

CALIFORNIA
MUSEUM
OF
PHOTOGRAPHY

UNIVERSITY
OF
CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

COLOR IN THE Street

March 11 - April 30

Mark Cohen
John Harding
Helen Levitt
Joel Meyerowitz
Leo Rubinfien
Stephen Scheer
Joel Sternfeld
Charles Traub
Robert Walker
Alex Webb

Kenda North,
Curator

Reception:
Sat., April 2, 5-8pm

Saturday, April 2:

A symposium featuring Joel Meyerowitz,
John Upton and Colin Westerbeck.
Reservations required. For more information,
please call 714-787-4787.

Museum Hours:
Mon.-Sat., 10am-5pm
Thur., 10am-7pm

SOME NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION

For the past several years, in between writing magazine articles, giving lectures and teaching (or doing an occasional catalogue essay), I've been writing a book on the history of street photography. It's proven to be a big project—bigger than I at first realized, because it turns out that almost all photographers try at least a little street photography, and most of the great ones have done it seriously at some point in their careers. That point usually comes early. Street photography is a genre for the young. It was first tried when the medium itself was young. Henry Fox Talbot gave one of the original cameras he had built—"mousetraps," his wife called them—to a friend who carried it on a trip to Italy in order to photograph everyday life in the street. Ever since then, photographers have been beginning their careers, and discovering their medium, in the street.

The range of those who have done so extends from Atget to Cartier-Bresson to Walker Evans to Robert Frank, and to the present, as this exhibition demonstrates. Street photography is also found in the work of every kind of photographer from pictorialists to photojournalists. A surprising number of photographers associated with the Photo-Secession—Stieglitz, Steichen, Genthe and Strand, to mention only the most prominent—did street photography in their early days. Even Minor White did a lot of it at one time here in California. And at the other end of the spectrum, of course, many of the greatest photojournalists have made street photography into a vocation. Cartier-Bresson's lead has proven so powerful that half the staff of Magnum and the other post-war cooperatives have been his followers.

In so far as street photography has been recognized at all, it has usually been thought of as a specialized form of photojournalism. This misrepresents the genre, however. Photojournalists are people who are on the scene. They photograph what's there. Street photographers photograph what *isn't* there. They are interested in a reality that's symbolic rather than literal. They are trying to see what the imagination can invent out of the world, not what was actually going on at the moment they happened to take the picture. A street photographer often establishes in the frame a relationship between subjects who were unconcerned with one another, or even unaware of each other's presence, in reality. The photograph reveals a look or a gesture suggesting an emotion—despair or ecstasy or rage—that no one was actually feeling at the time. The implication of it was simply created by the camera out of the flow of everyday feelings and events. This is not to say that street photography lies, but only that it creates fictions. A street photographer is to a photojournalist what a short-story writer is to a reporter. Both draw upon the material of life itself. But where one seeks out extraordinary events and tries to relate them as they happened, the other looks for the purely ordinary, and makes us see it in extraordinary ways.

Street photographers can be as varied in their outlook as Atget and Robert Frank, as different in temperament as the hand camera and the view camera. Yet certain kinds of imagery, certain strategies of vision, inhere in this genre. The photographer learns them from the street itself. Notice, for example, how many of the photographs in this exhibition turn the street scene into a kind of Joseph Cornell box, a series

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of compartments in which the various subjects of the picture are sealed off from one another. How naturally this view of life comes to a street photographer can be seen from John Harding's pictures. The world is to him infinitely divisible. Each picture is a chambered nautilus, a sphere unique, enclosed, yet belonging to the same species as all his other pictures.

A compartmentalized image can show the abrupt leaps of scale with which our cities confront us, as Robert Walker's photograph of a man walking by a construction site does. We feel we must be looking at two separate pictures that have been spliced together. A photograph like this, or the one that Stephen Scheer made of two backyards fenced off from each other, gives image to the divisions that exist within the society itself between young and old, brown-skinned and white, etc. Dividing and sub-dividing the frame, the way Walker did in his picture of a woman behind a poster of head shots, or Alex Webb in his of women secreted among

posters and shadows on a street in India, imparts to the photograph the same jammed-in feeling that living in a modern city often has. Yet pictures like these are also images of isolation, of the loneliness that people feel in crowds. The beautiful young black woman waiting for the bus may not have been feeling alienation and anger. But in John Harding's photograph, she projects those all to familiar urban emotions as convincingly as could any actress on stage or screen.

