



BRIEFLY SEEN
NEW YORK STREET LIFE

HARVEY STEIN

An Experiential Glimpse

We grow into the places we live.

Shaped by our environment and groomed by our culture, we learn what characteristics, roles, and behaviors will be accepted, shunned, or celebrated. As we venture into our world, we are socialized into the ways of the community—the shared values and cultural adaptations necessary to be able to live together in the collective space. The social landscape, whether urban or rural, serves as the stage for our lives. Sociologists talk a lot about the importance of context—how much of our life choices are dictated by the community we grow up in or migrate to as adults. Our proximity to opportunities, or their absence, and our willingness to see beyond the confines of our current circumstances come to mold our sense of ourselves and our perceptions of the world. The person who grows up in rural Montana, “Big Sky” country, has a very different sense of their world than someone in New York City with more neighbors living in a single city block than reside in many rural townships.

For many, New York City is the center of the universe—where anything can happen and opportunity abounds. A place where the urban dance is most frenzied, where dreams and nightmares are metered out in equal measure, and where autonomy born of anonymity opens up new ways of being. “New York gives us permission to do whatever we want to do,” Harvey Stein claims, “New York allowed me to be a photographer.” Many do come seeking the freedom and permission that Stein celebrates. The largest city in the United States, New York City also has the highest population density with over 27,000 residents per square mile. Indeed, one in every

thirty-eight people in the country lives in the greater New York area. Whether it is the density or the influx, the city has its own energy, its own rhythm—distinctive and mesmerizing. Walking down the street in Midtown is an experience that can’t be duplicated anywhere else in the country. One merges into the impromptu flow and is carried along by the ongoing current of migratory souls.

Unlike other cities, social life more often occurs in the public spaces in New York. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg’s recent study found that nearly half of the people living in Manhattan live alone—a fact that is unprecedented in human history. Having nearly 50 percent of the population “going solo,” as Klinenberg refers to them, and living in small, dense spaces, coupled with a high reliance on public transport, contributes to the prominence of street life in this city. Streets become the city’s living room, much like Napoleon claimed St. Mark’s Square in Venice was the drawing room of all Europe; a place where everyone came to conduct the business of their lives, to celebrate, to socialize, and to see and be seen. This is the fullness of the ongoing street theatre that unfolds in Stein’s third book in his New York trilogy, *Briefly Seen—New York Street Life*. His home for more than forty years, Stein has created another visual love letter to his adopted city.

The first installment, *Coney Island 40 Years*, documents his initial and ongoing fascination with the outlandish and exuberant aspects of this

community. Known for its “anything goes” attitude and ability to accept—even welcome—great variation in interests and lifestyles, Coney Island is where Stein’s passion for the medium took hold and, in many ways, his career began. In 1970, *Life Magazine* bought the first photograph Stein ever sold—an image made on Coney Island “of a very skinny man wearing a bow tie and with a book on his lap while he was sitting on a railing on the pier.” The second book of the trilogy, *Harlem Street Portraits*, is a series of more formalized environmental portraits. In this body of work, Stein is still attracted to the community environment—the vibrant context of a historically significant African American neighborhood—though he turns his attention more fully to the people who live there and how they inhabit their collective space.

In *Briefly Seen* Stein is working closer to home. Choosing his favorite haunts—the intersection of 5th Avenue and 45th street, with its reflective corner that allows passersby to come face to face with themselves, landmarks like Radio City Music Hall or Little Italy, the southeast corner of 5th Avenue and 57th street, where Tiffany’s and Trump Tower loom, as well as the ambiguous sidewalk rivers where individuals surge by engrossed in their daily lives—Stein documents the unceasing stream of humanity through the streets of Manhattan. Strategically using blur and layering through reflections, Stein captures both the urban dance—the chaotic motion as masses swarm and swirl—and the dancer—the solitary face in the crowd. What results is more than images of street scenes, residents, and interactions. Stein has created a dynamic and evocative document of how New Yorkers inhabit their shared social spaces. *Briefly Seen* is a composite of impromptu glimpses of a photographer’s keen eye as he encounters his fellow New Yorkers. Influenced by both the environmental context and those who share his streets, though not

reducible to either, Stein is captivated by the “vitality, energy and even craziness of Manhattan street life.” His images celebrate the improvisational street theatre of individuals moving through the city isolated in their separateness: the jubilant strangers in Easter hats, the famous and infamous, and the weary trudging along.

Stein shoots close up. He uses two film Leicas—one with a 21mm lens, one with 35mm—and usually presets his aperture and focus so he is ready. Stein describes his style, learned from his first teacher Ben Fernandez, as aggressive, “getting close with a wide angle, getting in people’s faces.” Discovering photography after a short, unhappy stint in the corporate world, Stein grew up in Pittsburgh and has an engineering degree from Carnegie Mellon and an MBA from Columbia. He purchased his first camera while stationed in the army in Germany, though his interest did not become serious until he began photographing the streets of New York City. “I’ve never looked back or regretted becoming a photographer,” Stein explains, “It feeds me emotionally and physically, keeps me engaged, informed, and in daily contact with my fellow beings...[photography] is ever challenging, and never gets easier...its internal rules and logic are forever mysterious and unsolvable. Photography keeps me on my toes, always.”

Briefly Seen offers an experiential glimpse of what it must be like to live in Stein’s beloved city—to walk the streets each day and to take part in the drama of a city with all 8.4 million residents. The sense of place, the cast of characters, the common gestures, the teeming currents of humanity, the anomie and isolation—it is all here in Stein’s timeless black-and-white images.

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