

TIBOR DE NAGY

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January 14, 2021

Rudy Burckhardt's "New York Hello!" (part one)

by Vincent Katz



Rudy Burckhardt : "New York Hello!" Photographs and Films from the 1970s and '80s

At Tibor de Nagy Gallery, December 11, 2020 through January 23, 2021

<https://www.tibordenagy.com>

<https://www.tibordenagy.com/exhibitions/rudy-burckhardt4>

Through January 23, run over to Tibor de Nagy Gallery at 11 Rivington Street to see a glorious selection of the later New York City street photographs of famed downtown denizen Rudy Burckhardt. You can also see the images online, but Burckhardt's prints, small and unassuming as they are, repay close observation in person.

I guess the only art form that survives intact online is poetry. Poetry was something Burckhardt had a lot of, and I often find myself making the Freudian slip of referring to a photo of his as a "poem." Partially, that has to do with the wide spaciousness Burckhardt was able to include in his photographs. They have a space in them that reminds one of the space in the city poems of his friends Edwin Denby, James Schuyler, and Frank O'Hara.

When he first came to New York from his native Basel, in 1935, at the age of 21, excited though he was by the city's gigantic scale, he was unable to photograph it, focusing instead on a prescient series of fragments — pedestrians rushing past him in midtown against slivers of storefronts and sidewalks. The effect was almost hermetic, as though Rudy was a consciousness that the urban swirl buffeted but never disturbed.



That still consciousness was something he brought to his well-known photographs of the 1940s, iconic views of Times Square and the Flatiron Building. After a few years in New York, Burckhardt had figured out a way to bring the tallest buildings and pedestrians into the same frame. He worked quickly, never wasting film, preferring to wait for the right season and light, rather than to force an unwilling moment into a picture.

Concomitant to his photographic practice, Burckhardt made over one hundred 16-millimeter films, some in collaboration with other artists, musicians and poets, others on his own as a form of diary or collage film he would assemble over time from footage shot in New York, Maine, and other locations. The collaborative films were one way Burckhardt kept up to date, choosing to invite into them succeeding generations of New York's brightest stars, from Orson Welles, Joseph Cotton, Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles and Aaron Copland, through Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara, to Red Grooms, Mimi Gross, Rackstraw Downes, Taylor Mead and Yoshiko Chuma, Douglas Dunn, Grazia Della Terza, Dana Reitz, David Shapiro, Christopher Sweet, Alice Notley, Ron Padgett, Jacob Burckhardt and Tom Burckhardt, among others.

Like his lifelong friend and collaborator, poet and critic Edwin Denby, Burckhardt made it a habit to keep up on the latest developments in poetry, music, theater, dance, and visual art. Denby and Burckhardt were inveterate culture vultures, inspiring generations of New Yorkers after them. Part of that urbane desire involved being attuned to the *look* of people and things, as they changed through New York's mid-century.

Burckhardt photographed on New York's streets from the late 1930s through the 1990s. His later work shows him experimenting, evolving, using familiar themes in different ways, with subtly different emphases. The photographs currently on view at Tibor de Nagy are striking in their immediacy, their sophisticated informality, and their ability to project certain types or looks of people. Burckhardt was remarkable in his ability to find the beauty in many kinds of people.



Three photos of couples walking are emblematic of the power of youth, of animated promenade. In one from the mid 1980s, a black couple presents ultimate contemporary style — he in t-shirt, athletic shorts, and Pumas without socks, she elegantly coiffed, in designed low-V t-shirt, carefully ironed and cuffed jeans, white sandals. They fit together in style perfectly. But to make a great photograph, he needed more than the main subject. Intimately steeped in classic European painting, he had no trouble forging balanced photographic figure-and-ground compositions on the fly. He also was immersed in modern Abstract painting, learning from it never to leave any area without interest. Here, Burckhardt catches memorable figures between and around the two mythic beauties who dominate the scene.

Ed. note: Part two of Vincent Katz's review will appear tomorrow or the day after.

January 16, 2021

Rudy Burckhardt's Photos at Tibor de Nagy (part two) by Vincent Katz]



How Rudy Burckhardt photographed on the move is something of mystery. He did it, so we know it's possible, but try to put yourself in his position. He must have moved with a dancer's speed and precision, or, cat-like, lain in wait before pouncing on his unsuspecting prey. He regularly captures head-on in close proximity the precise moment at which or just before someone looks at him and says, "Hey!"

