

I Spy

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE
THEATER OF THE STREET, 1938 – 2010

National Gallery of Art
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Introduction

Since the invention of small handheld cameras and faster films in the late nineteenth century, photographers have been fascinated by everyday life in the urban environment. Mining the city's rich potential, they have explored its people, architecture, and modes of transportation while celebrating the energy and diversity of modern life. Some photographers have recorded frequently overlooked people and places, while others have captured a single, often telling, instant of time, and still others have presented a highly personal expression of their own urban experiences.

A number of these photographers, such as Walker Evans, Harry Callahan, Robert Frank, Bruce Davidson, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and Beat Streuli, have pursued this genre by making works under strict parameters. Like children playing the game "I Spy" in the back seat of a car, whose choice of subjects is largely dependent on chance, these photographers limited their frame of reference as a way to embrace serendipity. Evans hid the camera

from the unsuspecting public and photographed only passengers who happened to sit across from him in the subway, Frank photographed only what could be seen from the windows of a bus moving through the city, and diCorcia and Streuli placed their cameras in fixed positions to capture photographs of random passersby. Evans, Callahan, Frank, and Davidson embarked on these projects to challenge themselves to work in a fundamentally different manner than they had previously, while diCorcia and Streuli incorporate these practices into much of their work. All these photographs and videos court happenstance, and all these artists view the city as an endless spectacle. In this age of cell phone and security cameras, YouTube and Google Earth, the photographs also make us aware of our uneasy relationship to the camera, suggesting both our fascination and discomfort with its intrusion into our daily lives.

1

In 1938, at the age of thirty-five, the American photographer Walker Evans (1903–1975) had a one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first large monographic show of a photographer’s work that the museum had ever presented. Although the exhibition and its accompanying book, *American Photographs*, were widely hailed, Evans was disconcerted by his success. As he recalled many years later, “part of me says: beware of this; don’t accept acclaim; be careful about being established.” Rather than continuing to make the same precise, carefully composed photographs that had defined his art the previous ten years, Evans descended into the New York subways to create radically different pictures.

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His resulting photographs, made between 1938 and 1941, were created using a rigid methodology remarkable for the lack of artistic control it gave him. With his 35mm Contax camera hidden beneath his coat, its lens peeking out between the buttons and a cable release strung down his sleeve, Evans abandoned all the means a photographer normally employs to make a picture: he did not arrange his subjects or coach their expressions, and he did not regulate the lighting, use a flash, adjust the exposure or focus of his camera, or even look through its lens to determine what was inside his frame. The only thing he did control was whether and when to photograph the people who happened to sit across from him on the subway. Evans embraced this approach because he

did not want his subjects to become aware of his purpose and pose for his camera. Instead, he wanted them to remain “in naked repose.” Moreover, he asserted that “even more than when in lone bedrooms,” in the New York subways of the time “the guard is down and the mask is off.” Admitting that he was “a penitent spy and an apologetic voyeur,” Evans believed that one should “stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die know-

ing something.” But he was also concerned about the invasion of privacy he had perpetrated. He waited more than twenty years to publish the subway photographs, hoping that the passage of time would soften and mitigate any sense of intrusion.

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Evans continued to explore how he could capture unguarded expressions in a series of photographs made in Bridgeport, Connecticut, while on assignment for *Fortune* magazine. Standing on the corner of Main Street and Fairfield Avenue, he took photographs of pedestrians who passed in front of him over the course of one hour on a single day in June of 1941. Unlike the method he had employed in his *Subway Portraits*, Evans did not conceal his camera while taking these pictures, but instead used it in a more conventional manner, looking through the lens and adjusting its focus and expo-

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sure. Instead of the 35mm camera he used for the *Subway* photographs, he held a 2¼ inch one at waist level and peered down into its viewfinder. In the *Subway* photographs, Evans surreptitiously stalked fellow passengers, but in Bridgeport his subjects confronted him as they turned the corner and found him looking down into his camera. Yet his intent was the same: he wanted his camera to be an objective recording device, documenting a random sample of Bridgeport residents who happened to walk by him that afternoon.

