

ROBERT WALKER

MUSEUM JAN
CUNEN OSS
Molenstraat 65 5341 GC Oss t: 0412 629 328
museumjancunen@oss.nl
www.museumjancunen.nl

COLOR IS POWER



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Robert Walker's Times Square

Max Kozloff

"Color is Power"; "Why search?!"; "Hop on – hop off"; "We delieve..." These phrases were photographed, the first printed on an Avon sign, the others on the adjacent side of a tourist bus, Times Square area, New York City. Robert Walker, a Canadian prowling there since the late 1970s, framed them with his camera as if to demonstrate that such snappy slogans could actually be verified by their urban surroundings. His image samples the visual racket of the place, jumped-up, hectoring, promotional spectacle...for the whole world to see. If you can't take it, hop off. If you want more, hop on. Lost within flat zones and shallow space of sick orange, apple green, and Coke red, tourists sit on the top deck of the bus with an expectant mood, or maybe they're just agog. As for the photographer, he doesn't forget that color is "power".

G.K. Chesterton remarked: "When I had a look at the lights of Broadway by night, I said to my American friends: 'What a glorious garden of wonders this would be, to any who was lucky enough to be unable to read.'" Had it been possible for him to be enthralled by the sensory phenomenon without being bombarded by its messages, Chesterton would have approved. But Walker not only accepts, he finds his true subject in the exchange between the visual and the verbal belligerence of the place.

Times Square's renown as an arena of high-density consumerism, news, and entertainment is, of course, notorious. Robert Walker is by no means the first photographer to treat its frenzy in pictorial depth. The *New York Times* recently published a good-natured album of images of the center by its own staff, over the decades. And such wartime and post-World War II figures as Andreas Feininger, Lou Stouman, Helen Levitt, Lou Stettner and William Klein have contributed quite graphic photographs to its memory. Even Robert Walker's involvement with color has antecedents, for example Lou Faurer's, early, in the 50s.

Of course, their pictures buzz with print and they are intoxicated with honky-tonk. After a previous history, when it was still regarded as an enchanted cross-roads—the Great White Way of Broadway's theater district at night—they considered Times Square as a decidedly low-brow center of vitality—in fact, vital by virtue of its raunchiness. The myths of the American imperium, flanked by the most lurid posters of crime and sex—how often the media treated them as the same!—were clarioned on movie marquees and film stills. Where else could war victories and New Year be celebrated on as national a level? Here was democratic mass culture with its gloves off, a disclosure that made the square itself a site of myth. It was irresistible to the inquisitive lens; it was magical.

Which is to say, Times Square was perceived as pure phenomenon, a dense, assemblage of texts valued for their staccato rhythms, yet consumed in foamy light. The exclamations of wish and desire were well attended, but at the same time it was the aura of the place that really counted. In Robert Walker's hands, however, the great metropolitan plaza becomes something very different, a locale totally without aura, yet narrative in its own right.

It may seem at first a little odd to put it that way. After all, one's initial impression of his art comes through its tremendous energy of *seeing*. Each of his frames constructs a tableau in which the miscellaneous segments partake of what appears to be an inevitable, yet surprising order. He jaywalks against the traffic of projected sightlines, rearranging them with a willfulness that draws attention to itself—that is, to the integrity of his picture, not

that of any one subject. Drenched in the most saturated chroma, which overpowers signage, how can these photographs *tell* of anything, when they are so absorbed with showing?

Quickly, though, it becomes evident that Walker likes color because of its iconographical punch, not its sensuous presence. To appreciate color is to be distracted from the rhetorical role it plays, coded within a strategy of hype. Red behaves as the bad cop, blue, the good one, in a palette that has designs upon viewers. For his part, the photographer speaks of being faithful to his experience of the “tyranny” of color.

Over the years, however, the place graduated from its reputation as a crossroads of tasteless romance, befitting an industrial culture. Of late, the photographer describes it as a configuration of logos that are all business, entering the digital age. Communication systems have overtaken commodities as the main subject of ads. The photographer has turned from the square’s glitzy atmosphere and crowds to make way for his collage study, through which loners occasionally pass. Rather than the action of those who are targeted, he focuses on that which targets them. Nominally a street photographer, he is really a student of representations.

Forget about bad weather or low light, conditions that earlier photographers enlisted in their poetic reverie. Walker shoots usually around high noon, and the air sparkles like crystal. The deepest and most jagged shadows come down from the canyons above to thrust into contrast an agora of outsized still lifes.

Yet, he rarely allows the tales they tell to be as straightforward as intended. Being in Times Square, they fight for their place and they would shout down their fellows. Feininger made visual panoramas of them, in his non-committal approach. It is also possible to isolate one or more of them, in the reflexive way their sponsors hoped for. But Robert Walker twists the cacography of Times Square to suit his own ends, which are ironic. From a corporate point of view, he pays emblems and signs a relentlessly wrong kind of attention.

