

ART

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Photo show puts the streets back in focus

By Lisa Stein
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Since its invention, photography has gravitated to the random, swirling energy of life on the street. There has been no better place to capture the jumpy pulse of modernity, its split-second, rhythmic patterns of form and light.

The genre of street photography has taken center stage at several points in the last 100 years, including during the Photo-Secession movement at the turn of the 20th Century, during the Depression when photographers were commissioned by the government to document American life, and in New York in the 1960s, when a circle of photographers gathered around Garry Winogrand. During these periods, street photographers found communities of like-minded artists who devoted themselves to candid shots of people in public places.

But in the last few decades, street photographers have found themselves on the fringes of the art world and society at large. By the 1980s a detached, postmodern sensibility favoring self-conscious social critique had replaced the tough, instinctual aesthetic of street photography. Many street photographers have been neglected since then, suffering from a dearth of museum exhibition opportunities and magazines willing to publish their work.

But street photographers haven't reacted to this indifference by packing it in. As an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago illustrates, they continue to prowl back alleys, boulevards and small towns all over the world. "The Sidewalk Never Ends," which continues through April 28, presents at least 100 works by 20 contemporary photographers entrenched by the theater of the street.

"Whatever photography is, street photography is the essence of it," remarks Colin Westerbeck, exhibition curator and curator of photography at the Art Institute. "Before photography art usually wasn't full of details of ordinary life, what you saw walking down the street. Photography can give us that. This is why street photography will always be a discipline, at the very least."

Focusing the eye

According to Westerbeck, at least all photographers experiment with street pictures at some point in their careers. He points to the fashion photographer Irving Penn, who went through a brief phase as a street photographer.

"They often do it while they're young, even if they go on to do studio work," Westerbeck said. "For some the camera is like a worry bead, they carry it and shoot casually. They keep that discipline as a way to focus the eye and respond to detail. . . . It's like limbering up for a dancer or a long-distance runner. It keeps you fit. That's why street photography will never go away. It's too inherent to photography itself."

"The Sidewalk Never Ends" is a follow-up to Westerbeck's previous exhibition, "Bystander: A History of Street Photography," which took place at the Art Institute in 1994. "Bystander" originated as a book, which was the result of a collaboration between Westerbeck and well-known New York photographer Joel Meyerowitz, who had worked closely with Winogrand.

"Bystander" traced the development of street photography from the mid-19th Century through the late 1960s and early '70s. It included works by masters such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Eugene Atget, Alfred Stie-



Tribune photo by Collie Upton

Colin Westerbeck, curator of "The Sidewalk Never Ends," sits in front of works by Italian photographer Ernesto Bazan.

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glitz, Paul Strand, Brassai, Walker Evans and Diane Arbus. Its survey ended with Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Barbara Cranz and Helen Levitt, among others, many of whom had been strongly influenced by "The Americans," an influential book of photographs published in 1950 by Robert Frank.

"Bystander" enjoyed critical and commercial success, and the publisher proposed a paperback edition, asking Westerbeck and Meyerowitz to bring the book up to date with an afterword. The two pored over hundreds of recent images, looking for those that embodied the same characteristics of classic street photography. Westerbeck decided to organize an exhibition to coincide with the release of the paperback. "This exhibition is an attempt to be illustrative, not definitive. We wanted to show the range of interest among photographers."

The biggest difference that Westerbeck sees today in the lack of a street photography culture like the one that thrived in New York more than 25 years ago. "Now there are street photographers who live in New York and gravitate to New York, but they are not in touch with each other. But street photography is alive and well and living in countries like the Czech Republic and Spain."

Old versus new

The Czech photographers in the exhibition — Viktor Kolar, Bohdan Holomecký and Jindřich Štěrba — turn out to be the elder statesmen among a group of mostly young photographers. All three are largely self-taught and have been taking pictures since the 1960s; Kolar and Štěrba served time in Soviet-era prisons for their photography. Their photographs tend to be bleakly industrial, but at the same time full of the strange, chance contrast that infuses street photography. In one of Kolar's photographs a group of weary, sooty miners getting off work trudge by a couple in traditional dress dancing joyfully.

As Meyerowitz observed in the book, "The street tradition seems to have the greatest currency and activity of late in developing or emerging nations . . .

In societies where there is instability or a conflict between

old ways and new that is being acted out in the streets, street photography has a great deal more urgency than it seems to here."

Since Meyerowitz wrote that, of course, the tragedy of Sept. 11 has profoundly changed life on the street in New York and everywhere else in the United States. Suddenly the streets here have become sites of instability, places where the fracture between old and new jumps to the fore. Westerbeck notes that such a change may signal a resurgence in the genre's popularity.

Like the Czechs, many other photographers in the exhibition have stuck close to home, combing their own back yards, as it were, for intimate details. English photographer Tom Wood documents the decline of working-class Liverpool and the nearby resort town in which he has lived for almost 25 years. Thomas Roma, the most widely known photographer in the exhibition and Friedlander's son-in-law, has depicted the inhabitants of his Brooklyn neighborhood for most of his career. Tom Arratt has done the same with subjects in his native Minnesota, and Cristóbal Sola with those living in the small Spanish town of Cuenca.

Some of the photographers, such as Jeff Mermelstein and Tom Hartney, highlight the human to be found in chance encounters. Mermelstein shows fellow New Yorkers in absurd moments, such as the ruffled man with a paperback stuffed in his mouth. Hartney "was stuck" as a security guard at the Art Institute, offers the sight of a beagle locked in what seems to be a passionate embrace with the priest while her groom looks on.

Although he has been a curator at the Art Institute for 15 years, Westerbeck feels an affinity with photographers such as Hartney who work outside the mainstream. He, too, ended up at the museum in a roundabout way.

Another anomaly

Meyerowitz played a pivotal role in Westerbeck's switch to photography. They were introduced by a mutual friend in the mid-1970s, a few years after Westerbeck had earned a doctorate in English literature from Columbia University. At the time Westerbeck was teaching literature and film history at Brooklyn College, and spending some free week-day afternoons watching the photographer work in his darkroom. His interest in the medium grew, and he began writing about photography exhibitions for Artforum magazine.

"I didn't like academic writing," Westerbeck said. "I didn't adopt the professional argot you're taught to speak in graduate courses. I was much more interested in the immediacy of writing. Because of that my pieces stood out from the typically academic writing that's done about art."

In the early 1980s he and Meyerowitz received a grant to start a comprehensive project on street photography. Soon after, Westerbeck's articles caught the attention of administrators at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who offered him a position teaching photography. A year later he accepted a curatorship in the photography department, a job that took him some time to adjust to after his teaching stint. "All this makes me sympathetic to those photographers who work in an idiosyncratic way while sharing a common discipline. I'm an anomaly too."

Street photography remains one of Westerbeck's abiding passions, even though he is currently working on a book about portraiture. "I love the spontaneity, the idea of a camera as an extension of vision, a kind of prosthetic device. It has the ability to show a range of humanity and a gentle, sometimes bitter, irony. There's nothing more essential than that to modern culture."