In 1950, the self-taught American photographer Harry Callahan (1912–1999) became head of the photography department at the Institute of Design in Chicago, where he had taught since 1946. Established by the Hungarian-born modernist artist László Moholy-Nagy, the Institute of Design was modeled after the Bauhaus school of art, architecture, and design in Germany. Its curriculum encouraged free-wheeling experimentation with all aspects of the process and practice of photography. When he first encountered Moholy-Nagy's art in the early 1940s, Callahan was deeply influenced by the artist's belief that the camera could break free of traditional formulas to depict the world. For almost a decade, he

experimented extensively with multiple exposure and camera movement, as well as extreme contrast, making prints that were almost entirely all black or all white.

By 1950, however, Callahan found the Institute of Design's emphasis on experimentation oppressive: "Everything was Bauhaus this and Bauhaus that. I wanted to break it." Callahan realized that if he and his students were to progress they must "learn to see things differently from the way [they] saw them before." One challenge Callahan gave to his students — and to himself — was to create intimate and candid portraits of people on the street. Once he embarked on the

project, he realized that he wanted to record people — and especially women — “lost in thought.” So as not to intrude on their reverie, Callahan, like Walker Evans before him, had to learn how to become, in a sense, invisible. Using a telephoto lens on his 35mm camera, prefocused to a distance of about four feet (at which point an average person’s head fills the frame), he walked down Chicago’s busy streets, quickly raising his camera to his eye and randomly recording women’s faces in the crowd. Because both the photographer and his subjects were moving, the technical and aesthetic challenges were immense. Sometimes the women are only minimally described, their eyes, noses, and mouths plunged

into deep shadow; at other times sunlight sparkles on their jewelry and reveals the pores of their skin, even the texture of their makeup. By separating the women from their backgrounds and focusing only on their faces, Callahan entered the psychological realm of his subjects and addressed the introspection, loneliness, and isolation of the individual in modern urban life.

In the summer of 1958, the Swiss-born American photographer Robert Frank (born 1924) was ready for a new challenge. He had spent more than three years constructing what he described as a “broad, voluminous picture record” of America, driving more than ten thousand miles around the United States in 1955 and 1956, shooting 767 rolls of film. The resulting book, *The Americans*, was finished by the summer of 1958 and would be published later that fall in France.

Frank’s work on *The Americans* had been so consuming that he had done little else in the preceding few years. But by the summer of 1958 he began to consider other projects,

one of which was to photograph New York City. Yet, just as Walker Evans restricted his photographs made on the New York subways almost twenty years earlier, Frank decided to limit himself to photographing only what could be seen from the windows of buses as they moved through the city streets. After the unparalleled freedom of his travels for *The Americans*, he seemed to be challenging himself to extract something of significance from an extremely restricted environment. Because he was in motion and because many of the people depicted were also moving, the photographs often appear to be stills from a motion picture, as if the bus were a dolly, the window a viewfinder, and the street an almost end-

less stage unspooling in front of Frank's eyes. He explained that when he printed the photographs for an exhibition in 1962, he surrounded the images with a wide gray border "to heighten the feeling of seeing from the inside to the outside," while the photographs themselves, often of solitary pedestrians, have "to do with desperation and endurance...compassion and probably some understanding."

Recognizing their filmic qualities, Frank also declared that his *Bus* photographs were his "last personal project in still photography." For the next dozen years he devoted his energies to making films, including *Pull My Daisy*, 1959, *The Sin of Jesus*, 1961, and *Me and My Brother*, 1969, before he returned, once again, to still photography in the early 1970s.

In the spring of 1980, the American photographer Bruce Davidson (born 1933) decided to photograph in New York's subways. With rampant crime, graffiti-covered trains, and dark, dank stations, the New York subway system was at its nadir, so dangerous that it had inspired the formation of a vigilante group, the Guardian Angels, in 1979. While Davidson was fully aware of the dangers of the subway, he also recognized that it tied the disparate sections of the city together and, in both the diversity of its riders and the state of its disrepair, provided a compelling metaphor for the world at large.

