

NEW YORK
OBSERVED THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE CITY



FOREWORD

This exhibition celebrates the City of New York through the eyes of photographers. New York and photography in America both came of age at the end of the nineteenth century. Not only had the City become the symbol of American progress, commerce, technology, and creativity, but as the dynamo of American culture it crystallized in stone, steel, and glass the achievements of the past century. New York's size, its frantic pace of expansion incorporated into Greater New York in 1898, and its vertical expansion on the threshold of the twentieth century created a new kind of city. Settled by the Dutch in the seventeenth century as Nieuw Amsterdam, New York by the early twentieth century was no longer the European city it had been a century before. A bustling metropolis and the symbolic—as well as literal—port of entry for millions of immigrants, New York's character had become international, cosmopolitan, and commercial—with a dynamic energy that made it a quintessentially American invention. The City remains strongly polyglot in character to the present day; one quarter of New York's inhabitants are immigrants from distant shores.

The mechanical aspects of photography led to debates in the late nineteenth century as to whether it could be considered an artistic medium on the level of painting and sculpture, or whether photography represented baser aims of imitation and commercial reproduction. This discussion came to the fore in New York with the arrival in 1890 of photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Returning to the United States after study in Germany, Stieglitz championed photography's expressive strengths as a new medium, fashioning Old World aesthetics of pictorial photography, with its picturesque qualities and pastoral subject matter, into an idiom peculiarly American. Taking the City as their subject, Stieglitz's early soft-focus portrayals of the city skyline and grand avenues differed from those of his slightly older contemporary in Paris, Eugène Atget. Beautiful and elegiac, Atget's photographs looked with an antiquarian's eye at the disappearing features of that European capital, whereas the photographers working in New York were fascinated with the burgeoning metropolis. Stieglitz himself, abandoning the aesthetic of pictorialism, opted instead for direct, unmanipulated images of the City, an approach that became known as "straight photography."

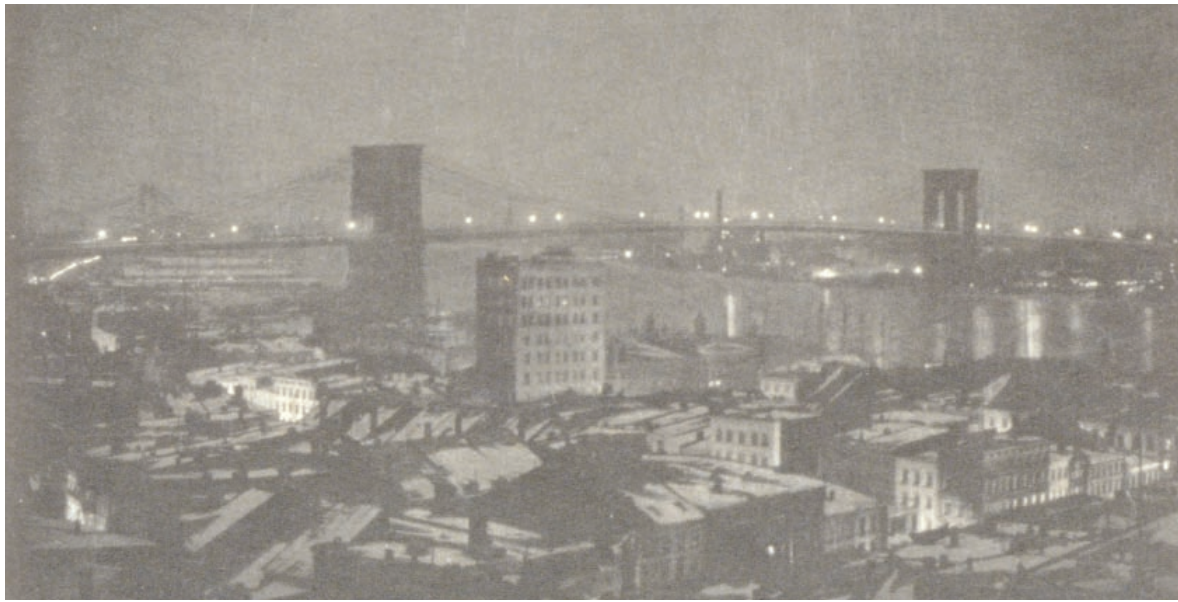
Throughout the twentieth century photographers working in the City formed a synergetic relationship to their subject. The City was new—growing by leaps and bounds—and photography's instantaneity captured the evanescent features of New York and New Yorkers. As stately mansions and brownstones gave way to the skyscrapers that



