poetic association of words which Alan Sekula has described as “handl[ing] an irreconcilable tension between bliss and self-destruction in a society of closed options” (Sekula A., 1978: 62). Terms such as “aglow”, “illuminated”, “abuzz”, “lit up”, “high”, “exhilarated”, “elevated”, “happy” suggest positive states of

drunkenness and offer a contrast with clearly less pleasant conditions such as being “screwed”, “bleary-eyed”, “fried to the hat”, “comatose” or “passed out”, to mention but a few. The expressionism of the terms allows them to stand in lieu of the actors themselves.

Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-1975 (detail).



© Martha Rosler; courtesy of the artist.

- 11 This darkness of the surroundings is further emphasized through the suggestion, at least in *Approach*, that the scene takes place at night. The homeless woman herself is barely visible; the backlighting and her dark skin do not afford her face much light or much detail. Although she is discernibly of African descent, there is not much about her features to instruct us about her feelings. Her body speaks more than her face does, as she stands wrapped up in a blanket for some warmth. Over the shelter, the piece of plastic tarpaulin that is intended to cover and provide added protection is partly folded up, allowing us what constitutes only a bare glimpse inside. The shoe, seen at the entrance of the shelter and the position it is in suggest a presence inside the shelter which may be that of a man's or a dog's given the dog plate, carefully set on a piece of cardboard outside the shelter. The presence of dog and man here can only be guessed at. The lingering uncertainty about these characters' presence/absence in the photographs and the woman's evanescent features enable Wall to comment on the social invisibility of the homeless: the anonymous and the marginalized literally living off-the-grid.
- 12 In fact, both *The Bowery* and *Approach* present grids, both formally and visually. The *Bowery* series is exhibited in the form of a grid which itself echoes the gridded shop fronts, gated entrances and closed doors in the photographs suggesting a strong sense of imprisonment and alienation. The grid is also to be found in *Approach*, with its long horizontal stripes converging towards a vanishing point to the right and the intersecting lines appearing in the cement at regular intervals and forming a network of lines. Each strip has its texture, smooth or rugged, painted or bare. There is no graffiti on the wall, and generally very little by way of concrete detail that could let us know where exactly the photograph was taken, and yet we all know, or have seen, even at a glimpse, places like these. The Bowery, on the other hand, is a precise location in New York, an old neighbourhood with a well-known history as a skid row; yet what is shown, although located specifically in that area, could be reminiscent of other marginalized locations in other large North American cities.
- 13 In an article entitled “Grids,” published in 1979, Rosalind Krauss establishes the profoundly ambivalent nature of the grid in modern art. Both profoundly materialistic and spiritual, the grid questions the relation of art to the world, the continuity between

the work of art and the world outside the frame or on the other hand its autonomy. The photographs in *The Bowery* can be seen as essentially pointing to the world “out there,” indeed the absence of the inhabitants of the Bowery acts as a strong reminder of their social invisibility, thus paradoxically putting them into view. By contrast, *Approach* could be seen as referring to itself insofar as it presents “the surface of the work as something complete and internally organized” (Krauss R., 1979: 63). Yet, the recurrence of the shopping cart in the perspective along the wall suggests that it has the capacity to reproduce itself infinitely inside and eventually outside the frame. Even if the grid announces “modern art’s will to silence” (Krauss, 1979: 50) the narrative, to lock it out, the choice of the voiceless, the down-and-outs, these off-gridders of sorts, lets the social and political discourses back in.

- 14 The people “represented” here remain anonymous, entirely or almost completely invisible; they dominate the scene by virtue of their invisibility. This very invisibility can be interpreted as a social commentary about those living on the margins, off-gridders of sorts, who have not chosen this life but are victims of its vicissitudes. Rendering the invisibility of the marginal or the poor visible is perhaps less about portraying homelessness or drunkenness or poverty than it is about the relation of the viewer to photography. It could be construed as a form of resistance to the idea that photography itself is transparent, that it does not affect the world it captures. It points rather to the assertion that photography as a medium induces a radical transformation of the world through the act of representing it (Bazin P., 2017: 27). In his 2013 interview with Yilmaz Dziewior, Jeff Wall insists on the idea that he wants the viewer to look “at” and not “through” the photograph (Dziewior Y., 2014: 37). In a photograph of oneself, that would mean thinking not “this is me” but “this is a picture of me,” because when you see only yourself, the photograph is rendered invisible. Both Rosler and Wall are striving precisely to make visible the process of construction that lies behind the picture.

