

## **“America Recovered: Chad Ress’ Photographs”**

Miriam Paeslack

In late 2009 the Obama administration advocated for an unprecedented level of transparency in the disbursement of stimulus spending as provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Section 1519 requires the “Recovery Act Accountability and Transparency Board... to establish and maintain a user-friendly, public-facing website to foster greater accountability and transparency in the use of covered funds.”

To this end the Administration established Recovery.gov as a resource by which the public might track expenditures. The photographer Chad Ress has used the text publicized on Recovery.gov – and related local government websites – as a guide to photograph ARRA projects. The language accompanying the images, in the form of a caption, has been transcribed verbatim from the original sources. In choosing subjects, Ress considered many parameters including but not limited to: perceived aesthetic opportunity, his initial response to the content of the language, and his desire to create a representative sampling of the broader stimulus efforts. While approaching this highly politicized information, he has attempted to disregard his own ideology.

The conceptual framework of this project is to reveal the point where abstract political processes manifest themselves in the physical world, thus providing an alternate means of experiencing the contemporary American landscape. Collectively the images show what aspects of our everyday lives are being assigned value in the promise of a recovered America. In comparison to Walker Evans’ and Dorothea Lange’s documentary photographs for the FSA as well as to landscape photographs included in the seminal New Topographics exhibition in 1975, Ress’ images transport us into today’s contradictory realm of man altered landscapes and post-historic manifestations of progress. Many of the FSA images became icons of their time and circulated through popular media. That there is no program to document the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act speaks to a changed attitude on the value of artistic practice and the need for public awareness and documentation of civic projects.

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Arts: *Cities of Memory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and *Berlin: Divided City, 1945-1989* (Berghahn Press, 2010).