



A mutual interest in America's class, race and political divisions propelled **"The Great Divide,"** a collaboration between documentary photographer **Stacy Kranitz** and art photographer **Zoe Strauss**. Their project about American economic decay and disillusionment included the publication of a 64-page zine and a public projection at the **LightField Festival of Photography** in Hudson, New York this past August.

Kranitz traveled in 2016 to Philadelphia, where Strauss lives, to discuss the possibility of collaboration. "I was looking at more rural places, she's looking at more urban places, but what we felt was that there was a connection between these two 'others'—rural poor and urban poor," Kranitz explains.

When they were invited to show work at the LightField Festival, they met for a second time in early 2017 to figure out the details of their project. Kranitz has been photographing economically distressed Appalachian communities and culture for years, while Strauss has focused on the

struggles of everyday people in mostly urban areas. The original plan for the festival was to exhibit a visual conversation based on their existing work: They would each respond to images presented by the other with images from their archives.

“But Zoe shot new work two weeks before the exhibition, and it was so brilliant, and it changed the whole thing at the last minute. That’s what collaboration does. I was like, ‘Oh, no! Why is she doing this?’ Then I was like, ‘This is amazing,’ and I had to respond to it.”

The new work Strauss photographed was a bankruptcy sale of furniture and fixtures at the Trump Taj Mahal casino and hotel in Atlantic City. The images, about the decay of Donald Trump’s empire, are a metaphor for America’s broader economic decay, and fast-fading illusions of prosperity.

Kranitz didn’t have time to shoot new work, so she pulled from her archive of images of Appalachia.

The two photographers ended up with a “yes, and…” visual exchange: The connection from one image to the next is subtle, and the conversation moves quickly. For instance, Kranitz answered a photo by Strauss of a room full of hotel exercise equipment with a photograph of a man hurling a chair at the door of a mobile home somewhere in Appalachia. He’s shirtless, with straining muscles.

In another pairing, a gaudy Taj Mahal casino chandelier with a sale tag, shot from below by Strauss, is followed by a photo Kranitz shot of a woman in a sequined dress trying on an ostentatious tiara backstage at a pageant. Many of the images are related by subject matter or meaning, but others are related by color or visual pattern.

An essential part of the project, Kranitz says, was the idea of reciprocity with the disenfranchised people who are the subjects of so many photographers. She and Strauss decided to project their images rather than frame them. They did that to save a lot of money, and festival organizers agreed to donate the money saved to two organizations, selected by the two photographers, that work for economic justice.

“[Photographers] are really not thinking through the way we publicly interact with work about very deep disenfranchisement,” Kranitz says. “It’s

like: Let's get our images out there and [get] everybody loving them, but it doesn't do anything for the communities you're working with."

Kranitz says she sought the collaboration with Strauss in part because she wants to converse with artists who are making reciprocity with subjects a priority, and who are finding new ways to display their work. "That's something I'm thinking about all the time," she says. "Built into [Zoe's] process is a very deep consideration of how her work is put out into the world,"

From 2001 to 2010, Strauss mounted an annual exhibition of her work under an I-95 overpass in South Philadelphia, and sold photocopies of the images for \$5. She has displayed work on billboards in Philly neighborhoods where she's photographed, and used Tumblr to display work and carry on open dialogue with residents of Homestead, PA, an economically distraught community where she established a storefront studio several years ago.

Strauss was unavailable for an interview.

Kranitz says she started pursuing collaborations last year, after breaking up with her gallery. "I wanted to find relationships—artist-to-artist relationships—that were not embedded in the commerce exchange," she says.

She was also looking for a way to cope with isolation she feels while traveling solo so much of the time. "I'm a loner by nature," she says. "I just want to know that there are other people who have struggled, too, and who have been through this great crisis of trying to understand what they're doing."

Kranitz hopes to collaborate again with Strauss. Meanwhile, she has started collaborating with an animator, and has in mind other artists she'd like to work with. "What I get is incredible inspiration from the exchange of ideas," Kranitz says, adding that the connections with artists with struggles similar to her own "just makes me feel more sane."