

# Face Value

A photographer searches for shared expressions of trauma

MAX KOZLOFF

WOUNDED CITIES BY LEO RUBINFEN LONDON: STEIDL (DISTRIBUTED IN THE US BY DAP), 292 PAGES, \$55.

On one level, *Wounded Cities* reads as a personal lament for a world supposedly at peace before September 11. On another, it is a personal inquiry into the consciousness of increased terrorism across the globe since that day. Retrospection and apprehension share an uncomfortable space in this beautiful book. Its author, Leo Rubinfien, is a middle-class New Yorker now in his mid-fifties. His family moved into an apartment only a few blocks from the World Trade Center shortly before it was attacked. At his window, he witnessed the crime while his wife was on her brief walk to her job. Throughout the book, he acknowledges that close friends and family members, as well as some people whom he meets abroad, consider him a sentimentalist. Where he needed to understand this or that side of conflict, they thought he was trying to exonerate it. In truth, he gives the motives of adversaries (such as they can be known or guessed) their due but is unsparring in his judgment of their ruinous effects. What cause, he asks, is worth crushing innocent lives, inspired by cycles of mindless retribution—an injury to all citizens who must be concerned. Though no pacifist and capable of anger, he presents himself as a rational person, utterly dismayed by the medievalism that has been spreading throughout the world over the past eight years. This attitude may seem unremarkable to those repelled by ideology, but it is lifted up by the music of Rubinfien's voice—and then there are his photographs.

Many of the eighty mostly black-and-white images will at first not be noticed, because roughly half are printed as gatefolds tucked within the pages of text and must be opened out to their full, two-page size. Rubinfien's photographs belong to a genre of street portraiture that accentuates faces, though not necessarily at the expense of passing figures. Even when out of focus, these seemingly extraneous bodies are welcomed into the tightly framed pictures. What impresses immediately is the contrast between the mild and unassuming character of the writer presented in the text and the aggressive, thrusting approach of the photographer who has barged into

the personal territory of strangers. Some of them are taken aback, as well they might be. Others just glower when confronted by an unknown man who pokes a biggish (6 by 7 cm) camera in their faces. Still others don't register his intrusive presence at all but look bothered just the same. The rest seem

to be in some private confusion unrelated to their surroundings.

Rubinfien is by profession a photographer, with solo shows at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC, to his credit. He is also a writer. A few years ago, he published a scholarly study of August Sander, the Weimar-period German portrait photographer whose images studied the social performance of sitters without seeming aligned with it. The unconsented and emotional pictures in *Wounded Cities* appear to have little in common with the formal impassivity of Sander's portraits, until one remembers that Sander intended to visualize a whole social entity represented by individuals in their different categories of work and status. In a like-minded but looser way, the photographs here are introduced as symptomatic of a collective disorder, brought on by the fear that death might lurk around the corner. Since the 1930s, photographers have harvested faces inscribed by the malaise of poverty and the brutality of war. More recently, the archive of trauma has been swelled by images depicting the callousness

street corner . . . again and again," he writes, "as if I had a post-traumatic tic, hoping to peel out of this stranger here or the next one over an answer to my own fear." So he took upon himself a feckless odyssey without a press card, capturing faces whose expressions proved no theory. He trawled the sidewalks of Karachi, Buenos Aires, London,



glance asserts that we are all entangled in the same nightmare—which may not be as irrational as it seems. In his inquiries into belligerent developments, Rubinfien employs conditionals ("it would seem," "there could have been") and resorts to passive verbalisms ("it was said"). But the faces he plucks from the streets are not rumors.

Each of his subjects has a personal history, not readily sharable yet not definitively alien. Meanwhile, their physical presence before his eyes is indisputable, and onto that fact he projects, fantasies of who they are.

Rubinfien's reverie on the conflict between the United States and its enemies is affected by his humanism and the conversations he had with widely scattered friends. He thinks that American policy "unlocked" a global trauma in response to

Manila, Jerusalem, Colombo, Mombasa, Cairo, Bombay, Nairobi, and many other places. They are "wounded cities" whose citizenry had in certain recent times been under assault—together an aggregate he calls "a worldwide city." "If you just looked hard enough," he thinks, "you might obtain some knowledge that you could not get from what you heard people say, which had become a swamp of cliché and generalization and dubious assumptions." But the ambition of these photographs is surely just as dubious, for the atmosphere of stress they evoke is as likely a reflection of a small disturbance—such as his transgression or the heat—as of any larger cause.

Though urban centers are gorged with people nameless and opaque to any observer, Rubinfien treats these strangers emphatically as fellow creatures, worn, tetchy, and full of character. Here, photography is used as a typically uncertain method to search for a mutual understanding. The one who watches is lost amid the crowd of those who are randomly but sharply seen. At the same time, while he is swallowed up by the throng, he is not part of it. The viewfinder's

the one that exploded in New York. He loves our self-respect and openness to what we might become but is compelled to notice that many of us look "in a different direction[. . .] preferring] mystic faith, firm loyalty, deference to authority, suspicion of the future." Rubinfien's text introduces difficult moral questions that are perhaps impossible to answer. Are we responsible for our government's behavior, and is there something called collective guilt? How do we disaffiliate ourselves from policies that increase our insecurity within systems that belie their own democratic principles? As for those who revile these principles—jihadis, for instance—it's like "trying to see the heart of a cloud."

But these thoughts occur in a context in which real faces are at least momentarily exposed. They add to the surmise that ruffles through the currents of our molested life, as considered by a writer who longs for some measure of harmony to be regained. The sentiments in *Wounded Cities* recall or parallel those of many others, for instance Chris Hedges, Michael Walzer, and Bill Moyers. In its language, Rubinfien's book sometimes brings to mind James Agee's in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, though accompanied by pictures less calm than Walker Evans's. In fact, *Wounded Cities* contributes to our postmodern age an eloquent imagery whose disquiet is without closure. □

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From top: Leo Rubinfien, *New York at the Empire State Building, 2004*, and *Amman, in al-Shabsogh Street, 2007*.

of cities, and now, as this project would have it, by a reckoning with patterned yet indiscriminate mass homicide.

To have imagined that photography could depict such a thought process was absurd, as Rubinfien himself admits. "I found myself searching the faces on each