To prepare himself for this project, Davidson embarked on a crash diet and a military fitness program. Each day before he descended into the subway, he donned a safari jacket and a bag loaded with cameras, film, lenses, a power-pack for his flash, and even a small Swiss army knife for nominal protection. He photographed only what could be seen in the subway system itself—its cars, stations, or platforms—or what could be glimpsed from the windows when the trains were above ground. For the first time in his personal, noncommercial work he used color film to add, as he wrote, “a new dimension of meaning” to his photographs. The Day-Glo

graffiti and the riders' often garish clothing demanded to be recorded in color, but Davidson also sought to reveal the iridescence of the reflection of his strobe light on the metallic subway cars.

Unlike Walker Evans and Robert Frank, Davidson made an effort to ask his subjects if he could photograph them before he took their picture. Many consented, but others threatened him. Even though he was mugged at knifepoint, accused of rape by a deranged passenger, and endured the smell of urine-soaked clothing, Davidson admitted that he became “addicted” to the dark and demonic but also democratic

subway. He sought to reveal not only the congestion and dangers of the subway — violent or drug-addled youths and lost souls — but also its beauty: young lovers who stole quiet moments, languorous women in their sheer summer dresses, and proud matrons. In this “grim, abusive, violent, and often beautiful reality of the subway,” he wrote, “we confront our mortality, contemplate our destiny, and experience both the beauty and the beast....Trapped inside” the moving train, “we all hang on together.”

[Click to listen to an interview with Bruce Davidson by curator Sarah Greenough \(7:20 mins.\)](#)

For more than thirty years, the American photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia (born 1951) has merged fact and fiction, blending a documentary style with techniques of staged photography. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the street was central to his art. Two series in particular are of anonymous city dwellers, illuminated, diCorcia has observed, as if by “a higher power.” To make these photographs, diCorcia embraced a cinematic approach, setting up a complex system of synchronized flashes, hung on lampposts and street signs, and using a prefocused telephoto lens that he activated when someone walked over a designated mark. He then positioned himself so that he could survey the scene without being immediately detected.

The first series, titled *Streetwork*, included photographs made in many cities around the world between 1993 and 1999. As in *New York, 1997*, diCorcia frequently captured a broad view of the street. The artificial illumination creates a heightened, almost theatrical drama and accentuates the figures of two businessmen as they stride beneath an announcement of a play based on T. S. Eliot’s modern satire, *The Waste Land*.

DiCorcia’s street photography became even more intense — and empathetic — in *Heads*, a group of seventeen close-ups of pedestrians made in New York in 2001. The product of a year spent observing people in Times Square through a telephoto lens, diCorcia’s head shots convert ordinary city dwellers — a

postal worker, a businessman, a teenage girl — into accidental celebrities by making them larger than life and lighting them like fashion models or movie stars. The radiant look of their unguarded faces framed against darkened backgrounds — a byproduct of the intense flash and the camera's shallow depth of field — clashes with their casual demeanor. Transforming the commonplace into the monumental, diCorcia reveals to us the art of our everyday world.

The question of what it means to be an unwitting participant in these dramas came to the fore in 2006. One of the people

diCorcia had photographed for his *Heads* series, Erno Nusen-zweig, an Orthodox Jew, sued the artist, arguing that both his privacy and religious rights had been violated when diCorcia took the photograph without his permission and then exhibited it. A New York state court ruled in favor of diCorcia on the grounds that his photographs were works of art and therefore constitutionally protected free speech, exempted from the reach of New York's privacy law.

[Click to listen to an interview with Philip-Lorca diCorcia by curator Sarah Greenough \(6:58 mins.\)](#)



Beat Streuli

NYC 01 / 02, 2002 / 2012

Manhattan 09–09, 2010



25 Beat Streuli, *NYC 01/02*, 2001/2002, two screen HD digital still sequences (excerpt), Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York (1:30 mins.)