A realism that is not

- 15 In *Approach*, as in many other Wall photographs, the formal aspects of the photograph are at least as prevalent as its apparent realism (Visser H., 2014: 10). In fact, the scenes are carefully staged over extended periods of time in a process which the photographer calls “cinematography,” which as in the art of film-making involves choosing a location and hiring a crew as well as performers. In a 2015 article in *The Guardian*, the journalist Sean O’Hagan reports on his interview with Wall about *Approach*:
- 16 Wall tells me it was shot under an actual freeway where the homeless congregate and that “it took a month to make, working hands-on” – but he won’t divulge just how staged it is. Is this an actual homeless woman, or an actor? Is the shelter real, or was it built by Wall’s team of assistants to resemble one? (O’Hagan S., 2015)
- 17 Wall discusses elsewhere the lengthy process at work which involves making “his actors rehearse until the gestures have become automatic and the performers are, in a sense, no longer acting” (Visser H., 2014: 14). He prefers in fact to speak, not of actors, but of “performers,” “giving primacy not to the person or the personality of the protagonists” but to the situation (Visser H., *ibid.*). In *Volunteer* (1996), for example, Wall paid “the performer to return to the studio where the set had been built and repeat his ‘voluntary’ cleaning duties night after night over an extended period of time” (Van Winkel C., 2014: 22). According to Van Winkel, for Wall, this was “the only way to transcend the aspect of

fiction and role-playing and to reach the point where the photograph could finally be made" (Van Winkel C., *ibid.*). This staging, Wall prefers to describe as a strategy of "re-enactment" (Dziewior Y., 2014: 36): "a process of construction of that rectangle, upon which the lost memory – lost because never photographed – reappears, not as itself, but as a pattern formed by its disappearance." (Dziewior Y., 2014: 37) The apparent realism in *Approach* lies at the same time in what are seen as classic features of documentary photography such as the banality of the scene and the choice of black and white as well as in a lengthy process of reconstruction of a scene which runs against the idea that documentary is about seizing a particular moment in time.

- 18 With their clear references to Walker Evans's photos and their dead-pan effect⁶, Rosler's images of the Bowery taken in the 1970s could pass for documentary street photography⁷. Here, the photographic moment is not staged, there are precisely no performers, but the presentation of it alongside the text breaks "the modernist insistence on the purely visual" (Edwards S., 2012: 84); it emphasizes the inadequacy of the visual/photographic system; its insufficiency, it seems, to express the fullness of experience. The image/text association plays with the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, of presence and absence, of the literal and the metaphor: the bum's absence literally echoing the expression "out of the picture" in the accompanying text. It is interesting to note that while Rosler questions the limits of a realistic photographic representation, the slang used by the drunkards and quoted in the installation "suggests the fundamental aim of drunkenness, to *escape* from reality" (Sekula A., 1978: 62). The interaction between the words in the text and the wording in the images further adds to the work's complexity. In Rosler's photograph of the sign for *Paragon Paint*, for example, Steve Edwards draws our attention to the discrepancy between the long list of goods on the storefront and the empty shop window (Edwards S., 2010: 20). Also, by interposing itself between the image and the viewer, the text, which taps into a slang repertoire presumably used by the actors themselves, attracts the viewer's attention to the person's absence and possibly to the oddity of the situation.
- 19 Both works seem to be grounded on notions of loss, disappearance, absence, mystery and have in common that they are founded on acts of refusal. Indeed, Wall explains that for him what precedes the re-enacting of a decisive moment in time is the deliberate and conscious act "to not photograph" it (O'Hagan S., 2015). Similarly, Rosler describes *The Bowery* as "an act of refusal" (Rosler M., 2004: 191), a refusal not of impoverishment as such but of "the impoverishment of representational strategies" (Rosler M., 2004: 194). The act of "not photographing" can be read as a statement about the illusion of the authentic moment captured by the camera as the defining act of documentary photography. What both works have in common here is their attempt to fashion other ways of making documentary photography. Edwards confirms this when he quotes Rosler as saying: "We wanted to be documentarians in a way that documentarians hadn't" (Edwards S., 2010: 76).
- 20 Both Wall and Rosler experiment with the possibilities and the limits of realist photography. In today's day and age of digital photography, Wall's choice of reverting to analogue photography in the 1990s, as in the case of his more recent photograph *Approach*, could be taken as a sign of kinship with the realist photography of the 1930s. But while the very possibility of realism has come under attack with the increasingly seamless manipulation that digital technology allows, Wall's *faux-réels* emulate realism while deconstructing it. Wall himself views digital manipulation simply as an alternative way of

