



color is power

ROBERT WALKER'S Times Square

by Max Kozloff

“Color is power”; “Why search?!”; “Hop on-hop off”; “We deliver....” These phrases were photographed, the first printed on an Avon sign, the others on the adjacent side of a tourist bus, in the Times Square area, New York City. Robert Walker, a Canadian prowling there since the 1980s, 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, a 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 a 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 colour is “power.”

In Robert Walker’s hands, the great metropolitan plaza becomes 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 jay-walks 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 colour because of its iconographical punch, not its sensuous presence. To appreciate colour 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 colour.

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 compromises their function. That space is overcharged. It explodes

with presences that defy reason even as it remains credible from the vantage of an everyday, if caustic, pedestrian.

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. ■

Max Kozloff is a photographer, writer and critic who has written a number of books on photography and modern art. The preceding introduction is an excerpt from a longer essay that will be published in a catalogue for an exhibition of Robert Walker’s photographs organized by the Museum Jan Cunen in Oss, The Netherlands, fall 2002. The exhibition opens at Museum Sztuki, Lodz, Poland in June 2001 and concludes its tour at the Musée de l’Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland, November 2002.





