



NEWS FLASH

WEEGEE'S CRIME SCENES TRAVEL THE ART CURCUIT BY STEPHEN MAINE

A NEW YORK PHOTOJOURNALIST with nose for trouble and a knack for self-promotion, Arthur Fellig (1899–1968) monitored police radio dispatches of gangland slayings and other urban mayhem so as to be first at the scene. His moniker, a phonetic spelling of Ouija, played up his seeming prescience. His hard-hitting, often lurid work, stamped “Weegee the Famous,” was a hit in the 1930s and ’40s with tabloid editors and readers alike in a tough town with a pre-TV craving for pictures to go with their news, and several daily papers serving them up. In radio interviews, public lectures and print, Weegee hustled himself as ubiquitous chronicler of the Big Apple’s seedier districts with a preternatural gift for getting the scoop. He talked a good game—and he delivered the goods.

On view through September 2, the International Center of Photography’s absorbing exhibi-

tion “Weegee: Murder is My Business,” drawn largely from ICP’s collection and organized by chief curator Brian Wallis, emphasizes a competitive media context that rewarded Weegee’s distinctive style, technique and persona. Transcending the genre conventions of crime reportage, his best work holds up alongside that of such lauded street photographers—portraitists of the concrete jungle—as William Klein and Garry Winogrand. In *Cop Killer* (1941) manacled hoodlum Anthony “Mad Dog” Esposito, bedraggled and abject, is led from a line-up flanked by two officers in overcoats who turn their backs to the camera. The work is grouped with three photos by others of the same event. They flesh out the historical moment but look flatfooted next to Weegee’s chilling shot.

With newly empowered G-men cracking down on the Mob

in the ’30s, whacked weasels were turning up everywhere. *Murder on the Roof* (1941) records the demise of a small-time wise guy. Two investigators attend to the body while, from the adjoining rooftop overhead, a dozen neighbors look on. A freelancer when wire services were starting to handle photos, Weegee set himself apart by capturing onlookers’ reactions. In many cases, these were distraught members of the victim’s family, as in *Their First Murder* (1941). Having snapped the corpse—near a Brooklyn elementary school—Weegee turned his camera on the gathering crowd of excited, appalled students. In their midst, the victim’s aunt wails.

The evidence suggests that Weegee was not queasy about crossing boundaries of propriety to get what he wanted, as per his frankly mercenary exploitation of the life-shattering grief of tragedies’ survivors. He may indeed

have been trying “to humanize the news story,” as he told Simon Nathan in a 1947 interview on the radio station WFMO, but in the process he burnished his profile as bright-eyed interloper in a world of trauma and pain.

The newly invented flashbulb was instrumental to Weegee’s style. Shooting 4x5 film primarily during the violence-ridden nighttime hours, he preset his cumbersome Speed Graphic camera to focus at 10 feet and positioned himself accordingly, considerably improving the odds of getting a stark, newsprint-friendly shot with bright highlights and deep shadows. At the time, New York street photography meant the romanticized, politicized view of the Photo League, represented in this exhibition by wonderful but polite images by Aaron Siskind, Helen Levitt, Vivian Cherry and others. While Weegee had two consecutive exhibitions at

the League (both titled “Murder is My Business”), his unaestheticized, unabashedly sensationalistic take on our mean streets played to a larger, less artsy crowd. A signatory of the League’s guest book on view at ICP asks, “How can I too become a Weegee—?”

Notwithstanding its title, the ICP show demonstrates Weegee’s range of interests, including auto accidents, fires, a stampede and sunny afternoons at Coney Island. His gallops humor, noted in a 1937 *Life* magazine feature, is suggested by *Check for Two Murders* (1939), a close-up of a pocket-worn pay stub from *Time* for “two murders” in the amount of \$35—he claimed one paid slightly more because the killer had used more bullets. A collection of crimes, mishaps and mundane moments at New York’s social fringes, his book of photographs

Naked City was published in 1945 and was an immediate success. “Weegee: Murder is My Business” prompts nostalgia for a wilder, tawdrier New York. Its grittiness and grime are balm to nerves frayed by encroaching wholesomeness, to sensibilities irritated by contemporary New York’s creeping squeaky-cleaness. Therein lies its renewed appeal. Elbowing its way into the critical canon, Weegee’s oeuvre introduces stoolies pumped full of lead to what is often considered the “golden age” of photojournalism, and thrills us with reminders of the elemental danger of zzzcity life.

See “Weegee: Murder is My Business” through Sept. 2, 2012, at International Center of Photography, New York City, www.icp.org

Opposite: Weegee, **Their First Murder**, October 8, 1941. © Weegee/International Center of Photography.