To vision like this, which street photography has always possessed, work done in color now adds another dimension. The same sense of isolation, of one figure closed off from another or from its environment, is also achieved merely by color values. In Joel Sternfeld's picture of an old woman passing before a plate glass window in which buildings are reflected, she is warm and bright in the light, the city cold, dark, remote in its reflection. A similar contrast occurs between the angry men outside the bus and the disdainful one inside, in a picture Alex Webb took in Uganda.

Street photographers have an acute sense of the event. They see all around them a continuous melodrama that would be, were it not for their pictures, invisible to the rest of us. Joe Meyerowitz has a particularly sharp eye for this. Instead of dropping in an epileptic fit, the man down in the Paris street in Meyerowitz's photograph might have been felled by the guy stepping over him with a hammer. Stephen Scheer's photograph of a playground scene also seethes with illusive violence. Leo Rubinfien's photograph of three dowagers tasting some junk food is much gentler, a vignette from Noh drama. But in many photographs in this exhibition, the



event is simply a color. In the background of one of Alex Webb's pictures, a tiny figure leaps high on a wall. In the foreground, an electrical line, pink in the dry, late afternoon sunlight, swoops across the frame. The latter is an action caught on the wing no less than the former.

The red hair of an old woman that Mark Cohen caught against an unforgiving granite wall is a similar event. So is the scattering of red cushions that Charles Traub found at a terrace cafe in the south of France, and the bright, pervasive redness of a truck door that Helen Levitt saw somewhere in the garment district in New York. The intensity of that truck's door is as sublime as the smile on the man's face next to it. The warmth of the color somehow matches the sweetness of the smile. Both contribute to the beatific quality of the image. If either were missing, the photograph would lose coherence.

Leo Rubinfien was responding to the yellow benches on the boat as much as to the colorless, bearded man amidst them. Charles Traub was responding to the yellow dress as much as to the woman in it reading and dangling her feet in the Roman fountain. Just the presence of a particular color can introduce a note of mystery into a photograph the way a peculiarity of the setting or a lighting effect might. The man enveloped in the greenness of the cyclone fence in Robert Walker's photograph becomes a magical figure like the man enveloped in steam in Meyerowitz's. Sometimes the street photographer creates such aberration himself, with a strobe. In one of Joel Sternfeld's pictures, as in one of Mark Cohen's, the frame pops with color when the flash hits a hot, pink pants suit.

Because of the relative slowness of color film, this kind of street photography requires even more precise reflexes and greater agility than the black and white version. It takes energy, poise, stamina and concentration. As I said before, it's a genre for young photographers. Let me give you a perfect example. Helen Levitt. The color work she is doing today has every bit as much spunk as the work she did forty years ago. No one knows how old she is, because she won't say. But she's certainly still in the prime of her photographic life. Levitt's career shows that street photographers began using color when it was young, too. Her first body of color work, which was subsequently stolen from her apartment, was done in 1959–60. Joel Meyerowitz has also used color for over twenty years. Although he thought of himself largely as a black and white photographer until six or seven years ago, he shot color as well from the very beginning of his career. Now he shoots nothing else with either the hand or the view camera.

And now a great many other photographs are doing excellent work in color, as this exhibition shows. Some of them are very young yet (photography is a *long* medium), and some not so young. Some are new to me, and some are not. Some will continue with street photography the rest of their lives, and some will turn to other interests—to portraiture or pictorialism or commercial work. Some will give up photography and pursue other careers. For now, however, they all belong together as we see them here. Collected thus in an exhibition, their work shows that street photography itself is very young yet. It still has a great future ahead of it.

Colin L. Westerbeck, Jr.