

ARTFORUM

Mary Ellen Carroll

THIRD STREAMING

10 Greene Street

March 23–May 19

It is unclear what constitutes the public sphere in the United States—and even more so in Los Angeles. Apparently engaged in investigating this question, Mary Ellen Carroll's current solo show presents *Kruder and Dorfmeister*, 1999–2000, Polaroids of every public library (at the time) in LA. The pictures are small, not always sharp, and black-and-white, thereby creating a formal conversation with the buildings themselves, which are also slight, forlorn, and generally rather unremarkable. Thus these structures are at pains to represent ideas of the public good out of which they were ostensibly cast.

Also on view is *Federal*, 2003, twenty-four photographs drawn from an eponymous film that was recently screened at the Museum of the Moving Image. The work takes as its subject the Federal Building on Wilshire Boulevard, a hulking mass that houses multiple government offices, including the FBI. Carroll filmed the structure from both the front and the back during a twenty-four-hour period. A paper trail of documents and letters also on display underlines the difficulty of capturing such an edifice in the aftermath of 9/11.

Kruder and Dorfmeister is undoubtedly in dialogue with Ed Ruscha's serialized LA projects, such as *Twentysix Gas Stations*, 1962, and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. Ruscha's work suggests that such spaces—where strangers momentarily coexist on private ground—constitute a particularly American take on the public sphere. Given that many of the libraries Carroll documented probably existed during the 1960s, the series comes to function like a more properly public addendum to those iconic enumerations that have since become synonymous with space in Los Angeles. Similarly, *Federal* seems an interpretive remake of Andy Warhol's *Empire*, 1964. But instead of focusing on a famed tourist attraction, Carroll's film and photographs image an unexceptional structure—an actual concretion of state power erected in 1969, empire at its most banal. At a time when public financing is being drained from public services but funding for government security operations remains flush, it is worth pondering what “public” means in the US today. Perhaps an answer is to be found in the nexus proposed by this exhibition: somewhere between the library and the FBI office.

— Sarah Lookofsky



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Federal* (detail), 2003, twenty-four color photographs, each 20 x 24”.