

express dissent and conceive of revolutionary transformation while distancing oneself from one's forebears, whose lingering nostalgia for their own storming of the barricades, not to mention their idealistic belief in the possibility of visible and permanent social change, seems quaint, if even a trifle embarrassing. (1)

Despite some equivocal distantiations, the reader is left with the impression that Raley largely accepts the rejection of revolutionary macropolitics. While she expresses a "fervent wish that this book will become obsolete because the world will have changed so dramatically that this study of art-activism could only appear as a quaint historical artifact" (xii), her immanent engagement with tactical media does not grapple with the central problem of how such a "dramatic" transformation could possibly take place or what agency could carry it out. Raley avoids the historical causes of the present impasses of revolutionary practice—impasses where tactical media are, in any long and global view, merely cultural symptoms.

The section on the difficulties of representing global capitalism reviews some recent theories and analyses but, again, falls short of formulating a clear position from which tactical media might be assessed. Theories that support the investments of tactical practitioners are presented without critical discussion or Raley's

own clear endorsement. This ambiguity compromises her "critical" study. Artist and author Gregory Sholette and I have argued in several places, including the pages of this journal, that any adequate critique of tactical media—any serious attempt to analyze both the strengths and weaknesses, effects and limitations of its orientations and practices—would have to question the rejection of strategy that constitutes this stream itself.

A renewal of radical politics today would need to critically question the now-inherited tactical *doxa* of an aimless and uncoordinated "plurality of resistances." It would need to take up the problem of reconstituting strategic forms of oppositional counter-power on more radically democratic lines. Such a counter-power is necessary if emancipatory movements and processes are to defend themselves from the all too-material reality of a global capitalist order enforced by the violence and terror of nation-states. If this urgency is not very legible in Raley's book, it is because her categorization of tactical media tends to foreclose the formulation of a global and organizable radical politics.

GENE RAY guest edited, with Gregory Sholette, a Third Text special issue on *Tactical Media* (Vol. 22, no. 5, September 2008).

OUT OF SIGHT?

"Look at me": Photographs from Mexico City

By Jed Fielding

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Caterwauling through perceived misery is a long-standing tradition in art—photography included—and unless handled deftly and with powerful restraint, it often empties the work of authority and critical perspective while diminishing the subject. At its worst, defects are embellished and malfunction celebrated to no good end. The lines crossed are muted, even invisible. The well-intentioned gesture becomes grotesque, not because of what it captures, but simply because that act is executed thoughtlessly.

In Jed Fielding's new book of photographs entitled *Look at me: Photographs from Mexico City*, he turns his camera on blind school children. Fielding posed the children against walls or lying on the floor, sometimes using a black cloth backdrop. His technique is both robust and sure-handed. These are deliberate and focused photographs of a vulnerable population, yet the central conceit here is too obvious and overstated. A disconnect between seeing and being seen serves as a sort of portraiture in half-measure, in which a conceptual twist is layered over the work. This imbalance, inherently present in each photograph, wears thin quickly, leaving the viewer to straddle a line between discomfort and puzzlement.

What resonates here is disability masquerading as insight, for what is captured is flat-lined and devoid of emotion. Indeed, the children remain unchanged, and unremorsefully poised and unseeing. Fielding fails to release them from the dark, a metaphorically challenged assumption to begin with, and instead, leaves them stranded, frozen in time, as figures in a wrongheaded experiment. The viewer is left slightly bewildered by his motivation and wonders what it was that he projected onto his subjects. Fielding, surely with the best of intentions, leaves these children as he found them—in the dark.

In the introduction, Britt Salvesen sheds a different light on the work, saying of Fielding, "He forces us to confront the uncomfortable assumption, common to many folk traditions, that blindness is an affliction, if not an outright punishment" (10). She then summons historical and mythological figures that have defined our understanding of blindness including Samson, James Joyce, and Jorge Luis Borges. She forgets, however, that both Borges and Joyce were blinded, not blind, and more importantly, not children—a crucial distinction in this context. Indeed, forgetting the exceptional talent of both men, their sight diminished over time and while both struggled in later years, their work was largely undiminished.

Salvesen sees Fielding's work as confrontational and unapologetic, as in fact it is. Yet in something so collaborative, it seems exploitative to hover so near the innocent in an effort to evoke strong feelings. Nevertheless, she defends Fielding's method, saying,

The result is not an idealized depiction; the people in Fielding's photographs are neither storied heroes nor biblical elders. They are,



crucially, children, and he makes no attempt to tame their wildness or contain their feral energy. They are crazy, cranky kids in dusty dungarees; they are pudgy pre-teens wearing their Sunday best; they are hormonally charged adolescents flaunting fashion fads. Finally, they are not picturesque, angelic charity cases, and by rejecting this formula Fielding declines to solicit the viewer's empathy in any conventional way. (10)

It is a persuasive, spirited, and wide-ranging defense that just barely adheres to Fielding's work here.

Vince Aletti's essay offers an overview of Fielding's career, addressing his work photographing on the streets of Naples, Italy, where the photographer was often concerned for his personal safety. He photographed children, some of them members of dangerous

street gangs. Aletti also traces Fielding's studies with both Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan and the influence both men had on him. He quotes Fielding in regard to his work on this project: "There's something paradoxical, almost preternatural, about a blind child staring into a machine whose only purpose in the world is to see..." (15). And here, I think, Fielding skirts across the central problem with these photographs. The paradox he finds so alluring is the work's weakness. The simplicity of the idea undermines the complexities involved in working with these children and neuters the vibrancy that Fielding desired.

But Aletti disagrees. "The children," he writes, "exist in their own universe, their broad, sightless faces like moons and bright planets filling and overflowing the frame. These are images that echo the aesthetic of Surrealism and the classic avant-garde: fraught, irrational, startling, and utterly subjective" (15).

Aletti injects a fantasia of detail into the children's faces, all layered in systematic fashion around the idea that they have been transformed, captured, and illuminated by Fielding's camera. Here too, a disconnect surfaces; it rises out of the notion that somehow, something has changed. It implies that the viewers' collective "seeing" imbues the children with special power—some severe enchantment or magical claim. In one respect, it ordains Fielding for his "daring" and neglects what is central here, the children and their disabilities. This in no way implies that we should look away. On the contrary, we should look thoughtfully and with exquisite care. Otherwise, we risk cheapening something the children in Fielding's book would never take for granted: our vision. What better evidence of this than having an artist of Fielding's stature, experience, and compassion, so fully misread the delicate interaction between the photographer and subject?

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