Garry Winogrand, American, 1928–1984
New York City 1968, 1968, gelatin silver print
Gift of Stanley T. Lesser, A.B. 1951, J.D. 1953
© The Estate of Garry Winogrand,
Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, SF

opposite: John Francis Strauss, active 1900–1920s
detail of *The Bridge*, from *Camera Work*, 1903,
photogravure on Japan tissue
Gift of the Marvin Felheim Collection

front cover: Berenice Abbott 1898–1991
detail of *Village Square*, gelatin silver print
Gift of Harry H. Lunn, Jr.



came to dominate New York's skyline, the aims and aesthetics of photographers adapted to and built upon those changes. The approaches taken by the photographers represented in the present exhibition were as varied as their subjects. Berenice Abbott, a fierce admirer of Atget, undertook an immense project to record New York's changing face and scale. Helen Levitt's and Roy DeCarava's lyrical images forged sensitive connections to the neighborhoods of New York, complete with their subtle relationships and intimate sense of belonging to a particular locale. Motivated by social inequalities and concern for the welfare of its inhabitants, Walter Rosenblum and Dan Weiner followed in the steps of Jacob Riis and Lewis Wickes Hine in portraying the grittier aspects of urban life. For street photographers such as Garry Winogrand, Joel Meyerowitz, and Elliott Erwitt, the incongruity of modern life can be caught on the fly—often with tremendous wit. It is appropriate that New York's commercial, cultural, and artistic energy has been recorded in all its many facets by the gifted photographs of the past 100 years on view in this exhibition.

I would like to extend my deep appreciation to Phillip Lopate for the excellent and thoughtful essay featured in this publication. His extensive knowledge of photography is wedded to a life-long love of his native New York in a beautifully written essay on the importance of New York to the serious photographer.

This exhibition benefited from the generosity of a select group of lenders. My warm thanks go to Lois and Bruce Zenkel, Margaret and Howard Bond, Mrs. Morris Baker, and Wendy and Thomas

Halsted of the Halsted Gallery. Not only were they willing to part with their important photographs for the exhibition, but all of them also graciously gave that most precious commodity—their time. Ian Reed Twiss and Nicholas Delbanco from the Master's Program in Creative Writing, Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan, have been ideal partners throughout this project. They were instrumental in engaging Phillip Lopate as the essayist for the gallery guide, as well as arranging for Mr. Lopate to speak in Ann Arbor during the run of the exhibition. Finally, the assistance of staff in sister institutions helped secure critical loans from local collections. My sincere thanks to Clayton Lewis at the William L. Clements Library, the University of Michigan, as well as Nancy Sojka and Michelle Peplin at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Julie Mellby and Patricia A. Whitesides at the Toledo Museum of Art for their kind assistance.

Carole McNamara

Assistant Director for Exhibitions and Collections



NEW YORK

OBSERVED

PHILLIP LOPATE

New York has been the most photogenic of subjects. It has sat patiently and obligingly, allowing its portrait to be snapped by amateurs and professionals, hacks and artists, oblivious to the winnowing hand of taste that would select a few dozen of its devotees as master photographers, worthy of collection and display in a museum exhibit such as this one. New York's rise to prominence as a world city coincided with the birth and ensuing universality of photography; and the image the world retains of New York, from Duluth to Dubai, owes almost everything to the photographic lens.

At the beginning there were two principal types of New York photographs: tourist views and social documents. The first, largely composed of stereoscopes and postcards, left us an invaluable record of the most celebrated landmarks of late nineteenth and turn-of-the-century New York: Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, City Hall, Fifth Avenue. These pictures were for the most part straightforward, artisanal visual mementos, broad vistas practicing a naïve deep focus. In the early twentieth century, some members of the more artistically self-conscious "pictorial" school, such as Alvin Langdon Coburn or Karl Struss, would try to bring a glow of subjective poetry to the Brooklyn Bridge or Pennsylvania Station. Alfred Stieglitz would take his famous Impressionist-style photograph of the horse on Fifth Avenue, but it still had to be Fifth Avenue.

