NEW YORK: CAPITAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

MAX KOZLOFF WITH
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Max Kozloff has been writing about art for over 40 years, concentrating in the last decade or two on photography. The exhibition this catalogue documents was presented last autumn at the Jewish Museum and examines the origins and development of the street photography idiom in its New York City incarnation. It is a study in concision: in a selection of just 104 pictures, Kozloff gives coherent shape to this sprawling subject – photojournalism with the 'news' optional – even as he demonstrates the diversity of approach of its practitioners. He organises his essay according to a hybrid of chronological survey and thematic groupings, suggesting that this untidy, unpredictable thing that happens when photographers leave the shelter of their studios nevertheless has had a traceable development, with periodic stylistic shifts. And he explores why it might be that the preponderance of photographers who have made lasting contributions to the genre have been Jewish, while attempting to identify the elements of a Jewish photographic sensibility.

Following a graceful introduction by Museum curator Helen Levitov, Kozloff's essay is divided into six sections. 'The three New Yorks' outlines the major traditions in formation early in the twentieth century: the archivists, exemplified by the Byron Company; the pictorialism of

Stieglitz and his Photo-Secession; and the work of Lewis Hine. The tremendous significance of the availability of the Leica camera is central to the discussion of Depression-era photography, 'Fallen culture'. Unencumbered by a load of equipment, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans and others brought a new kind of spontaneity to the photoreportage tradition coming out of Hine, as well as a new style: 'grabbed, notational, and intrusive'. The author is especially good on the power relationships between subject and photographer that become particularly acute as a result of this nonconsensual portraiture. 'The rough and gregarious town' examines New York of the 1940s: the hard-boiled look of Weegee; Andreas Feininger's swarming panoramas; Coney Island and Times Square in their heydays. In contrast to such celebration of the public New York, the microcosmic or even allegorical emerge from the work of Lisette Model and Helen Levitt, and the looming huddling figures of Ted Croner. Kozloff is not given to close formal analysis (though he has a great eye). His method is to identify the psychological reverberations that distinguish an artist's oeuvre. Of the great Saul Leiter: 'He worked the mode of the photographic vignette, reducing context yet implying hubbub'. It's that sort of thing that makes reading Kozloff such a pleasure. He also captures Levitt, whose subjects 'play in a shadowed area luminous with halftones where modulations transform a mean street into an enchanted spectacle'. The four accompanying photos are knockouts, especially the outrageously lyrical colour photo of five (or six) kids in delicate motion, from 1972.

'The indispensable target' observes a shift, in the 1950s, from reservedly celebratory to openly critical. The depiction of American society as materialistic and obtuse, its citizens alienated and devoid of *la joie de vivre*, found a warm reception in Paris (where Robert Frank and William Klein found publishers). This 'tough' kind of work was the other side of the coin from Edward Steichen's 'Family of Man' show, MoMA's touring juggernaut of *Life* magazine-style uplift. As vice makes for more interesting literature than virtue, so does anxiety result in better pictures than calm. Leon Levenstein is the perfect example; his subjects look as if they haven't slept in days. Klein's brashness is overrated, but the work's visceral impact is undeniable and he can be very, very funny. 'Lights, color, action' covers the 1960s and 1970s, during which time the City became, for the photographers discussed, merely a backdrop for eccentric characters and representatives of sometimes vaguely defined subgroups, 'fringe scenes that did not advance ideas about metropolitan life in general,' and always had a hard edge. In the selection of images meant to represent the 1980s and 1990s, the laughs come faster. Jeff Mermelstein's shot of a small dog, staring down the camera from a slightly more equitable vantage point atop a heap of bundled newspapers, is an ode to the comically petty territoriality urban dwellers know so well. Larry Fink, about whom Kozloff has written a monograph, is represented by two hilarious (and tonally exquisite) prints both of which feature, amid a crush of self-involved society revellers, a figure whose reaction to the camera registers unmistakable displeasure at the party having been crashed. Though very different, there's a little of Garry Winogrand's edgy humour in this work.

Kozloff's interest in viewpoints that are critical of the status quo, or that sympathetically examine the circumstances of social minorities, is nothing new to his readers; he got his start at *The Nation* in the 1960s, and the street photography genre itself would seem to select itself for artists who find more worth recording in the shared spaces of the disenfranchised than in the exclusive spaces of the privileged. What does appear to be new – or at least heretofore undeveloped – is proposed in the essay's final section, 'Jewish sensibility and the photography of New York.' That the image bank of the City is somehow qualitatively Jewish in outlook nearly defies elucidation since it is not a matter of style, content or subject matter but of attitude toward the picture-taking process. Broadly speaking, the author proposes that, much more than their gentile colleagues, Jewish photographers have engaged in a dialogue with the City on a deep emotional level, interacting with their environment at close range and on a human scale, and recording the result of that very interaction. Maybe because of their mixed feelings about cultural assimilation, Jews identify with cultural outsiders and place themselves in proximity to them. Maybe, as A D Coleman has suggested, the relentless assault on European Jews culminating in the Holocaust stamped itself on these artists' conception of relationships between and among people as provisional, shifting, and above all vulnerable. Maybe Klein put it best (quoted by Anthony Lane in the *New Yorker*):

> I think there are two kinds of photography – Jewish photography and goyish photography. If you look at modern photography, you find, on the one hand, the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks – funky photographs. And then you have the people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston. It's like black and white jazz.

In any case, Kozloff's curatorial risk-taking is such that the subject is renovated. A more doctrinaire treatment might have omitted the painters Shahn and George Grosz, whose work in photography is not so well known, and Alexander Alland, Ruth Orkin and John Gutmann (about whom Kozloff has also written at length), each represented by a terrific image or two. From Bruce Davidson we have not a Brooklyn gang but a Gay Pride gathering

Lewis Hine, *Climbing into America*, 1905. Gelatin-silver print. George Eastman House, Rochester, NewYork

in Central Park. Surprisingly, Nan Goldin is included. Though she is more often associated with pictures of bedrooms and bathrooms, here the case is made for her street (and semi-public) work in terms, again, of the camera's authority. Two dozen additional images, not in the show itself, provide context for the essay. On the 'missing' list are Lou Stettner, the wonderful populist photographer (if not actually innovator) whose personal enthusiasm and sense of humour translate into a close emotional involvement with his subject, and Danny Lyon. *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan*, Lyon's 1967 documentation of the 60 acres of commercial and housing stock, some of it a century old, slated for demolition to make way for the World Trade Center and other downtown projects, is in a way a throwback to early-twentieth-century documentarians such as the Byron Company. Events subsequent to the organising of this show have given these images an even deeper resonance.

The book itself is crisply produced, the reproductions nearly as good as those in Jane Livingston's indispensable *New York School: Photographs 1936–1963* which was published in 1992 and until now has been 'the' book on the subject. (An international perspective is taken, with great flair, in *Bystander: a History of Street Photography* by Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, from 1994.) The scholarly apparatus is in place, the bibliography and checklist of the exhibition supplemented by brief artists' biographies by Johanna Goldfeld. If the golden age of New York-specific street photography is in the past, its history has been astutely rendered by one of our finest critics.

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