

A South Bank Centre touring exhibition

# CITY LIGHTS

COLOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

ROBERT WALKER  
New York



An imagined, manageable city from long ago might centre on a cathedral, opera house, and a few associated civic buildings. Robert Walker's city of the 1980s, New York, is, by contrast, limitless, a garish apocalypse or end-game played out with flashing lights through a collapsing infrastructure. The place is entertaining enough, and rich in signals, painted big as houses or screened to catch the eye... this very instant, NOW. The city is a cosmos and a body in

motion, circulating, moving with respect to laws more or less indifferent to you and me.

Subways, sidewalks, the world of commerce: raw material, mere stuff. The city, the real city, is a figment of the imagination. Whose imagination? The strongest one around: the one capable of envisaging the whole, of bringing it to the kind of life which would make it a match for all those oceans and stars in the big stories. Walker insists on the city re-made, imagined

again and brusquely in elemental terms: that yellow taxi is some chariot of the sun, or of Jupiter, although in a sort of "time out," to judge from those indolent hands. It is the whole story, including the inside story, the one that admits to shortcomings, signs of weakness. Behind the dazzle, comprehensive bureaucracy and abrupt directives lie wear and tear, tired feet and a capacity for improvisation. Walker, a Canadian come to this particular town-to-end-all-towns,

knows that face value is no value, and reworks the place as show-biz, as well-lit, pungent and convertible – a matter of phrases, noisy with observation. Although a photographer he works in something like the literary tradition of Nelson Algren and William Burroughs, who introduced his major book *New York Inside Out* (Skyline Press, N.Y., 1984). The place may be tacky enough, but its dreams writ large on the hoardings, come not far short of Homeric.