These were essentially composed, stately

views of an ascendant, prosperous metropolis. Much as "sun and shadow" guidebooks all through the nineteenth century had helped to codify the city's wonders while titillating readers with its secret vices and miseries, so postcard photographers, such as Byron, also took views of the ghettos—the Lower East Side, with its pushcarts and teeming Hassidic humanity, or Chinatown, with its seemingly exotic queue-wearers. But they were a far cry from the second type of photography, initiated by Jacob Riis, which produced hard-hitting documentary images, meant to discomfit the viewer and expose grave social ills. Riis wanted his photographs of Lower East Side slum-dwellers, crammed into dirty, tubercular hovels, to change social conditions, and they did in fact lead to a reform tenement law. We might include in that Riis tradition Paul Strand's blind woman, Lewis Hine's workers, and the proletarian street scenes taken by members of the Photo League (Sid Grossman, Walter Rosenbaum, Ben Shahn).

In Berenice Abbott we see a struggle between the documentary and the formalist, abstract impulse. Following in the footsteps of her Paris exemplar, Eugène Atget, she set out to assemble a typology of streets and neighborhoods, at a time when New York was undergoing a major tearing-down and construction phase. Her shots of skyscrapers from above accentuate the negative space between buildings, in dizzying, Cubist compositions, while her photographs of streets taken at eye level seem intent on capturing a homely,



Edward Jean Steichen, American, born Luxembourg, 1879–1973
Portrait of Clarence H. White, from *Camera Work*, 1905
 photogravure, Gift of The Morris and Beverly Baker Foundation,
 in memory of Morris D. Baker, a graduate of The University
 of Michigan School of Architecture, 1952

top: Berenice Abbott, 1898–1991, *Trinity Church*
 gelatin silver print, Gift of Harry H. Lunn, Jr.

opposite: Karl Struss, American, 1886–1981
 detail of *Mercedes Autobus, Fifth Avenue and 38th Street, New York*,
 ca. 1912, Sepia-toned platinum print, Gift of the artist

preceeding spread: Alvin Langdon Coburn,
 American, 1882–1966, detail of *Fifth Avenue, from the St. Regis*
 from *New York*, 1910, photogravure, Museum Purchase

small-townish New York about to vanish.

Much of the best New York photography is street photography. This is partly because the New York street represents a powerfully unifying public realm, understood and shared by all. The clarity of its gridded layout encourages wandering on foot, and indeed, New York remains one of the few “walking cities” in America. The vitality of its street life partly derives from cosmopolitan demographics: the infusion of immigrants and visitors from everywhere in the world. But there is also—perhaps more important for a photography discussion—the particular built environment of New York: its siting as a port city, which offers vistas of escape in the distance, along its waterfront edges, contradicted by its middle, which is densely, almost claustrophobically, bounded by edifices.

The grid system, particularly in Manhattan, offers an orthogonal frontality to the camera eye, one square format imposed on another. Building block, sidewalk, street—add people to the mix, and you have the X-ray of a million New York photographs. The block is the focus, the bracket of the photograph. But the block is by no means visually simple. In New York, the standard building lot was a rather narrow twenty-five feet, the double-lot, fifty feet, which means that for all the gigantism of skyscrapers, you still have a procession of storefronts and contiguous buildings lined up, as it were, for the camera. Since the impromptu opportunities of real estate speculation determined each building’s look and function (rather than ensemble planning, on the order of Nash’s Regent Street in London), and since the city was built up over considerable time, you get those odd, almost droll juxtapositions of building type. A tenement might be next to a Greek-column office building, which might be next to a grocery store. As Walker Evans’s photographs demonstrate, the procession of storefronts alone, each with its own signage and window display, makes for intriguing competitive claims on the viewer’s attention.

If the block is the deck of the ship, the street is the ocean lapping at the sidewalk. The human figures (storeowners or clerks on break, idlers, pensioners, moms with baby carriages) stand before stationary buildings watching the moving traffic. At the street corner, off in the distance, the photographer lets you glimpse other buildings, sometimes intentionally included because they make for ironic contrasts (wealth and poverty, low-rise and high-rise), more often because they give a



flavor of the surrounding district. New York, as is frequently pointed out, is a collection of villages, and it is another part of the photographer's challenge to convey the unique personality of the neighborhood (Greenwich Village, Chelsea, Harlem, the Garment District) as well as the single block.

