

NEW YORK

INSIDE
OUT



Robert Walker

William S. Burroughs

New York Inside Out

William S. Burroughs

The object of art is to make the reader or viewer or listener aware of what he knows but doesn't know that he knows...And this is doubly true of photography because the photographer is making the viewer aware of what he is actually seeing and yet at the same time not seeing. So many people in urban environments are walking around without seeing what is in front of them, let alone what is at the margin of vision, because what they see seems to have no meaningful relationship to them as observers. It is the art of the photographer to wrest back meaning for the observer from the input of impressions. Cut, shuffle, pick a card, any card...what do we see as we walk the streets of a city? A jumble of fragments. Now, these fragments are meaningful to **you** because they are what you have chosen to see.

I used to have an exercise that I suggested to my students at New York City College. Walk around the block and try to keep your eyes open for a change. Now sit down and write what you have just seen with particular attention to what you were thinking when someone walked by, when you saw a certain billboard, when a car passed...and so forth.

It soon becomes apparent that these fragments are not meaningless, that they mean something very definite to you, spelling out messages, cryptic messages...Some students think they are going insane. 'Everything is talking to me'. Of course it is...it always was...You are just starting to listen and see a little (one student became convinced that I was the anti-Christ and that voices were telling him to kill me. As this point I edged into the kitchen and sought the proximity of a potato masher.

Another exercise I called 'color walks'. Walk down a New York street and pick out all the reds – focusing on the red. Now shift to blues, the yellows, the whites...Blue again and I **know** the car coming up behind me will be blue...and it is. Or you're running out of yellow...a yellow cab comes right on cue. Just start looking and you will see.

Example – I am thinking about New Mexico. Round a corner and there is a New Mexico license plate. 'New Mexico, Land of Excitement.'

Click, click, click. Catch these intersection points between your inner reality and what you are seeing, between the inner reality and the outer reality. They have a particular relevance to the observer and if the observer is also a photographer the intersection points give the photographs their special style. Now take a stack of photographs. We are looking for the point where inner reality and outer reality intersect. You don't know what intersections the photographer experienced but if he is as good as Walker you know that he was experiencing something quite definite. Take a walk through these photographs and with each one you will experience a different point of intersection.

Walker's color walks are in a way particular to New York City because that is where they were taken. He had to be in New York at a certain time and place to take these particular pictures. He catches the meaning of meaningless, the patterns of chaos, the underlying unities of disparate elements. All the fragments are jumbling and shifting, throwing out pieces of paintings – the sky and the billboards, Dutch blue on a white of a woman's white skirt, blue blouse and goose on a pond...pure painting, a Dutch painting.

Of course photography is very closely related to painting. The **montage** method, which is pretty old in painting, Bryon Gysin and I applied it to writing with out cut-up method. And, of course, this method brings us closer to the facts of perception than representational painting or linear writing. You walk around the block and come back and put what you have seen on paper or down on canvas. What you have seen is a jumble of fragments – a car cut in two by signs and so forth. So this is certainly much closer to the facts of perception – certainly urban perception – than representational painting or photographs. Representational painting presupposes that time has stopped. You are sitting in front of something that doesn't move, whereas in a **montage** you have a cross-section of time. You are moving and what you see is moving and that is ideally caught by the camera.

In the early 1930's, when I was studying at Harvard University, New York was the glamorous, sophisticated, romantic, glittering metropolis, the place where things were happening. Anyone trapped in the provinces with artistic or theatrical or deviant tastes was inexorably drawn to New York. Greenwich Village in that time, that remote epoch, was peopled by real artists and bohemians. Rents were low, restaurants were cheap. I used to drive down to drink in the speakeasies on 52nd street, to visit Harlem night-clubs, to eat in the Village. All this has changed. The artists moved out, the tourists poured in, rents went up and up. New York City is no longer **The** place. People are moving out to Boulder, Santa Fe, Aspen, Santa Cruz, Berkeley. Nothing remains but the surface. The city is like a vast toy house peopled with living dolls and manikins. The people are now part of this vast surface.

Walker captures the intricate shifting of this surface, the interplay of colors and composition, deep velvet reds, electric blues, flashing greens and yellows. Is this the face of the city? The human subjects seemed pushed together as if an actor from one scene and an actor from another scene were pressed incongruously into another scene to which they have no relation. How few of these faces have any urgency, and purpose, any grandeur or, well, class...

Some street photographers collect faces. Walker tends to avoid faces and people. These are the anonymous faces of a big city, people walking about in a vast tinsel and glass and concrete and plastic ruin. This is most evident in the crowded intersections around 42nd Street and Times Square in the ruins of old Coca Cola and pizza and sandwiches and shops and theatres. There is no urgency, no real purpose, in many of these bodies and faces.

Often in Walker's pictures there is an impression of two images spliced together that are not related to each other except by some cryptic randomness of the City itself – which seems to be more of an organism than the people of inhabit it. The pictures are spliced to each other without a soul and so the City itself. The people who inhabit it are spliced photos...

The City has been flattened by the camera squeezing out incredible colors and juxtapositions. The lines that separate one set from another are breaking down, shattered into kaleidoscopic fragments. A man is part of the magazine he is reading, his shirt flowing down into the covers of the magazines... a little old lady comes out of a subterranean cave under a piano that hangs in the air... a gin bottle as big as a skyscraper is pouring out the sky... red manikins dance... red and white stage curtains swirl with the sheen of peppermint candy... smoke-black figures walk by a black hole in the smoke... The whole vast canvas of New York City is running together... a wall of photographs... a backdrop that could collapse at an moment.

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