

Photographing America: Klein and Weegee's Methods of Representing the Experience of New York

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Abstract: During the era when American social changes, disruptions and postwar prosperity met the rise of photography as an art, there emerged a bunch of great photographers who documented the life experiences in New York. By looking at William Klein and Weegee's work, and analyzing their different artistic styles, depicting subject matters and career as a photographer, we will get a clearer vision of New York that they present. More importantly, we will uncover the chaos, stories, and love of the city.

Keywords: American art; Photography; New York artists

1. Introduction

Since the first street photos were taken, they had always been seen as a reflection of social conditions. In America, the new generation of photographers experienced a significant change of political climate by the late 1930s, due to the influences of the Great Depression. In order to understand and respond to the great changes and disruptions caused by unemployment and starvation, photographers focused on various social scenes that resulted in the trend of documentary photography in American culture. This documentary movement lasted until the post-war period that caused the rise of other new photographers including Arthur Fellig (also called Weegee) and William Klein. Weegee, who started as a photographer of the daily New York newspapers, was specialized in capturing and depicting the underside of the city and gained a popularity that allowed him to produce the famous *Naked City*.^[1] Different from Weegee, Klein had an artist status since he started his artistic career by being a painter, and with his love and hate of the city, he went back to New York from Europe to produce his photo book: *Life is Good* and *Good for You in New York: Trance Witness Revels*.¹ With largely different life experiences, tastes, and values, two artists adopted different methods to execute their work. By comparing two systems of working, the experience of New York will be more diverse and the image of the city that two photographers present will be clearer.



Figure 1. William Klein, *Ynette, New York, 1955*.

2. A comparison between the two artists

By analyzing the aesthetics and the compositions of the photography by two artists, it is realized that Klein and Weegee had completely opposite characters in their photography. As Klein states, he decided to make his camera as visible as possible in his pictures of New York: "I decided to be visible, intervene, and to show it."² Indeed, this concept is reflected in the style of his photographs. In *Life is Good*, many photos show his deliberate use of wide-angle lens; the unexpected transitions and angles, figures close to the camera are distorted; others in the background are blurred. Using a wide-angle lens as he did was quite new and unusual, figures distorted and blurred were not the features of conventional good photographs, and all these made his aesthetics and the

presence of the artist visible in his work.³ In specific, in a photo by Klein in 1955 (figure 1), the artist's touch is quite obvious. To the general viewer, this work is about the chaos of the urban life that it is a street scene of individuals and groups of people overlapping each other; however, there is an order under the disorder. When the picture is bisected into two halves vertically, the group of two women talking is balanced by the man behind the window glass on the left; the shadows on the lower right are also balanced by the diagonals in the lower left corner.⁴ Nonetheless, the grainy print, the typography, and the layout in *Life is Good* brought the spectator a more stylistic and the 'New York School' aestheticized way of viewing New York.⁵



Figure 2. Weegee, 'Their First Murder, 9 October 1941,' from *Naked city*, 1945.

Although Klein once suggested that he was inspired by Weegee and his work with New York daily news aesthetics, Weegee's artistic touches seemed absent in his representation of New York. Weegee mostly depicted the shocking events and unexpected action happened in the city, murders, fire, accident, a man wearing suit asleep on a staircase, a woman sitting on a lifeguard chair on a beach at night.⁶ In depicting these significant events and scenes, Weegee shot with a strong flash to create a film noir kind of black and white contrast, in order to bring the viewer a greater impact.⁷ For instance, in the picture entitled 'Their First Murder, 9 October 1941' from *Naked City*, because of the strong use of flash, the figures' faces are spotlighted, which provides a chance for the viewer to see each figure's facial expressions clearly, to feel the emotions of the figures and to imagine the plot of the story. Weegee's artless manipulation is embodied in every image. 'Painterly' elements that can be easily found in Klein and other photographers' compositions such as blurred figures, foreground objects to add another layer to the composition are absent in Weegee's images, and even cropped photos seem uncropped.⁸ Because of Weegee's remove of his presence in the photograph, the relationship between the figure and the viewer is closer that the viewer has a direct contact with the figure. For the same example in figure 2, without any compositional disruptions, the photo contains a range of emotions, the woman in the middle cried, the kids enjoyed the show; there is curiosity, anxiety, and sorrow.^[2]