Of course, "neighborhood" is a concept that conveys not just a style of building but a human community: the tribe that occupies that area. Thus there came to be the photographic vignette of the average New Yorker as wry survivor (its literary equivalent might be a sketch by A.J. Liebling or Joseph Mitchell about some cigar store proprietor or movie cashier). These subjects were the ordinary stiff, the non-celebrities, the eight million urban peasants, salt of the earth, who spoke a "dese and dose" dialect. In films about World War II, it was the street-smart sailor from Brooklyn, usually played by William Bendix. In photographs, it was the grizzled dignity and good humor of Walker Evans's "Lunchroom Buddies." Or Helen Levitt's children at play, their fantasy lives blossoming in the most run-of-the-mill streets.

The émigré photographers who arrived from Europe in the 1930s and 1940s (André Kertész, Lisette Model, Rudy Burckhardt, among others) were fascinated with the jolie-laide discordances of New York, its casual squalor cheek by jowl with fabulous wealth and style. They had all photographed beautiful, harmonious Paris and were tired of Haussmann's chestnut-tree boulevards,

the Sacre Coeur, and the City of Light's gorgeous public realm. Surrendering to culture shock, they turned their cameras happily on reflections in Fifth Avenue department stores and the crowned tops of skyscrapers and ant's-eye views of the sidewalk, where footwear and skirt-hems of throngs intermingled without ever colliding. The crowd gave their photographs a dense, anecdotal visual field. And always there were the New Yorkers, those expressive, gesturing types with loud dress patterns, big noses, pot bellies and cigars. Sometime in the late Fifties people started getting bored with that working-class characterization of New York (around the same time that the city lost much of its manufacturing base and port jobs, and received a migration of black and Hispanic newcomers, and white flight sent the children of many salt-of-the-earthers to the suburbs). New York came to be characterized by more of a beat, outlaw sensibility: the "beautiful losers," from Louis Faurer's Times Square people and Robert Frank's night isolates to Diane Arbus's freaks and Bruce Davidson's street gangs. Today, Nan Goldin's junkies and transvestites inherit that tradition. The tabloid photographer Weegee (Arthur Feelig) may be seen as its ancestral uncle, providing a transition from the average Joes to the grotesque. In Weegee, the ordinary sidewalk was still the main focus, but it had become a crime scene: his urban peasants famously gawked at a murdered mobster.

It seemed that ordinary stoics never quite accepted their destiny; they too were drawn



to the sensational, and wanted their fifteen-minutes' worth of at least proximity to fame. Why not? New York had been, since the 1880s, the nation's central manufacturer of celebrity. In the twentieth century, all the media gathered in Midtown—Broadway, radio, movies, television, gossip columns, magazines—pumped out seductive images of a larger-than-life popularity. Celebrity and fashion shoots provided steady employment for many fine New York photographers (Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Louise Dahl-Wolfe), as well as opportunities for refined portraiture. Barbara Morgan documented the performance worlds of ballet and modern dance. For this more self-contained, elegantly rarefied New York, interiors seemed more suitable than streets.

It should be noted how much the postwar New York art forms fed off each other: photographers learned from the action painters the intuitive pounce of gesture; learned the body's sprawling grace from the walk-based choreography of George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham; learned a downbeat sensibility from the jazz of Parker, Dizzy, and Monk, and from noirish movies of the day (*The Naked City*, *Pickup on South Street*, *Shadows*, *Sweet Smell of Success*), learned the joyous logic of urbanism from the exhilarated writings of Jane Jacobs and Frank O'Hara. And the influence worked both ways. As O'Hara celebrates the simultaneity of a Times Square afternoon when "everything suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of a Thursday," he's perhaps showing how much the picture of the city he carries in his mind has been conditioned by the overlapping planes of New York street photography.

