



Walker Evans Archive

## Tunnel Visions

Below the streets and behind sliding doors, decades of subway photos present a furtive portrait of the city.

By SARAH BOXER

**T**HE guard is down and the mask is off: even more than when in lone bedrooms," Walker Evans said of the New York City subway riders he photographed from 1938 to 1941. Snapping his pictures secretly in violation of a ban on subway photography, he called himself the "spy and voyeur in the swaying seat."

This year, in the 100th year of New York's subway, the city is celebrating in two ways: with lots of exhibitions and books of subway photography and, perversely enough, by thinking about reinstating the ban on subway photography for security reasons. (The old one was rescinded 10 years ago.) If the rule, proposed by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, goes into effect, anyone shooting a photo, film or video in the subway without a pass will face a \$25 fine.

Maybe, for the sake of subway photography, it would be just as well. This is one kind of art that has always thrived on sneakiness.

Evans took all his pictures in winter so he would have a coat to conceal his camera. He shot blindly, with his lens peeking out between the buttons and the cord of his shutter release hidden in his sleeve. Sometimes he invited Helen Levitt, a fellow photographer, to be his decoy.

In 1966 his book of anonymous subway riders was published, with a title, "Many Are Called," borrowed from the gospel of St. Matthew, and a quasi-religious introduction, written in the 1940's by James Agee. The book, just reissued by Yale University Press, is a somber catalog of isolated souls, thanks to Evans's strategic cropping. Their destinations appear in bold white letters over their heads. The book ends with a picture of a blind accordionist making his way down an aisle of inattentive riders. Maybe, James R. Mellow noted in his Evans biography, Evans saw himself as "an Orpheus in the underground."

Evans's alienated underworld was a presence for subsequent subway photographers. So were his methods and forms. His stealth in shooting,

his frontal presentation of face after face, his fascination with the words on the subway walls, and his high sense of mission (he reported a "heaven-sent exuberance") all became part of the underground aura.

In the 1970's and 80's, Evans's decoy, Ms. Levitt, who often used a right-angle viewfinder to conceal what she was doing, snapped her own subway pictures. In her shots, bits of graffiti float above the passengers' heads, and the mood isn't nearly so dark. The riders, usually in pairs or groups, are tenderly absorbed in one another, or happily not. A man in a corduroy jacket gently props up the head of a sleeping child. A woman under the graffiti "Topcat" ignores a passenger near her and smiles down the row of seats.

Not long after Ms. Levitt, Bruce Davidson descended to the underworld, arming himself, as he reports in his book "Subway" (St. Ann's Press), with a police pass, spare change for beggars, a whistle to call for help, a pocketknife to defend himself and, to explain his project to hostile strangers, "a small gold-trimmed white wedding album holding pictures of people I had already photographed in the subway." His camera was in full view.

Shooting in color and not always straight across the aisle, he caught the subways in all their garish violence. In his photos (on view at the Museum of the City of New York), the graffiti is everywhere and out of control. He used a strobe light that bounced off the subway walls, so even the riders who know they're being photographed look startled. Some are shirtless, some are naked, some are scarred. Jumbled together, they know they are in hell. In one picture, a blind accordionist walks down the aisle, a grim reincarnation of Evans's prophet.

Subway photography emerged from underground in Thomas Roma's 1998 book of black-and-white subway photographs. The title, "Higher Ground," indicates not only that he photographed in the elevated sections of the subway (and legally) but also, as Ian Frazier notes in the



book's introduction, that he sought out "the transcendental among the everyday." The riders are often sleeping or gazing out the window. Underground flash has been replaced by blazing sunlight. The graffiti, scratched onto the windows, is (thanks to new surface treatments that repel spray paint) a ghost of its former self. It is as if the passengers got a reprieve from Mr. Davidson's hell and emerged blinking.

Many of the photographs in "Life Below: The New York City Subway" (The Quantuck Lane Press) by Christophe Agou, a French photographer, take their cue from Evans. All the passengers are absorbed in their own worlds — putting on makeup, puffing up their cheeks — unaware of the lens.

Beginning in the summer of 2001 and into 2002 the Czech photographer Peter Peter went into the subway with color film in his camera. Like Evans he worked undercover, hiding his camera in a bag with a peephole cut into it. And he photographed the requisite accordionist. But, unlike Evans, who saw the subway as "a sociological goldmine," Mr. Peter is a picture punster. In one image, in his book "The Subway Pictures" (Random House), the photographer's lone reflection is sandwiched between a couple stretched out on a seat and the word "Loner" scratched onto the window.

Then there is Camilo Jose Vergara, who has been shooting New York City's subways, inside and out, for the last three decades. (His subway pictures are at the Museum of the City of New York.) As he notes in his book "Subway Memories" (The Monacelli Press), he set out to catalog the archetypal interactions of people underground. But his color pictures, often shot down the aisle, capture more about the train cars than any of the souls that pass through them. In 1986, he photographed a lone child in a sea of graffiti, and in 2002 a Mariachi band (with an open-eyed accordionist!) in a shiny chrome car. Mr. Vergara noted, "I have long since abandoned my search for mythical characters."

So where is the sneaky and sacred art of subway photography now? The threat of a ban on subway photography has injected some righteous energy into the mix. The photobloggers of New York, many of whom post subway photographs taken by cellphone camera ([www.hnorthrop.com](http://www.hnorthrop.com), [www.satanslaundromat.com](http://www.satanslaundromat.com) and [www.joesnyc.streetnine.com](http://www.joesnyc.streetnine.com) are a few), have vowed to keep on shooting without passes. The Village Voice and the Straphangers Campaign held subway photo contests in protest.

But why all the fuss? When it comes to the underworld, the law has never stopped anyone with a coat and a camera.