The stories behind the scenes demonstrate that the pictorial style and role of the artist's camera are inevitably associated with the photographer's characteristics and the way of working. Klein's controlling presence in photographs comes from his playful attitude toward the medium and his subjects. Before Klein came back to New York, he worked on a project of a mural with turning panels in Milan. Using long exposures to photograph the panels in motion, Klein played with the blurry geometrical shapes, lines, circles that inspired him on the concept of another dimension to the forms and ways to violate the conventions of the given media.⁹ Klein also played with his subjects. In the photo of two boys and a gun, Klein asked the two boys to pose, while one boy pointed to the camera with a gun, imitating the classical pose and violent facial expression of criminals, a famous photograph was taken.¹⁰ For Weegee, his absence in the image is due to his shy character that allowed him to take photos as a voyeur.¹¹ As a photographer of tabloid journalism, Weegee was used to taking pictures of the victims at a murder. Because of his shy character, especially at a murder, victims and figures with rage and sorrow hardly noticed Weegee's existence. Compared with Klein, Weegee would never want to intervene or disrupt the scene, and this largely formed his artless touches.



Figure 3. Weegee, *Tenement Penthouse (Children Sleeping on the Fire Escape)*, 1938.

Klein and Weegee's consistent choice of subjects and method of working formed their unusual eyesight and coherent vision of New York that reveals their emotion toward the city, which influences the viewer's experience of the city. Similar with Weegee, Klein definitely emphasized the chaotic underside of New York that triggered the controversy when his photo book was published. Differ from the stereotyped image of the city that is full of 'headlines, gossip and sensation,' Klein depicted New York as a 'slum.'¹² By presenting the grainy images, blurred faces of the ordinary people, he highlighted the visual chaos of the streets, the urban anxieties, and the disordered image of the city. Indeed, the anxieties and potential violence that Klein displayed in the photographs still exist in New York that the city still faces a variety of social problems caused by the gap between rich and poor after sixty years. In the photo of the two boys with a gun, the artist's emotional relation with the figures in his work is more directly displayed, since Klein states that the photo is his self-portrait that he could be the boy who is holding the gun and the other boy who is pointed by the gun.¹³ Klein's self-relation with the figures is the most typical representation of an artist's sympathy; he cared about the people from the underside of New York, and he wanted to awaken the public's consciousness to focus on the other side of the city. Weegee's empathy of the subjects and the city was also discovered in his neutral way of viewing and using the camera. Weegee exists in every photo because of his consistent absence, 'he is there, in every photo, because he is not there.'¹⁴ More importantly, his artistic absence effectively stimulates the viewer's emotional relation to the subjects. From his famous picture of children sleeping on the fire escape (figure 3) to the pictures of homeless vagrants, Weegee's works made us want to believe in the existence of the subjects, because the photographs reminded us of strangers we pass by in this city. It is found that beyond the impression of the daily news, what had remained was the empathy of the figures because of their human nature recorded in the photographs. Those people's moments of joy, fear, rage and anguish had lasted in the viewer's heart and had made Weegee's work from newspapers to museums.¹⁵ As William McCleery views that Weegee's pictures had made it possible for us 'to see his city and believe it, and love it--and yet want to make it better.'¹⁶ Moreover, both artists' pictures of New York were the reflection of the city's image. It consists of urban disorders, anxieties and chaos, but overall, the image was positive that the city and the whole nation were celebrating its growing economy and pulling together after the war during the 1940s and 1950s, because of the artists and the public's sympathetic emotions toward the city and their wishes to make it better.^[3]

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the different working methods of the two artists demonstrate that photography, as a new art form at that time, had great potential of embracing various styles, containing different contents, and explicitly expressing emotions. The success of the two photographers suggests that New York, the city as a raising power in the contemporary art world, has a great capacity of accepting and celebrating new artists with different backgrounds, styles, and cultures. Klein and Weegee, using this new technology, positively and effectively captured the problems of the society. By highlighting the chaos and the underside of the society, the anxieties of the city's violence issues, the changing political climate, and the balance between the rich and the poor in a super metropolis were exaggerated, which could be seen as two artists' warning. In the photographs by Klein and Weegee, the true essence of artist is kept, since both artists dared to photograph with the style that breaks every tradition of photography, and they pursued to reflect the real New York with the depiction of human nature

Annotation:

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3. Orvell, *American Photography*, 123.
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6. Miles Orvell, "Weegee's Voyeurism and the Mastery of Urban Disorder," *American Art* 6 (1992): 20-21.
7. Des O'Rawe, "Eclectic Dialectics: William Klein's Documentary Method," *Film Quarterly* 66 (2012): 52-53.
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- 16 Orvell, "Weegee's Voyeurism," 23.

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[3] O'Rawe, Des. "Eclectic Dialectics: William Klein's Documentary Method." *Film Quarterly* 66 (2012): 50-61.

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