creating his realistic-looking images and sees no fundamental opposition between his chosen techniques of analogue or digital photography (Visser H., 2014: 16).

- 21 Analogue photography does not in and of itself preclude the possibility of montage or of retouching a photograph, but these are not the primary approaches Rosler and Wall choose to pursue. Their respective critical strategies rely not so much on the manipulation of the negative or on montage as on the staging and the presentation of the work. In this way, their work both states its connection to the documentary style while undermining it by choosing to stage the invisibility, if not the absence, of the subject, itself pointing to the problematic notion of the referent, which is not “the Bowery *per se*, but the ‘Bowery,’ as a socially mediated, ideological construction.” (Sekula A., 1978: 60)
- 22 Jeff Wall first used the expression “near documentary” to characterize his work in 2002 during an exhibition at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York (Blaschke E., 2009: \$5). The way it echoes with the title of the photograph *Approach* is quite striking. Is the homeless woman a metaphor for the photographer “nearing” documentary and yet cautiously staying away from it? The woman, bracing herself against the cold, certainly seems hesitant about approaching the shelter, fearing maybe what she will find or the aggressive reaction from its supposed denizens. The tension between the reflection on real-life issues that this photograph obviously displays and the technique of cinematography adopted by Wall shows how the photographer approaches documentary realism while keeping it at a distance.
- 23 The choice of the title itself is revealing of that tension. In an interview given to *Le Monde*, Jeff Wall explains how a title and a caption are different. According to Wall,
- a caption under a photograph in a newspaper gives practical information: if a woman is crying we are told why. In this specific context, the reader is there not to contemplate a crying woman but to take position. This transforms the photograph into something instrumental, there’s nothing wrong with that, but this is not an artistic relationship.
- In a title, as opposed to a caption, Wall further explains that he seeks to cut this practical relation with the image so that something good can emerge from it. It is and is not real. This ‘new realism’ is a balance between commitment and distance. To write a title is a form of poetry. It is up to the viewers to hold on to what they see. If they take time, then things emerge, and they no longer need a caption. (Guerrin and Guillot 2010: my translation)
- 24 The text clearly plays a poetic role in Rosler’s series, her
- found poetry begin[ing] with the most transcendental of metaphors ‘aglow, illuminated’ and progress[ing] ultimately, through numerous categories of symbolic escape, mingled with blunt recognition, to the slang terms for empty bottles: ‘dead soldiers’ and ‘dead marines.’ (Sekula A., 1978: 62)
- 25 Here the poetic language as seen by Sekula embodies both escape and recognition, absence and presence, a process of distantiation and proximity which mirrors the distance that the text introduces between the image and the viewer. The suggestion of hesitancy or indecision in the title *Approach* echoes with the sense of lacking that we find in the inadequacy — or failure — that *The Bowery* work’s title asserts. This inadequacy seems to be referring to the inadequacy both of the image and the text as systems of representation. According to Edwards, however, the two inadequate systems are more precisely the metaphor of poetic language and the metonymy that operates in the images. Neither metaphor nor metonymy is able to signify the “figurative departure from the ground of experience called ‘literal’” (Edwards S., 2010: 106). Therefore, *The Bowery* may

aim at being read as a double refusal: an act of distanciation from realist documentary and from figuration itself. In both works by Wall and Rosler, the poetry of the titles cuts against the brutality — Sekula would say “pornography” — of direct representation (Sekula A., 1978: 61).