For more than twenty years, the Swiss photographer Beat Streuli (born 1957) has used large-scale color photographs, slide and video projections, as well as billboard and window installations to explore the pictorial possibilities of the contemporary city street, with its congested mix of buildings, signs, cars, trucks, and a never-ending sea of people. Working around the world, he uses telephoto lenses to create close-up, intimate portraits of strangers; these are framed against blurred, often abstract backdrops that change little from one city to another. With his camera set up in café windows or busy thoroughfares, he records a heterogeneous mix of city dwellers — although young people, who convey style and self-assurance through their clothing and

carriage, are his most frequent subjects. Working on sunny days, he uses a slow, fine-grain film that captures saturated colors and rich details, such as the weave of a man's sweater or the sheen of a woman's hair, highlighting the inadvertent patterns that adorn our daily lives.

In 2001 and 2002, Streuli sat in a New York coffee shop and focused his still camera on the entrance to the Astor Place subway stop to record a random sampling of passersby. The resulting work, *NYC 01/02*, consists of two side-by-side projections of still photographs, one fading into the next, that capture in staccato fashion the movement of people within the city. The



26 Beat Streuli,
Manhattan 09–09, 2010,
HD video with sound
(excerpt), Collection of
Aaron and Barbara Levine,
Courtesy of Murray Guy,
New York
(1:33 mins.)

depiction of single, brightly lit heads and torsos gives the pedestrians an almost iconic aura. In *Manhattan 09–09* Streuli set up his camera in several locations throughout the city. Hiding in plain sight, he seems to have elicited little attention while making this video. Occasionally passersby notice him and his camera, but they rarely do more than acknowledge his presence and move on: people photograph in public places so often now that his actions scarcely seem intrusive or voyeuristic. Because he used a telephoto lens and positioned his camera so that pedestrians walk often directly toward it, their movements sometimes seem slowed and the rapid pace of urban life is transformed into a fluid, graceful sequence. Streuli allows us to study, if only for a few seconds, fleeting expressions, casual interactions, and minute changes of mood. Mundane actions — a woman crossing the

street, a man turning his head to look for oncoming traffic, a truck passing in front of the camera lens — are transformed into a hypnotic current of images. Like many of his videos, *Manhattan 09–09* includes intermittent sound so that the city's typically staccato noises — the blaring of a car horn, a loud voice in the distance — blend into a lulling rhythm of muffled tones. Together, these elements allow Streuli to present the spectacle of the street as if it were seen in a moment of reverie, thus revealing the dramatic beauty of everyday life.



1 Walker Evans, *Subway Portraits*, 1938–1941, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, John Wilmerding Fund



2 Walker Evans, *Subway Portraits*, 1941, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry H. Lunn Jr. in Honor of Jacob Kainen and in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art



3 Walker Evans, *Subway Portraits*, 1938, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Kent and Marcia Minichiello



4 Walker Evans, *Subway Portraits*, 1938–1941, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Kent and Marcia Minichiello



5 Walker Evans, *Bridgeport, Connecticut*, 1941, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Promised Gift of Kent and Marcia Minichiello



6 Walker Evans,
Bridgeport, Connecticut,
1941, gelatin silver print,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Promised
Gift of Kent and Marcia
Minichiello



7 Walker Evans, *Bridgeport, Connecticut*, 1941, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Promised Gift of Kent and Marcia Minichiello



