

Wall Street

In 2009 Reinier Gerritsen made a number of photographs in the subways of New York in the vicinity of Wall Street. In choosing his subject he consciously placed himself within the tradition of documentary photography, by retracing the footsteps of Bruce Davidson in the 1980s and Walker Evans in the 1930s.

Evans and Davidson also took pictures of people in the subway, because they were fascinated with everyday life in the big city and were amazed at the way in which the boundaries between private and public space dissolve in the subway. Gerritsen specifically chose his location – one of the world's largest financial centres – and his moment because of the worldwide financial crisis that had just erupted. We see large groups of introvert subway travellers. These unposed 'group portraits' reflect the collective feelings of a world in shock, not understanding that things have reached the stage where the global financial system has collapsed. The series is therefore the personification of the loss and a possible historic turning-point in world economics.

Street photography: The city's spectacle

'They are members of every race and nation of the earth,' James Agee wrote in his introduction to *Many Are Called*, the book that Walker Evans published in 1966 selected from the pictures he had made in the New York subway between 1938 and 1941. Agee's remark about the great variety of human characters applies as much to the situation in 2009 – the year in which Reinier Gerritsen chose the same subway line (Lexington Line) to photograph people – as it did in 1940. Even now New York presents us with a city that is a melting pot, an indefinite mixture of social, national and racial backgrounds that provides the passer-by with a visual spectacle.

Halfway through the nineteenth century the French poet Charles Baudelaire had already written about the modern phenomenon of the '*flâneur*': the individual stroller who absorbed daily life and events in the streets of the big city (in his case, Paris). This 'aimless stroller' was fascinated by the dynamics of the never-ending stream of people and traffic, the countless activities that took place in the streets, the continuous process of demolition and construction, the hectic traffic, the noise and jostling – but also the amusement and recreation, for instance in a park. After all, the spectacle of the big city always offers some kind of diversion to the person who takes his time and has an eye for it.

There is still another important aspect to the metropolitan experience: the anonymity of the individual person amidst the crowds. The individual stroller can imagine himself to be all by himself, while observing his fellow townsmen in the public areas of the city. After all, unwritten social rules and codes provide each individual with a certain space and freedom – as long as he or she leaves others alone, and can therefore 'blend in with the masses'. Within certain boundaries, it is allowed to watch and observe. And to take pictures – the *flâneur* is after all an outstanding example of the photographer, as the American writer Susan Sontag remarked in her famous 1977 collection of essays, *On Photography*:

The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a

landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world 'picturesque.'¹

Indeed, press photographers, paparazzi and photojournalists find their main field of interest in the streets of the big city. Street photography originated from the fascination with what has been called the 'theatre of the street', a fascination that is a mixture of voyeurism and interest in everything that is new, the unknown, modern social life. Here all social classes are mixed together. The rich and the poor, the common worker and the CEO, the movie star and the fan: they all meet each other here. That theatre has attracted countless photographers to the streets of New York over the decades. Here important photographic oeuvres were developed. Think for instance of the world-famous press photographer Weegee, who captured the crime scenes of nocturnal New York with his Speedgraphic camera in the 1930s and 1940s. The canon of street photography was developed further through the work of several other diverse photographers such as Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Joel Meyerowitz, William Klein, Bruce Gilden and Lee Friedlander. Over the years street photography not only developed into a specialism, but has even become an 'autonomous' genre.²

Although New York is considered to be the centre of street photography, its origins lie in Paris. Eugène Atget, for instance, photographed the empty streets of Paris around 1900 as if they were the background of a theatre piece that had already been performed. (He took his pictures very early in the morning, and there is always an uncanny feeling of emptiness in his photos.) Brassai followed in his footsteps, making pictures of the Parisian streets in the evening and at night. Robert Doisneau and Henri Cartier-Bresson followed, each with his own well-known humanistic approach, putting man and his social and cultural context at the centre of things. Cartier-Bresson set the tone for the following generations of 'street photographers' (among them those mentioned above) by stressing the importance of the moment the picture is taken, as described in his theory of the 'decisive moment'. The dark metaphors of Frank, the well-balanced compositions of Meyerowitz, the close-ups of Klein, the crooked spontaneity of Winogrand: no matter how diverse their styles may be, their work focuses on capturing that one moment when something essential is happening in the eyes of the photographer, in his reality. (I don't mean here the metaphysics of the creative process, but the art of the photographic eye itself.)