Engaging with documentary somewhere between the ethical and the aesthetic

- 26 In her essay entitled *In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)* initially published in 1981, in which she discusses *The Bowery*, Rosler underlines the power relations at work in documentary photography. With the photographs of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis as well as the social realists of the Farm Security Administration project of the 1930s in mind, she stresses the discrepancy between “the manifold possibilities of radical demands that photos of poverty and degradation suggest” on the one hand and the “polite and negotiable [...] argument for reform” on the other (Rosler M., 2004: 73). In a scathing appraisal, Rosler describes such documentary photography as testifying to
- the bravery or (dare we name it) the manipulateness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble. (Rosler M., 2004: *ibid.*)
- 27 Rosler is calling into question the notion that the photographer is allegedly on the inside and that her being on the inside somehow discharges us, the viewers, from our responsibilities to what is being photographed. In her famous essay “In Plato’s Cave” published in 1977, Susan Sontag had already denounced photography’s profoundly conservative nature and the essential complicity of the photographer with the thing photographed:
- Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a “good” picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing — including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune. (Sontag S., 2005: 9)
- 28 Sontag’s and Rosler’s critiques of photography, respectively ethical and political, both rest upon the inside/outside dialectic. This issue is taken up by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in her article entitled “Inside/Out” published in 1994 where she explores the question of the photographer’s positioning with regards to the subject photographed. She begins with the usual assumption that authenticity and truth are on the inside and that the outside guarantees a position of objectivity but goes on to show that the involvement of the photographer in a milieu or culture does not necessarily “dislodge the subject/object distinction” or “the risk [that] the subject — irrespective of the photographer’s intent — becomes object and spectacle” (Solomon-Godeau A., 1994: 55).
- 29 Rosler’s work is seen by Solomon-Godeau as offering an alternative to this binary system through its “radical iconoclasm” (Solomon-Godeau, 1994: 58) — literally the breaking of images — which displaces the problem of poverty or dereliction from the register of the visual to that of the politics of representation. Rosler unambiguously states, in the essay previously quoted, the photograph’s inability to “deal with” reality (Rosler M., 2004: 194). The presentation by Rosler of her work as a series refuses to conform with the traditional

idea that a work of art is to be understood as an object of beauty abstracted from the world and begs the question posed by Sontag as to photography's capacity to awaken ethical responsiveness or political action in the viewer. Limiting the representation of reality to an aestheticized product of consumption reduces its capacity to affect us as well as its ability to inspire a political interpretation.

- 30 Jeff Wall's work can also be seen as suggesting a practice that is political in that it engages explicitly with the inside/outside dichotomy (Solomon-Godeau A., 1994: 58). *Approach*, for example, can be seen as transcending this dichotomy through the adoption of the grid where the photograph is in a kind of continuum with reality. The balance that Wall and Rosler seek between a proximity with reality taken as a lived experience and distance from the illusion of the authentic moment is emblematic of a shared strategy that aims, through the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, at revealing the double process of "approaching" or proximity implied by the documentary format and distancing that occurs in the act of photographing itself. The aesthetic dimension of Wall's photographs aims precisely at underscoring the limits of representational photography and points at the centrality of photography as a process. For both Rosler and Wall, the reflection on notions of visibility and invisibility put into question the very possibility of visual representation.
- 31 In her article entitled "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," Judith Butler discusses the process at hand in the act of framing a photograph (Butler J., 2009). In her attempt to answer some of Sontag's concerns about the ethics of photography when concerned with human suffering, she relies on the example of the Abu Graib photographs to explore both what is inside and outside the frame and how the dialectic between the two, between what is visible (inside the frame) and invisible (outside the frame and yet clearly part of the scene) addresses the question of the "field of representability":
- we cannot understand the field of representability simply by examining its explicit contents, since it is constituted fundamentally by what is left out, maintained outside the frame within which representations appear. (Butler J., 2009: 73)
- 32 When the frame is no longer perceived as active — both showing and truncating reality — "what emerges under these conditions is a viewer who assumes him or herself to be in an immediate (and incontestable) visual relation to reality" (Butler J., 2009: *ibid.*). She then takes her argument a step further to say that unless the act of framing is laid bare, the image actually "withdraws reality from perception".
- 33 The represented image thereby signifies its admissibility into the domain of representability, and thus at the same time signifies the delimiting function of the frame — even as, or precisely because, it does not represent it. In other words, the image, which is supposed to deliver reality, in fact withdraws reality from perception. (Butler J., 2009: 74-75)
- 34 This belief that images can "deliver reality" would imply that photographs are somehow transparent. In an age that values transparency as akin to the democratic process, this notion is increasingly put to the test by digital technology. In fact, a critique of the transparency of the photographic image by revealing the photographic processes at work points precisely to what is beyond the formal frame and the limits of defining documentary photography in terms of its transparency. Although it was central to FSA documentary aesthetics that photographs should be untouched, Dorothea Lange herself is known to have retouched the prints of her famous *Migrant Mother* (1936), to Roy Stryker's dismay⁸.