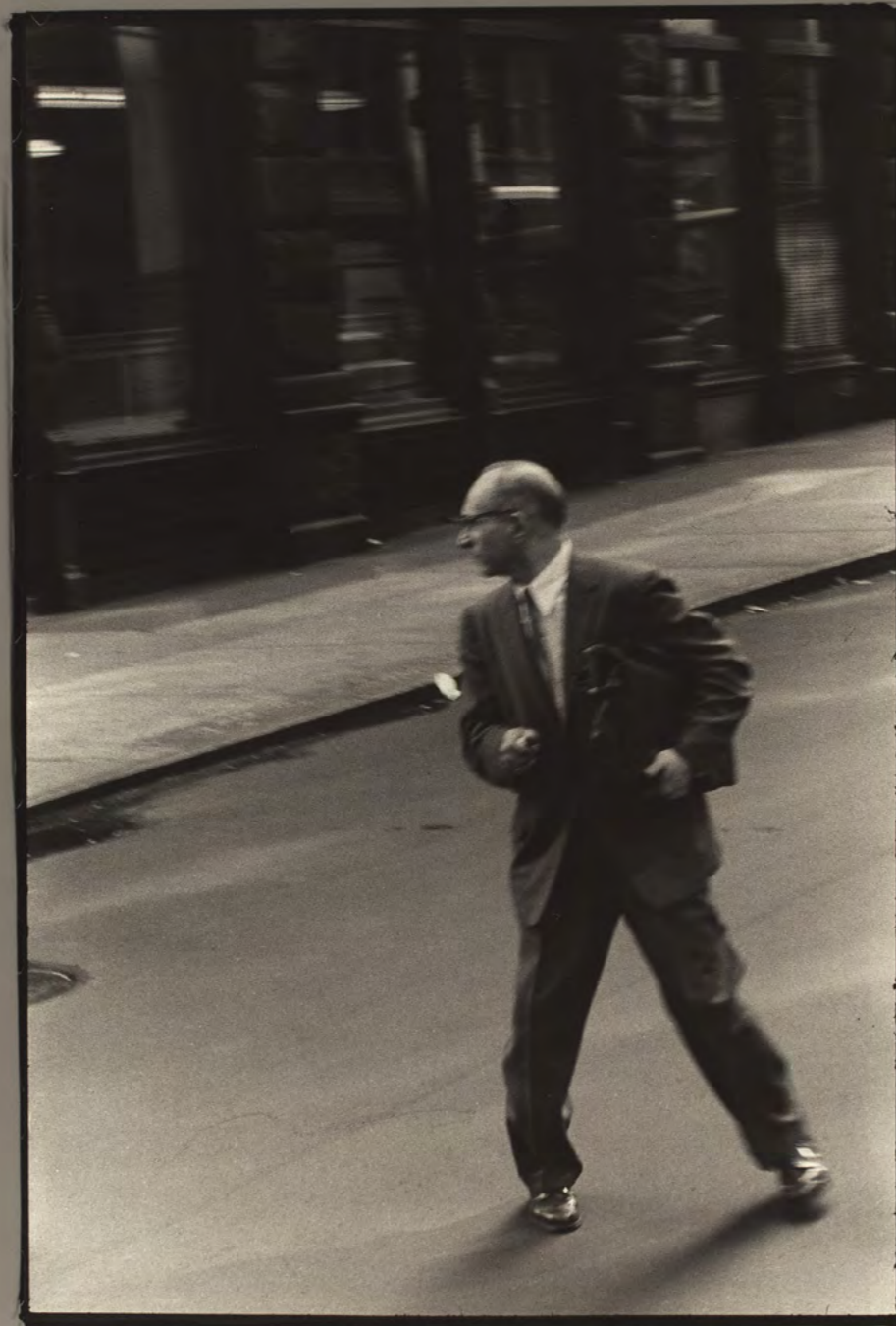
8 Harry Callahan, *Chicago*,
1950, gelatin silver print,
Collection of Randi and
Bob Fisher



9 Harry Callahan, *Chicago*,
1950, gelatin silver print,
Collection of Randi and
Bob Fisher



10 Harry Callahan,
Chicago, 1950, gelatin
silver print, Collection of
Randi and Bob Fisher



11 Robert Frank, *From the Bus, New York, 1958*, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Robert Frank Collection, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation through Robert and Joyce Menschel



12 Robert Frank, *From the Bus, New York, 1958*, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Robert Frank Collection, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation through Robert and Joyce Menschel

13 Robert Frank, *From the Bus, New York, 1958*, gelatin silver print, Private collection of Dr. J. Patrick and Patricia A. Kennedy



N.Y. BUS 1958

Robert Frank



14 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



15 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



16 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



17 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



18 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



19 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



20 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



21 Bruce Davidson,
Subway, 1980–1981, dye
imbibition print, Michael
and Jane Wilson



22 Philip-Lorca diCorcia,
New York, 1997, 1997,
chromogenic print,
Courtesy the artist and
David Zwirner, New York



23 Philip-Lorca diCorcia,
Head #22, 2001, chromo-
genic print, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Charina Endowment



24 Philip-Lorca diCorcia,
Head #23, 2001, chromo-
genic print, Courtesy the
artist and David Zwirner,
New York

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