In addition to tableaux frozen from the city's gyre, Burckhardt could compose images that seem snatched from a Renaissance picture-making textbook. Such a one is *V-Back*, from about 1985. There are two versions of this moment. In the first, Rudy has come up close behind a beautiful woman, her hair carefully styled and held back by a clip, a slender chain around her neck, a purse hanging from her left shoulder, her sweater turned backward, so that its V reveals her upper back. We can see the spinal cleft as it travels down, widening to a darkness in between her delicately flaring shoulder blades. We see a man in a suit in front of her, waiting to cross the street. We catch a glimpse of the traffic as it rushes past.

In the second photo of this moment, Burckhardt has quickly and adroitly turned his camera from a vertical to a horizontal format. He takes advantage of a moment of urban serendipity. A large white delivery truck is passing. In Burckhardt's horizontal frame, we now see, in addition to the man in the suit on the left, a man in a long-sleeved striped shirt on the right. These two men frame this remarkable woman, each one turned slightly toward her, without actually looking at her, in two different gestures, diffidence and deference. And in that split-second, the woman has suddenly become aware of something behind her, some heat of energy, some thinking, something stretching back to the galleries of European museums, kindled on the stages of New York's ballet. She turns, looking at Burckhardt, and now at us in the photograph, her beautiful face caught in that glance, the whole picture given a timeless quality by the pure background of the white truck passing, such that, for a split-second, Burckhardt has taken the city completely away, and we are enveloped in this moment of observation, two people seeing each other for the first time.

The exhibition of these and other chance encounters of New York City residents immortalized by Burckhardt's eye and body is punctuated by a sequence of three films shown on a wall-mounted monitor. In these three films — *Default Averted* (1975), *Cerveza Bud* (1981), and *Ostensibly* (1989) — Burckhardt takes three different approaches, all showing his complex approach to cinema. *Default Averted* refers to the moment when New York City almost went bankrupt; Burckhardt takes a typically wry approach to the topic, choosing to show a building being demolished over time. This is a favorite motif of his in his films; he loved the way New York was built, and also knocked down, sporadically, without municipal oversight. *Cerveza Bud* focuses on one of New York's great pleasures — public joy, in this case in the form of outdoor dancing, music playing, and roller skating. As usual, Burckhardt is drawn to the city's black and Latinx populations. *Ostensibly* uses a poem by that title by John Ashbery, and in fact Ashbery appears in the film, in red suspenders, recording the poem. So many events and images fly by in these films, balanced by moments of calm, that I like to try to document them as they pass. I'll end with my notes from the films.

Default Averted (1975, 20 minutes, black and white, music by Thelonious Monk and Edgar Varèse)

Architectural emblems, details, demolition, smoke and fire

Fireman grins

Boards dropped from roof

T Monk big band sound to sped up b/w city traffic

Shakespeare-like head all that remains: preserved relic in antic sweep of

wreckage-remake (the New York mantra)
Earl Hines reflections in wet pavement
Walls fall, classic Burckhardtism

Cerveza Bud (1981, 30 minutes, color)

Endless bodies of color, dancing, roller skating
Public displays of love: bodies, gay couples dance Hustle to Kool & The Gang
Reclining in summer grass à la *La Grand Jatte* but more relaxed, more openly sexual
Open embrace of Twin Towers, part of that cityscape with street light suspended in front
Seagull soars against dirtied blue

Ostensibly (1989, 16 minutes, color, poem by John Ashbery,)

piano music by Alvin Curran)
JA reading poem
Kia Heath nude poses in front of Rudy's De Kooning then dresses, walks in snow
Nice family hops backward up steps
Maine log-throwing competition
A woman (Rochelle Kraut?) reads same poem
Shots of pond details of trees
Man jogs shirtless on Maine road
NY intersection (23rd & Broadway?) in rain reflection
Dancers at party (Skowhegan?)
RB pushing garbage to gutter (NY) and trees to ground (Maine)
Lichen details
NY walkers, skylines, water towers, sped up clouds

Ed. Note: for [part one](#) of Vincent Katz's piece on the new Rudy Burckhardt show, click [here](#).

Tibor de Nagy Gallery is located at 11 Rivington Street on the Lower East Side

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The show is up from December 21, 2020 until January 23, 2021.

Gallery Hours:

Tuesday to Saturday 10-6pm