No matter how much is 'manipulated' (position, frame, the moment the picture is taken, lens, shutter speed, film speed, etc.), the result represents what the maker of the picture experienced, saw, recognized, knew, felt, thought or wanted – and right at that one moment. That which was in front of the lens has remained untouched, was not manipulated and not staged. The image is a preserved fragment of reality, so to speak – it is 'only' seen, recognized, observed and captured. In other words, while the documentary photo as a 'window on the world' always had its origins in the classic unity of time, place and action, for a long time it put the emphasis on the momentaneous character of the medium – the relationship with time. Only recently the

¹ Susan Sontag. 1977. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. p. 55

British photographer Paul Graham again argued that the essence of the ‘creative act’ in photography lies in showing ‘the measuring and unfolding of the cloth of time itself.’³

² Joel Meyerowitz and Colin Westerbeck. 1994. *Bystander. A History of Street Photography*, New York: Bulfinch Press.

Clive Scott. 2007. *Street Photography. From Atget to Cartier-Bresson*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris

³During the first Photography Forum in the MoMA, February 16, 2010. See: www.paulgrahamarchive.com/writings_by.html

Gerritsen’s work however shows us that the relation between photo and time can also be of a completely different nature. At a first glance *Wall Street* might appear to be closely related to the work of current innovators of the field like Streuli and DiCorica, but the series is in essence completely different from their work.

The individual in the crowd

In the works of Beat Streuli and Philip Lorca DiCorcia, in which the boundaries of the classic street photography are expanded, the unity of time, place and action remains untouched. In the 1990s Beat Streuli gave street photography a new impulse by using a telephoto lens and focusing on people in the crowds on the streets. He made pictures and filmed pedestrians from far away in eight large cities in the United States, Europe and Asia, without them noticing they were being photographed, for instance while they were waiting for a traffic light. That way Streuli made monumental (group)portraits of people who didn’t realize that their facial expressions were being captured. He was able to visualize they way individuals ‘blend in’ with the crowd by putting them in the spotlight for a brief moment. Those portrayed in the photos of Philip Lorca DiCorcia were also unaware that their picture was being taken, until the moment DiCorcia used a strong flash unit to take his picture. DiCorcia made his series *Heads* (2000) on a busy street in New York. He hid his camera and had it react automatically to the movements of the passers-by. Here as well, the persons portrayed could not influence the way they were put on the photo at all. Streuli and DiCorcia depict the modern urban experience, where the habitat of each urban individual has almost incessantly become the crowd surrounding him, but they also point out less explicitly that individuals blending in with the crowd does not mean they are all of the same social class. After all, not all individuals who together apparently form a crowd are on the same rung of the social or economic ladder.

Underground

The subway (or bus, train) is not the same subject as the street, but it is a public space that is partly a derivative of it. It has a number of specific qualities that are very attractive to photographers. It is true that the space of public transport is a space from and for the public, but legally speaking it is always private. Relatively few photographers have taken pictures in the subway. Perhaps that is a result of the many practical drawbacks: the difficult light, the

small spaces, the shaking of the carriages, the travellers who are standing very close to each other and the ban on taking pictures in many places. 4

⁴ Taking pictures in the New York subway is permitted, but only without a tripod.

In the 1970s the Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama took pictures of passengers waiting on the platforms of the subway in Tokyo. Before him, in 1966 his fellow-countryman Nobuyoshi Araki aimed his voyeuristic camera at female subway passengers sitting opposite him (the same working method Walker Evans had used before him). Following in his footsteps Martin Parr photographed sleeping subway passengers in Tokyo. The German photographer Willy Spiller published a reportage in 1986 about the New York subway (he called it a ‘hell on wheels’). More recently, in his *Tokyo Subway Dreams* (2010) Michael Wolf captured travellers in the subway of (yet again!) Tokyo, whose bodies are pressed against the overcrowded subway carriages. But all in all the number of series on the subject can be counted two hands. The subway literally moves around in the city’s underbelly (even though it often rides above ground for long distances, as is the case in New York). That is in itself symbolic. When Bruce Davidson began to take pictures in the New York subway he explicitly searched for an urban zone where criminality was thriving. The subway is long been known as an extremely efficient manner of transport, but not necessarily the most safe or comfortable one. Popular B-films like *The Taking of Pelham 123* (1974/2009) and *Moebius* (1966) even increase the fear of disappearing for good under ground by subway. The terrorist attacks in the subway of London, or more recently of Moscow, filmed by survivors with their cell phones, are indelibly printed in everyone’s memory.