Generally, his method is to insinuate a new meaning or sometimes guilt, by fortuitous association. He scrambles or splices together otherwise separate appeals by his abrupt framing of near and far and, for that matter, old and new, trivial and grandiose. He’s an expert in the proposal of unwarranted collusions, effected by forcing motifs to cohabit cheek by jowl in a tight space that comprises their function. That space is over-charged. It explodes with presences that defy reason even as it remains credible from the vantage of an everyday, if caustic pedestrian.

The bus picture might be thought of as a prologue to this insubordinate state of affairs. That is, it operates as an anthology of motifs, resonant of his procedures, but not yet of his concerns. Walker unfurls some of them in a more ambitious photograph (Fig. ?) Its immediate foreground features the cavity of an old firebox, crammed with discarded Sunkist orange juice cups, which dominate a scene that would otherwise be presided over by actor Frank Langella as Dracula, across the street. By reversing their evident scale, and therefore social presence, Walker compares the movie fantasy and the improvised trash bin to their mutual disadvantage.

A viewer is free to take up the photographer’s implication that Times Square is a field of garbage. What is consumed has no more value than what is regurgitated and left behind. Capitalism, or at least this city’s embodiment of it, comes across as a slovenly system, matched by a thoughtless and immature society. Just the same, the sense of his work takes us past impressions like these, which are glib and in any case, familiar. If he does look coldly upon the commercial pitch, still, he declines to see it as an alienating signal. On the contrary, he relies on such signals as sources

from which to build a conspiracy of subtexts, funnier than could be imagined, darker, or more cryptic.

So, for example, polyurethane Superman flies over a distant sign that says “Heads above the rest.” In another frame: “Fair warmer” is flashed above a man carrying a placard: “CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS.” In still another picture, the upper section is decorated with an ad for Virgin Cola, adjoining a clock face with a Buckingham Palace guard for an hour hand. Meanwhile beneath, on a poster for Amtrak, a black man’s glasses seem to reflect a crossword puzzle, next to the words “Brainchild on.” How does it happen that an idea about a train line emerges as a more cerebral and portentous than a religious homily? In this ricochet of selling points, with their acceleration of time and space, the photographer uncovers a world of deflated prophecies.

Such inventiveness of reading recalls an earlier practice like that of Weegee, who delighted in goofy commentary by light-hearted texts on dire realities. Weegee was a connoisseur of the ridiculous. In the background of a sidewalk murder or fatal accident, he shows the local movie to be “The Joy of Living.” A burning building showered by fire engines has a sign: “Simply add boiling water.”

These had been marvelous finds, illumined by one who realized that New Yorkers needed a sense of humor to get through their dangerous round. Walker, by contrast, specializes in texts that comment only, if at all, on themselves. For him, the abusive loquacity of Times Square is sometimes pathetic, as it is loaded with hyperboles that deplete each other. Their wordplay is mysterious, too, because it hints of but does not confirm a capitalist unconscious. A realist might say: ‘well, Times Square is like that’; but Robert Walker is a modernist.

Where appearances had been brutish and motley in the Square, his photographs organize them into a network of powerful forms. Walker speaks of having come to artistic age under the influence of abstract color field painters, at least Ken Noland’s – and probably Ellsworth Kelly’s. An impulse towards rigorous abstraction informs his Times Square vignettes. It keeps them from being arbitrary quotes within unemployed or recessive backgrounds. Much of the tension in these pictures stems from the conflict between their decorative strength and their appetite for dialogue. The appetite comes from the photographer’s taste for Pop art, which checks his tendency towards color arrangements for their own sake.

It’s wonderful to see this tension pulled tight in a picture that could reflect on his own self-awareness as an observer. The side of a double telephone booth is posterized with a photograph of two men aiming their cameras in Walker’s direction. On the receding back of the booth, we read “Unlevel the playing field”, and beneath the photographers, “Hello”, and “Reunion.” Meanwhile, an ominous shadow accompanied by Walker’s own profile, wedges in from the bottom. Times Square talks back!

But what, exactly, does it say? All along, the photographer had intervened into an urbanscape to suggest an unwitting discourse among features. This interchange, the product of concise editing and a discerning eye, implies nothing about his psychology as a viewer. For artistic purposes, walker is a selfless monitor, someone who, although before motif, works behind the scenes. Now, the photographers on the telephone booth assume his own stance. They expose what he does—reveal him to be a private voyeur in a public space. Times Square has the muscle and the magnitude to enforce this kind of leveling disclosure. The very act of looking places us in a

troubling complicity with what is seen. It does not matter if we consume the signifier rather than the signified: we are all image junkies and “image” is what the square is about.

The street photographers who came before Walker saw the square, above all, as a physical place, even if they often endowed it with a symbolic dimension. Given that aim, their work must be understood as a series of glimpses that modulate into a personal account. While still dependant on their transitory vision, Walker accents it with his deliberate aim and his conceptual stance. Younger photographers who wander the city no longer see the point of street photography, whether as document or as critical montage. They take snapshots, with enjoyment in the deflation, and also, the equation of all genres. Meanwhile, Times Square has gone on inevitably to its next stage, as a mall, a Disneyland, a theme park. If anything, the retreat of the sex shops and the advance of “family values” has transformed it into an even more indigestible place than it was.

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