- 35 Rosler and Wall differ fundamentally in their politics. Rosler calls for a revolutionary politics of representation whereas Wall seeks to move the viewer, to stimulate an emotional relation between him or her and the work of art, not in a self-expressionistic mode, but as a reflection on the process of representation – maybe one should even call it a pedagogical relation. The ethical dimension of Rosler’s and Wall’s photographs lies, however, not so much in that they reveal a hidden world but that they address “the problem that visibility itself is an ideology” (Wilkinson J., 2015), “they teach us to see the frame that blinds us to what we see” (Butler J., 2009: 100).
- 36 In addressing the issue of poverty and its expression on the streets through social and political lenses, Rosler and Wall both draw on and deconstruct the documentary genre. Although they endorse a somewhat documentary aesthetic, both of their works tend, in different ways, towards a form of abstraction through absence – absence of the subject in *The Bowery* or of a precise location in *Approach*. Because neither the images, nor their titles, however, have the “immediate intelligibility”⁹ expected of social documentary, this tends to blur the nature of the relationship between the subject photographed and the spectator.
- 37 The present humanitarian crisis posed by the plight of refugees around the world has brought to the fore the question of the visual status of citizens. For Azoulay, the focus on the photographer/viewer relation has tended to eclipse the agency of the subject photographed (Azoulay, A., 2008). Contrasting the photographer’s ability to promote social change on the one hand and the viewers’ responsibility to take action on the other has often resulted in a relatively binary perception opposing those who have the privilege to represent and those represented. In what she terms the “civil contract of photography” as Martha Rosler before her (1981), Azoulay explores the “encounter” between the three “participant parties” in the contract: the photographer, the viewer and the subject photographed (Azoulay A., 2008: 99).
- 38 Both *The Bowery* and *Approach* offer a gaze at the intolerable situation of the poor in wealthy Western societies. The potentially problematic nature of that gaze draws our attention to a form of indeterminacy in these photographs, in terms of genre and of the subject/location photographed. Maybe this indeterminacy is precisely the condition that allows us to follow Azoulay’s suggestion that photographs should be read as civic encounters where
- the individual is not confined to being posited as the photograph’s passive addressee, but has the possibility of *positing herself* as the photograph’s addressee and by means of this address is capable of becoming a citizen in the citizenry of photography by making herself appear in public, coming before the public and entering a dialog with it by means of photographs, which despite their power, are often both silent and silenced. (Azoulay A., 2008: 130)

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NOTES

1. <https://www.mariangoodman.com/artists/jeff-wall>. Last accessed, 7 February 2019.
 2. « Malheureusement, ce nouveau mot fétiche, l'«humain», n'est bien souvent qu'un synonyme respectable du «sentimental», auquel il confère une certaine hauteur de vue, tout comme il voile d'universalisme un attendrissement de plus en plus nationaliste. » (Lugon, 2001: 104).
 3. Dominic McIver Lopes offers this definition of the transparent: “To say that photographs are transparent is to say that we see through them. A person seeing a photograph of a lily, literally sees a lily. She does not see a lily face-to-face, for there is no lily in front of her; nor is the photograph a lily — it is an image of a lily. Rather, her seeing a lily through a photograph of a lily is like her seeing a lily in a mirror, through binoculars, or on a closed-circuit television system.” (2003, 438)
 4. For example, Susan Sontag (2005 [1977]).
 5. I thank Martha Rosler for her remarks on this subject in an email exchange, January 2019.
 6. For a discussion of Walker Evans's documentary style in particular, see Olivier Lugon (2001). Here, the “dead-pan” effect refers to a photograph that deliberately steers away from expressing emotions.
 7. Clive Scott (2007, quoted in Derrick Price, 2015: 117) writes: “Street photography certainly puts us in a taxonomic quandary, not only because it stands at the crossroads between the tourist snap, the documentary photograph, the photojournalism of the fait divers (news in brief) but also because it asks to be treated as much as a vernacular photography as a high art one”. For a discussion of street photography, see Derrick Price, “Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About”, in Liz Wells (ed.): 77-132.
 8. Roy Stryker created and managed the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the Federal Government during the Great Depression.
 9. Writing about Jeff Wall's photograph *The Forest*, E. Blaschke points to the topos of the “intelligibilité immédiate”, which I borrow here. (Blaschke, §36)
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ABSTRACTS

