



Construction Site, East 42nd Street and Park Avenue by Robert Walker.



TV Newcaster, Times Square by Robert Walker.

STREET PHOTOGRAPHY: WALKER'S NEW YORK

by Ian Jeffrey

"Ya gotta shoot a roll a day for two years just to get your legs". A street photographer speaks. The artist in question is Robert Walker, and eighty-eight of his pictures have lately been printed under the heading *New York Inside Out*, a city survey introduced by THE Williams S. Burroughs. Walker specialises in Manhattan, and the muse of street photography, who favours Manhattan, has looked kindly on him.

At a casual first sight Walker's heavily inscribed city looks an entertaining enough place. But street photography, as practised by Walker, Winogrand and Weegee, is a more serious matter than that. One of his more cryptic pictures, of the San Gennaro Festival in Little Italy, features three baskets set up as targets in a ball game. They are outlined against a red ground and supported by a white frame clothed in a green mesh. The whole faintly and ambiguously inscribed apparatus takes a lot of deciphering, and by the end of that process I am conscious of having concentrated — as I might have done in throwing for one of the baskets. This is to say that street photography is a test, a matter of exactitude, calling on eye and aim.

The exponent practises for years and then begins to get it right. Or the muse eventually consents and comes up with rhymes, puns, observations and enigmas. Walker, endlessly attentive, is open to the subtlest promptings. "If you can see what I..." the inscription reads on Times Square: a newscaster addresses a

microphone and a shadowy range of gold-tipped poles mimics the action of voice-pulses on a screen. A black suited woman sits reading on a fire hydrant on Fifth Avenue: "colour 0%" grumbles a placard behind a green shade.

Burroughs judges these pictures to be "intersection points between your inner reality and what you are seeing, between the inner reality and the outer

reality". He devotes a paragraph or so to these "intersections" and rounds off triumphantly with a set of paradoxes: "He catches the meaning of meaninglessness, the patterns of chaos, and the underlying unities of disparate elements". Nicely said, although I can't quite see the accuracy in it. He talks about fragments and goes on to discuss one of Walker's great pictures, "Dutch blue and white of a woman's white skirt, blue blouse and a goose on a pond... a pure painting, a Dutch painting". I might say that the blue of the sky and the white of clouds have been incarnated and propped up on the stout timbers of a fence. What is expansive and intangible has been compressed and made palpable in as handy a metaphor as you'll find in photography. But what makes the picture is that goose emerging from that pond; the goose approaches to a point where it is framed by the railings and to a point where it rhymes with another grey and white arabesque similarly framed across the page. The moment has cohered, been completed, endorsed by "the outer reality" or by whatever authority picks out artists from the rest.

He puts it all together in "Dutch blue", tropes his way metaphorically to victory. Then, outside the Supreme Court on Center Street he sums up a padlocked fragment with peep holes and red reflectors, in a miniature metonymic version of the columned and stepped building itself, and of the processes which it symbolises. He can hold something large in, as it were, the



Photo by Helen Levitt.

palm of his hand, get the better of it.

At his most outrageous Walker is a Munchhausen of modern photography. On Times Square "a (Gordon's) gin bottle as big as a skyscraper is pouring out the sky" (Burroughs), over a neon slogan which reads "England, America, the World"; tiny painters work on ice cubes in a tumbler, like early explorers on an Alpine glacier. On a midtown construction site a trick of light shows heavy metal tackle supported apparently by limp wires, while further forward Manhattan itself seems to be under attack from carrier-based aircraft on the USS *Intrepid*. He can imagine the sky, and the clouds, and the sea, and all of New York's pretensions into words. He is braggart enough for the place, and subtle too: on the parking lot at Mamma Leone's Restaurant (W. 48th St. and 8th Avenue) a reflected sun bursts on pale windows over a high wall, and over here loose bricks and a ladder suggests some hopeless Quixotic scheme to keep it out. Walker is extremist enough for the job, and New York has never had anyone better (Weegee included).

Weegee is the street photographer par excellence, and the one they defer to. He had both the eye and the stamina. "Street photography is a young man's game": Walker. Weegee went to extremes at a time when New York was naiver than it is now, more hand-made, sentimental and raw. His great book, *The Naked City*, takes on New York and shrugs it off; he jokes his way past hard times, notes the sign SIMPLY ADD BOILING WATER on a blazing frankfurter factory and hard boils his way through mayhem: "The cop got a medal... the gunman got the bullets". But that New York of pre-1945 with its brick and stone and



Photo by Garry Winogrand.

dark panelling is more or less gone. Burroughs complains: "Nothing remains but the surface. The city is like a vast toy house peopled with living dolls and mannikins. The people are now part of this vast surface. Walker captures the intricate shifting of this surface, the interplay of colours and composition, deep velvet reds, electric blues, flashing greens and yellows". Walker enthuses, "The colours, where do you get colours like that", pointing at a lurid array of pinks and lime greens.

If Weegee is the never-to-be-repeated raw progenitor and ideal, Helen Levitt and Garry Winogrand are more approachable precursors. Helen Levitt worked with colour and that colour was published in 1980 by the Grossmont College Gallery in California. Her style is her own, a matter of subtle blendings of painting stucco, brick and scarred pavement. She considers the City as having a unifying ambience and hardly at all as "shattered into kaleidoscopic fragments". Yet "Dutch blue" might have its model in a Levitt picture of a plump child in pale blue leaning on steps and looking wistfully into an absent sky — facsimile swans in the windows too, as a foil to that gracelessness.

Winogrand also has a Grossmont endorsement (1976), and he is every bit as abrupt as Weegee, and a lot more desperate. Walker, in the final analysis, outsmarts the City; he is cleverer, wittier, a master of picture play. Winogrand, by contrast, toughs his way into the ascendant. His jokes shriek and he gets the worst out of the place. He has taken some of the vilest and the funniest pictures in the history of the medium. He sees New York as a place inhabited by figures out of Bosch and Grosz, but at the same time it is peculiarly enlivened by the grace of

women and children. His secret, or at least deep, subject is Beauty and the Beast, an encounter between Balthus and Bacon on a tatty pavement. He found relief in, as it were, a smash in the face or in charm, and his photography has, as a result, a personal, existential edge. Walker, as Burroughs points out, "tends to avoid faces and people". He sees the occasional Winograndian prowling in Times Square but he prefers to take New York by subterfuge, by clever ruses and cunning concealments. Maybe he is the man for the neon-lit moment. Burroughs writes nostalgically of driving down "to drink in the speakeasies on 52nd Street, to visit Harlem night-clubs, to eat in the Village". Drinking, visiting and eating: all archaic, all part of the old world of stone, brick and stucco. Walker's bright streets belong to another culture entirely, even to another epoch. In his New York private space has all but vanished, or if it does exist it is black and mysterious. His citizens are receptors of garish messages or telephonic communicators, part of the wider network. In this blaring context his own oblique, hyper-intelligent art amounts to an act of refusal, even of defiance.

Books discussed.

New York Inside Out. Photography by Robert Walker. Introduction by Williams S. Burroughs. Skyline Press (Oxford University Press, Canadian Branch), Toronto, 1984.

Helen Levitt: Color Photographs. Published in conjunction with an exhibition organized by Grossmont College Gallery, El Cajon, California, 1980. (23 photographs).

Garry Winogrand. Grossmont College Gallery, 1976. (40 photographs).



Photo by Garry Winogrand.