

REVIEW

NEW YORK

**Mary Ellen Carroll: *Federal, State, County and City*
Third Streaming**

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May 8, 2012

In the tradition of conceptualism and institutional critique, Mary Ellen Carroll's work eschews the metaphorical for the literal.¹ Carroll engages the bureaucracies that structure our daily lives, unveiling their operations and failings with a characteristic dry wit. Whether crashing a 1985 Buick Riviera on the steps of a museum in Munich or casting an actress to act as her doppelgänger during an opening, Carroll operates within the real to provoke questions about the social construction of meaning and authenticity.

Take, for example, her recent project in Houston: *prototype 180*. With a mandate to "make architecture perform," Carroll worked within the city's zoning laws to rotate a single-family house in the first ring suburb of Sharpstown 180 degrees on its lot, documenting the process via cameras installed on the premises. In the artist's words, this open-ended work takes "policy as a readymade;" the house in question sits firmly in the realm of art but also acts to catalyze discourse about urban development and sustainability in the country's fastest-growing city.



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Federal*, 2003; 24 Cibachrome prints, each 20 x 24 inches; courtesy Third Streaming, NY.

The objects in Carroll's exhibition at Third Streaming revolve around *Federal* (2003), a work that prefigures *prototype 180*. The two-channel 24-hour high-definition video documents in real time the front and back facades of the Los Angeles Federal Building, which houses local chapters of agencies such as the FBI, CIA and Department of Defense. Iconic for its modern ugliness, the Federal Building was described in 1970 as an "immense file cabinet that one can't miss."² *Federal's* monumental quality recalls Andy Warhol's eight-hour film *Empire*. So too does its cinematic mode of presentation: rather than showing the video in Third Streaming's gallery, it was screened over a single 24-hour period at the Museum of the Moving Image in

Astoria, Queens in March.

Third Streaming's intimate Manhattan space includes twenty-four still photographs from *Federal's* production, arranged in a tight grid along the space's largest wall, and a vitrine with related documentation. These include correspondence between Carroll and the FBI securing permission for her to shoot within a cemetery that abuts the building's back façade, Carroll's eloquent letter describing the project's conceptual underpinnings to potential supporters (then-Senator Hillary Clinton and Michael Moore among them), and the unexplained decision to change Carroll's filming dates. In contrast to the bureaucratic documents' semi-transparency, the photographs intone a sense of foreboding mystery behind the walls of the Federal Building. These stills show little public foot traffic along the street, but depict shifting bodies and activity behind the gridded windows. That Carroll was even able to release the footage, which went through multiple rounds of review by federal agencies, could be considered a monumental feat in the climate of fear and suspicion engendered by the Bush administration at the debut of the Iraq War.



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Kruder and Dorfmeister*, 1999-2000; 66 Polaroids, each 3.25 x 4.25 inches; courtesy Third Streaming, NY.

Carroll further dissects LA's iconoclastic urbanity, nearly devoid of public space and pedestrians, in a neighboring series. *Kruder and Dorfmeister* (1999-2000), named after an Austrian DJ duo, riffs on Ed Ruscha's iconic gas station photographs. The series indexes every library in Los Angeles through a series of sixty-six black-and-white Polaroid prints. Seemingly taken from the window of a moving vehicle during a weekend spin, these casual pictures depict the heterogeneity of the city's architecture while throwing the spotlight on institutions far outside the aspirational glamour of much of Hollywood's architecture. Sixty-eight enamel-on-metal panels with ambiguous 'captions'—penned by poet Tan Lin, Carroll's then-boyfriend—accompany the photographs. The exhibition shows only one of these panels, which states: "Fig. 1. In LA, my girlfriend tells me she wants to be *moderne* and listen to Debussy at the same time."

Nowhere (2002) works against the urban logic that structures the other two series, while still exposing the limitations of federal agencies. Carroll went on a discount cruise in order to photograph "nowhere," that is, the middle of the ocean. In her developed prints, the lab technician mistakenly included photographs of friends on a beach trip. Carroll asked the Greek tourist board in New York to determine the location based on a hydrofoil in the Greek language. When they could not, Carroll further corrupted the photographs' integrity by having them silkscreened backwards on the verso of colored vellum and folded.

The implicit dialogue of doubling and mimicry, a major thread in Carroll's work that runs through *Federal* and *prototype 180*, spans a sculpture and several watercolors based on the likenesses of Laura Riding Jackson and

José Feliciano. Though the connections may not be obvious to viewers less familiar with the breadth of the artist's projects, it is the strength of Carroll's objects that encourage you to look, reflect, and look again.

1. For a further explication of Carroll's approach to literalness, see her interview with Hamza Walker, "My Death is Pending," in *MEC* (Göttigen: Steidl Mack, 2009): 13-15. Equally indispensable to this discussion is the chapter in this monograph entitled "Literalness," indexing works made by Carroll that fall under this category in her personal card catalogue, 317-332.
2. "An immense file cabinet that one can't miss. As depressing a comment on architecture of the 1970s as it is a condemnation of the bureaucracy of our society," David Gebhard and Robert Winter, *An Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles*, rev. ed., edited and updated by Robert Winter (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2003): 137. Quoted in Jonathan Flatley, "Semblable," *MEC*, 8.

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