Four decades separate Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-1975) from Jeff Wall's *Approach* (2014), two representations of life on the streets. In the 1970s, Martha Rosler, among others, sought to define and practice documentary photography in ways that would invite the viewer to reflect on the politics of representation at work in documentary art. Forty years later, in his work *Approach*, representing a homeless woman, Jeff Wall, in the style he describes as “near-documentary”, also questions notions of objectivity, authenticity and realism in photography. The balance that both Wall and Rosler pursue between proximity with reality taken as lived experience and distance from the illusion of the authentic moment is emblematic of a shared strategy. Through the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, this strategy aims at revealing the double process at work in documentary photography, that of approaching a subject and establishing a distance with it. The radical act of “not photographing” ironically present in both works underlines the ways in which Rosler and Wall are engaged in a critique of the politics of visibility.

Quatre décennies séparent l'exposition des œuvres de Martha Rosler et de Jeff Wall, respectivement intitulées *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-1975) et *Approach* (2014), deux œuvres qui s'intéressent aux gens de la rue. Dans les années 1970, Martha Rosler, parmi d'autres, cherche à définir et à mettre en pratique une forme de photographie documentaire qui invite le spectateur à se pencher sur les politiques de représentation à l'œuvre. Quarante ans plus tard, dans son œuvre intitulée *Approach*, représentant une femme sans-abri, Jeff Wall, dans un style qu'il décrit comme tenant du *near documentary*, cherche lui aussi à réévaluer les notions d'objectivité, d'authenticité et de réalisme en photographie. L'équilibre que Rosler et Wall recherchent entre une proximité avec la réalité comprise comme expérience vécue et la distanciation par rapport à l'illusion d'un moment authentique est emblématique d'une stratégie partagée. Une stratégie qui vise à travers la dialectique du visible et de l'invisible à révéler le double processus que la pratique du documentaire implique ; à la fois approcher le sujet et le tenir à distance. L'acte radical qui consisterait à *ne pas photographier*, ironiquement présent dans les deux œuvres, souligne la façon dont Rosler et Wall s'engagent dans une critique de la politique de la visibilité.

Han transcurrido cuatro décadas entre la exposición de las obras de Martha Rosler y de Jeff Wall, tituladas respectivamente *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-1975) y *Approach* (2014); ambas obras se centran en la gente de la calle. En los años 1970, Martha Rosler, entre otros fotógrafos, busca definir y poner en práctica una forma de fotografía documental que invita al espectador a que se centre en las políticas de representación de la obra. Cuarenta años más tarde, en su obra titulada *Approach* –que representa a una mujer sin techo– Jeff Wall, en un estilo que él mismo describe como acercándose al *near documentary*, busca a su vez la reevaluación de las nociones de objetividad, de autenticidad y de realismo en fotografía. Rosler y Wall buscan un equilibrio entre una proximidad con la realidad entendida como experiencia vivida y la distanciación con respecto a la ilusión de un momento auténtico, lo que es emblemático de una estrategia compartida. Dicha estrategia tiene como objetivo, a través de la dialéctica de lo visible y de lo invisible, revelar el doble proceso implicado por la práctica documental: acercarse al sujeto manteniéndolo a distancia. El acto radical que consistiría en *no fotografiar*, que está irónicamente presente en ambas obras, subraya de qué modo Rosler y Wall se sitúan dentro de una crítica de la política de la visibilidad.

INDEX

Palabras claves: fotografía documental, fotografía en escena, realismo social, Canadá, Estados Unidos

Keywords: documentary photography, staged photography, social realism, Canada, United States

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