One of the challenges of New York-based photographers was to capture the city as locals saw it, to wrest a more raw, existential truth from the packaged, varnished tourist images of the Big Apple. No one succeeded better at that than Garry Winogrand, with his off-kilter, decentered compositions that were meant to convey the information you take in at a glance looking up, lasting no more than a second. Winogrand also excelled at commonizing the chic and the celebrated, by annexing them to a woozy, rushed vision. The "New York minute" reduced and democratized everyone with its rapacious, impatient embrace. It seemed we had come a long way from the long exposures and anchored streetscapes of Alvin Langdon Coburn. Of course, technology—film speed, camera size, printing material—all played

opposite top: Barbara Morgan, American, 1900–1992
detail of *Martha Graham in Letter to the World (Swirl)*, 1940, gelatin silver print, Gift of the Willard and Barbara Morgan Archives

opposite bottom: Paul Strand, 1890–1976, *Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street*, from *Camera Work*, 1915, photogravure on tissue, Museum Purchase made possible by the Jean Paul Slusser Memorial Fund

below: Elliott Erwitt, American, born 1928, *Legs on a Wall*, *New York, U.S.A. 1978*, from *Recent Developments*, 1978
gelatin silver print, Gift of Lawrence and Carol Zicklin
© Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos



their parts in the evolving photographic image of New York. But perhaps the roots of Winogrand's dazed subjects may be traced all the way back to the startled faces of Jacob Riis' slum-dwellers, when the muckraking photographer barged into their flophouses and caught them, lights flashing in their eyes, unawares.

A warmer humanism may be glimpsed in the street photography and domestic family scenes of Joel Meyerowitz, Roy DeCarava, and Elliott Erwitt. Their work conveys a sense of community, based on fleshly ties (familial or erotic) and offhand wit, triumphing momentarily over alienation.

During the 1970s, New York, always obliging, posed as Modern Hell, the seat of danger and disenchantment. Then the economy rebounded, and it was recast as a playground for swinish yuppie tycoons (see Larry Fink's satiric studies of cocktail parties). In both cases, a peculiar dialectic was in operation: glamorizing seediness, puncturing glamour. Throughout, the photographic image of New York has altered because it has had to keep up with the changing roles and meanings of the city, in America's and the world's eyes. New York has evolved from a brash, mercenary port without the culture of, say, Boston; to the "melting pot" for millions of immigrants; to the quintessential modernist metropolis, Stieglitz's "The City of Ambition," a spectacular Mammon often mistrusted by the American heartland; to the world's capital after World War II, home to the United Nations' home; to near-bankruptcy and proof that big cities don't work; to a confident, juggernaut-like resurgence, aided by global investment; to terrorist attack and a shocking awareness—provoking national sympathy, however ephemeral—of its vulnerability. What the best New York photographs show us is that it has always been vulnerable.

It is a place of enormous problems and opportunities. Like Manhattan Island's granite foundation, it may be harsh, even unpleasant at times, but it never seems insubstantial. When you are in New York you feel you are up against the real. A conviction that one is in the presence of reality cannot help but be attractive to a medium whose strongest suit has always been recording the material world. Hence, the love affair between New York and photography.



Joel Meyerowitz, American, born 1938, *New Year's Eve, NYC (Kiss me, stupid)*, from *Joel Meyerowitz Photographs: The Early Years* 1965, gelatin silver print, Gift of Selma and Gerald Lotenberg

opposite: Berenice Abbott, American, 1898–1991, detail of *Pennsylvania Station*, ca. 1936, gelatin silver print, Gift of Mrs. Ursula R. Freimarck

back cover: Berenice Abbott, American, 1898–1991, detail of *New York at Night*, 1932, gelatin silver print, Museum Purchase made possible by Helmut Stern and the Jean Paul Slusser Memorial Fund

Philip Lopate was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1943. He is the widely published author of fiction, poetry, movie criticism, works on architecture and urbanism, and numerous essay collections, including *Portrait of My Body* (1996), winner of the PEN Diamondston-Spielvogel Award for best essay book of the year. He edited an anthology of writings about New York from Washington Irving onward, *Writing New York*, and is currently finishing a book on the New York waterfront (to be published in 2003) and editing an anthology of American film criticism for Harcourt-Brace. Philip Lopate holds the Adams Chair at Hofstra University, where he is professor of English, and teaches in the Bennington College MFA program.

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