

“The Manhattan Art Review”

Peggy Ahwesh, Paul Auster / Spencer Ostrander, Gretchen Bender, Sihan Cui, Mona Leau, Corky Lee, John Schabel, Charles Van Schaick - Model Home (New York), After Wisconsin Death Trip - Carriage Trade - ****.5

An immaculately constructed group show, as is the norm at Carriage Trade. As the title indicates, the show is centered around *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Michael Lesy's (unfamiliar to me, but clearly remarkable) book of photohistorical research, itself centered around the also remarkable work of Charles Van Schaick, the town photographer in Black River Falls, WI from 1890 to 1910. The book's methodology, in the manner of most good sociopolitical art, is to present facts that the viewer can then draw conclusions from instead of treating their subject as a preconditioned illustration of a political norm. We see photos of fin-de-siècle Wisconsin and read news clippings from the era about crime, suffering, and gossip; we feel one way or another about the information we are given, but we are not told what we should think about it. The show's main room is dedicated to extracts from the book, and some of the other pieces, such as the photo and video works on Chinese life in Flushing, Queens, operate on a similarly documentary level. But the show's prevailing thesis, which takes it beyond simply copycatting the book, turns this materialist (as in historical) lens towards the skewed dissemination of information by the news. Everyone, hopefully, realizes that the *New York Times* presents a less-than-objective view of the world, but, notwithstanding the newspaper's considerable imperfections, it has to be admitted that the media can not do anything other than mediate, and distort, reality. Corky Lee can take a picture of a protester bleeding from the head and being carried away by the cops because he was there at the time; the picture is one thing, the way a newspaper uses his image and reports on the protest is another, the actual moment itself is a distinct, irreducible third. Likewise, Paul Auster and Spencer Ostrander's photo-text documents the locations of mass shootings with a stark normalcy, revealing an unremarkable suburban scene when scrubbed of a sensationalizing news context. Peggy Ahwesh's collage of awkward Korean animations of US news stories makes its caricature explicit, and Gretchen Bender's video combining *Cops* with a car commercial does a fair job of exploding the ideological underpinnings of television as a whole in the span of about fifteen seconds. Life is something that happens, the document of life happening is something else, and the distance between the two is impossible to bridge. The strength of the presentation in *Wisconsin Death Trip* is that it does not pretend to provide a full portrait of a small town from 120 years ago, and the strength of Model Home is that it portrays the act of portrayal. That doesn't provide a clear-cut solution to anything (not that anything ever does), but it does highlight the mechanisms that are always influencing our understanding of reality, as well as reality itself. After all, we can't understand anything if we don't know what we're looking at.