Unposed Portraits

Walker Evans was the first photographer who systematically took pictures in the New York subway. He began doing it in 1938 and stopped in 1941. At that time the New York subway had already been running for 35 years. It was a revelation for Evans. Still, he only took pictures there for three years and at long intervals. With the exception of one or two prints in a magazine, he only made the photos public in 1966, 25 years after they were taken. He published them in the photo book mentioned above, with the biblical title *Many are Called*, where a selection of 89 pictures was printed. Perhaps this delay was caused by World War II, but also by the success he had as photographer after the solo exposition in the Museum of Modern Art in 1938 with *American Photographs*. In his introduction on the ways in which

people protect their naked self against the gaze of others, Agee wrote: 'The simplest or the strongest of these beings has been so designed upon by his experience that he has a wound and nakedness to conceal, and guards and disguises by which he conceals it. Scarcely ever, in the whole of his living, are these guards down.' Only very rarely do people drop their protective masks, for instance at moments when they are lost in thought. In the subway for instance, in the half darkness and with the rhythm of the moving carriages, travellers are alone and are thrown back on their own. This made the subway the most ideal portrait studio to Evans. There was no posing, no sentiment, no faking it. 'My idea of what a portrait ought to be: anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind,' he would later write about *Many are Called*. His portraits are of travellers who are often captured sitting all alone against the dark background of the carriage; they are staring into space or are reading the paper. Evans sometimes also photographed advertising posters or information signs that were hanging on the wall. In addition to the many faces we see a wide variety of attire: hats, caps, fur coats, ties, scarves, raincoats, handkerchiefs, pinned-on flowers and jewellery. Evans clearly had an eye for such details, but he didn't want to characterize his subjects on the basis of those details. (He was familiar with the work of August Sander and with the aspirations that were at the root of his work.) 'Unposed portraits' was one of the titles he once considered for his book. In order to enrich his 'document of humanity' he even considered publishing some of the overheard conversations in the subway along with the photographs. Although he probably was not familiar with the *Mass Observaton Project* that three young Britishers had begun in Great Britain in 1937 – thus in the same period as his own work – and which was intended to study the masses in a semi-scientific manner in order to create an 'anthropology of oneself', Evans's photo series matched perfectly.⁵ Evans secretly made the shots with a cable release. A number of times he was accompanied by someone to assist him or serve as a distraction (among others, the photographer Helen Levitt). Evans didn't like talking to people and prized anonymity.

War Zone

How different things were for Bruce Davidson! Forty years later the subway had become a less neutral public space. 'The subway seemed to me like a train carrying cattle. The people seemed weighed down by their fate. I wanted to photograph these closed, hurt, haggard or indifferent faces,' he later wrote.⁶ When Davidson began working on his photo series in the spring of 1980, the subway of New York was not the most obvious spot to make photographs. Armed robberies and muggings were the order of the day. In those days subway travellers became acquainted with the illustrious phenomenon of the Guardian Angels, who on their own initiative had started to patrol the subway in order to chase away criminals. New York society was strongly divided along racial lines: any darker fellow citizen was regarded as a potential attacker by the white residents, and that tension was most palpable in the subway. In the introduction to his book Davidson describes how nervous he was the first time he set out. The Swiss pocketknife in his coat was to give him enough courage, as did the whistle he intended to use in order to alarm others in case he was attacked. Davidson asked subway travellers whether they would allow him to take pictures of them. Only once in a while did he take a spontaneous picture. By changing carriages and lines frequently, he was able to evade awkward questions and to prevent possible problems. In his pocket he carried a small photo album containing pictures of subway travellers he had made before. In order to get their

