

WHAT TO PHOTOGRAPH?

ROBERT WALKER

When I was invited to give a photography workshop at the School of **Applied Arts in Beyer**, Switzerland, I knew most of the students would not be familiar with my work. The first item of business then was to make a slide presentation to acquaint them.

How does one arrive at a personal subject matter to concentrate on when you are a young student without much experience in the world? A difficult question. It seemed that presenting a chronology of my pictures would not throw light on how I arrived at that particular point of view. The process can often be obscure and elliptical and I could only attempt to clarify it by relating two experiences which I thought might be relevant. I put myself back in their shoes when I was twenty years old. In my case, I was an art student studying painting and this was the mid-sixties when American art was the rage.

Most of all I was excited by the post- abstract expressionists – colour field painters like Morris Louis and Jules Olitski, and by the geometric abstractionists Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly. Their “cool” detachment was appealing for me at the time. The lessons they taught were scale, colour inter relationships and balance, but most importantly, that a successful picture did not have to rely on dramatic, literal subject matter such as the human form.

The pop artists couldn't be ignored – Andy Warhol's monotonous soup cans, Roy Lichtenstein's comic book graphics with their sardonic wit, and the psychological montages of Robert Rauschenberg. The most influential artist of this generation to me as a photographer turned out to be James Rosenquist. Years later when I lived in New York, memories of Rosenquist paintings would jump out at me as I wandered through Times Square. One painting in particular came to mind titled, **I Love You with my Ford, 1961**. The painting is abruptly cropped into three distinct zones: the chrome radiator grille of a Ford, a woman's dreaming face, and a field of spaghetti. This surrealist disjuncture was compelling and mysterious and I can now say in retrospect, a major influence on how I now view the world through the camera's lens.

In 1980 a rare opportunity came my way. Columbia Pictures decided to make a film version of the hugely successful Broadway musical **Annie**. John Huston was chosen to direct and it was to be one of the most elaborate and expensive films made up to that time. Hollywood producer and art collector Ray Stark wanted the production of the film to be documented with a book and chose a group of art photographers for the job, including Gary Winogrand, William Eggleston, Stephen Shore and Joel Meyerowitz. I was honored and flattered to be included in the group and looked forward to the challenge. “Challenge” turned out to be an understatement – the job turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated. I was used to working on the streets in bright sunlight, but this film was shot outdoors, mostly at night or in the deep dark cavern of Radio City Music Hall. I was “a fish out of water” – the initial results of my shooting were dreadful – the modernist painters no longer acted as a model or reference point.

Lying awake at night thinking of how to deal with the problem, I conjured up another painting from memory, but this time from an earlier period. The picture was by Edward Hopper and was titled **New York Movie, 1939**. The scene depicts a cinema with the backs of people watching the silver screen in one half – the other half shows an usherette, bathed in amber light, seemingly lost in her own melancholic mood. The painting provided a perfect balance between the public and the private, the glamorous and the banal. Essentially, it was a tableau illustrating the co-existence of two separate worlds which created visual torque and a psychological tension.

When I returned to the shoot I was able to focus my energies more efficiently and not be seduced or distracted by the exotic environment of beautiful chorus girls, colourful costumes and extravagant sets. These contrasts of opposites now popped out at me from every direction and the assignment dramatically switched from one of high anxiety to that of a truly stimulating challenge. The project culminated successfully with the publication of **Annie** on Camera.

At the end of the day the lesson is an old and simple one – there is no substitute for experience. The question of how does a photographer find his/her subject matter might be reversed. Maybe the subject matter eventually finds the photographer.

List of illustrations on the side of the box

1. **ROBERT WALKER, Annie**, Radio City Music Hall, New York, 1981
2. **ROBERT WALKER, Times Square**, New York, 1999
3. **ROBERT WALKER, Times Square**, New York, 2002
4. **JAMES ROSENQUIST, I Love You with My Ford**, 1961
COLLECTION: MODERNA MUSEET, STOCKHOLM
5. **EDWARD HOPPER, New York Movie**, 1939
COLLECTION: MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



Edward Hopper, New York Movie, 1939



Robert Walker, Backstage, Radio City Music Hall, New York, 1981



James Rosenquist,
I Love You with My Ford, 1961



Robert Walker, Times Square, New York, 2002