permission he showed these pictures to hesitating travellers, and was often still able to get their permission. Davidson took pictures on the platforms and in the carriages. Sometimes he deliberately also captured the view from the moving train when it emerged above ground. After a short while he changed from working in black and white to colour. He expected that making colour pictures in the subway would work better from a visual point of view. By changing his working method Davidson joined a small but growing group of documentary photographers who were pioneers in the field at the time. He got very close to his subject. He made photos of small groups of people who were standing close to each other, sometimes zooming in on a face or a detail such as a pair of hands holding on to a pole or grasping a strap. In his book he alternately shows us faces in close up and photos of the interior of the subway without travellers. Every now and again he took pictures on the staircases and the platforms. Davidson's style looks dynamic, restless; he did not use a fixed angle or distance; many people are looking straight into the lens, some are obviously posing before the photographer. Strong light-dark contrasts contribute to an eerie atmosphere. Numerous graffiti-artists have left their 'tags' everywhere in, on and around the carriages. The slurry of words and signs on the walls, and even on the windows of the carriages make the photographed spaces look like a war zone. Davidson used these aggressive spaces as the background of his portraits, giving them an extra psychological depth.

⁵ This ambitious project is still running. See <http://www.massobs.org.uk>

⁶ PhotoFile: Bruce Davidson. 1986. London: Thames and Hudson (no page)

Post documentary

Reinier Gerritsen made his shots standing on the platform. Each time he waited until the passengers had gotten into the train and right before the doors would close – right at the moment when the alarm signal would sound - he would make several fast shots right after one another, moving his camera horizontally as if he was filming, obtaining a kind of tracking shot. The space he captured each time was small, which resulted in an overlap in the different shots. Back in his studio he edited these four or five shots into one shot by means of picture editing software. Each time Gerritsen chose a moment when the passengers are waiting for the subway train to leave. They are standing at ease – the train is not yet moving – and they don't pay attention to each other. Only the rare individual notices the photographer; that is to say, only once in a while does someone half-consciously look into the lens. Most travellers look ahead or down. Some have an iPod or another kind of music device (a sign that they have isolated themselves even more from the others). If they are visible, the interiors of the carriages are gleaming metallic and clean, almost clinical – a huge contrast with what Davidson showed us 25 years earlier in his pictures.

Unlike trains, subways, buses and trams are places where people are travel in silence. The subway usually makes too much noise to be able to speak to each other anyway. When you look at other people around you, you do it without the other person noticing it. This way passengers give each other a little privacy. People leave each other alone. Even when the carriage is busy and overcrowded, to touch each other is against the unwritten rules, and you apologize immediately if it happens by accident. You may only push when it is inevitable and

when it is obvious that you can't help it. The relative silence during the trip to the next subway station is only disturbed by a beggar or a musician: people who generally speaking belong to the margin of society. The silence and resignation that Gerritsen captured in his shots is more in line with the Walker Evans's pictures in *Many are Called* than with Bruce Davidson's *Subway*. We could ask whether or not the 'unposed' quality that Evans was looking for still exists in our current media-oriented society, where people are constantly aware of the presence of cameras. Since we are aware of this, the image we have of ourselves is a construction anyway, which is constantly tested and compared with the images of the ever-present commercial campaigns that are also manifest in subway stations.

But Gerritsen adds another layer to the work, which has more to do with his working method than with his subject. There is an obvious connection with the tradition of street photography, but at the same time he also breaks with it: after all, Gerritsen created his pictures by using different, overlapping tracking shots. Although they appear at first sight to be a snapshot, they are also constructed scenes that have been created with the help of Photoshop. He expressly presents his documentary as a construction (or the picture construction expressly as a documentary), and thereby Gerritsen places himself and his work in the centre of the discussion on the meaning of the documentary in the beginning of the 21st century. This discussion not only focuses on the legitimacy of digital image processing in the field of documentary-making, but also on the possibility (or impossibility) of, and/or what its contribution to the social debate is, from the point of view of this medium – like the debates on public space, questions of privacy and the hegemony of our current economic model, the last of which is at the centre of this work.

In 2010 the streets are no longer the sanctuaries that they appeared to be in the 1980s. In a certain sense the street was an utopia for a long time, *the* spot where real life took place. Perhaps that democratic notion of the street has always been a myth: but the fact is that in the big Western cities the streets have become completely controlled environments, where CCTV-cameras constantly focus on passers-by, whose privacy in these areas has disappeared for ever. This has taken the breath out of street photography. But by already being subtle constructions, Gerritsen's photos carefully try to change the myth, and they are not intended to refer to the alleged authenticity and the classic 'decisive moment'. Thus these pictures make us think about the place and meaning of the individual within the crowd, about power and control, and about what the documentary image could still mean in the post documentary era.

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