

October 2014
Press Announcement

Rudy Burckhardt – In the Jungle of the Big City Photographs and Films 1932 – 1959

Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur, 25 October 2014 to 15 February 2015
Press preview: 24 October 2014, 10 a.m. to 12 noon, opening: from 6 p.m.

The Swiss photographer Rudy Burckhardt (1914-1999) arrived in New York for the first time as a 21-year-old and immediately decided to stay. Overwhelmed by the sheer size of the metropolis, the architectural diversity and the hustle and bustle on the streets, he began to process his impressions in photographs and films. The photographs and short films he produced until the early 1950s are a combination of straightforwardness and formal strictness, contrasting perspectives, the inclusion of chance as well as lyrical concentration, all of which make up a radically modern pictorial language which was way ahead of its time then, but surprises and fascinates us all the more today. On the occasion of his 100th birthday, the Fotostiftung Schweiz is presenting the exhibition “Rudy Burckhardt – In the Jungle of the Big City”, providing an opportunity to discover anew the photographic and filmic oeuvre of that highly individual artist.

Rudy Burckhardt never really felt at home in the established patrician family into which he was born in Basel in 1914. At an early age he preferred to hang around in the slightly disreputable area of Kleinbasel, instead of seeking a social position in what was referred to in Basel as the “Daig” (“dough”), meaning the upper echelons of society. Around the same time he became interested in the new pictorial medium of photography, which was very much in the air in the 1930s. Exhibitions of the photographic avant-garde were being held and igniting fierce debate even in Basel, where high art was the main priority. This was perhaps another reason for the young Burckhardt to seek to access through photography to a new world free of all tradition and family constraints. In 1933 Burckhardt started to study medicine in London, but abandoned it almost immediately, undertaking instead extended walks on which he explored the large city camera in hand. Later he recalled: “... that was a revelation. My first big city, with slums and things out of control. People asleep on the street. The smell of urine. It was great.” After a stay in Paris, and having run a photo studio for a short time in Basel, Burckhardt finally made a break. He met the American dancer, poet and later dance critic Edwin Denby (1903-1983), who was ten years his senior, and followed him to New York in 1935. He took with him a comfortable inheritance that ensured his survival for the next few years. He rented a loft in Chelsea for himself and Denby, with whom he maintained a life-long friendship. Together they immersed themselves in the lively artists’ scene to which not only their neighbour Willem de Kooning belonged, but also Paul Bowles and Orson Welles.

Rudy Burckhardt quickly realised that he would not be returning to Switzerland again, and so he began to explore the New York metropolis. He was totally overwhelmed by the busy activity on the streets and by the extreme differences in size between the passers-by and the skyscrapers. It was some time before he was able to capture his intense impressions – first with a second-hand 16mm film camera, and, as of 1937, with the 9x12cm plate camera he had brought with him from Switzerland. His reserved gaze focussed first on the architectural details visible at street level, as well as the chance arrangements of the writing on shop fronts and advertising signs. He was fascinated by banal objects like drainpipes and hydrants, which he photographed as if they were anonymous sculptures, in an even light, with almost no depth of field. Unlike

many of his London photographs, which are reminiscent of the slanted views of Alexander Rodchenko, his views were now consistently from a right angle to the background, without a visible horizon, in controlled and strict compositions, as if the city were his private studio for object photography.

Soon he also devoted his attention to the people who acted out their lives on that big city stage. From 1939 onwards he took fleeting but tense instantaneous photographs of them using a Leica. He deliberately avoided the socio-critical angle of many of his contemporaries, concentrating instead on the recurrent everyday movements of people in crowds, on the “near collisions” of usually faceless figures on the street. His gaze is often downwards, again avoiding any horizon so as to capture just the feet and legs of the men and women, cropped and in infinite variations. Photograph and film seem to overlap, becoming a common two-dimensional projection surface on which to capture movements, forms in light and shade, a kind of “ballet mécanique”, surely also inspired by Edwin Denby’s interest in the “dance” of ordinary people on the street.

As early as 1939, Burckhardt compiled the first photographs he took in New York in an album entitled *New York. N. Why?*. The following year he composed another such album entitled *An Afternoon in Astoria* using minimalist takes of a desolate area in the district of Queens, photographs reduced to the essential. By arranging those photographs on double pages and using different picture formats and sequences of motifs, Burckhardt created a filmic rhythm. At the same time he intuitively added film sequence to film sketch – for example, in the 1940 city portrait *The Pursuit of Happiness* – in keeping with the motto: “Sometimes the way things come together by accident is just as good as when you think it out.” During that extremely creative period photography and film seemed interchangeable. Some of his later films are still characterised by Burckhardt typical proximity to everyday, usually banal reality, but they are more deliberately composed. *The Climate of New York* (1949), for example, outlines not just a broad urban panorama, but also presents “a day in life”, as it were, of a city through its clearly structured sequence from morning to evening.

After more than three years of service in the US Army (1941-44) as a photographer, Burckhardt returned to New York and, as of 1947, discovered the city from whole new viewpoints. He portrayed people travelling the subway and climbed high up to rooftops above the streets so as to photograph the fantastic roof landscapes under the New York sky, which Denby claimed was “as magnificent as the sky of Venice”. At the same time as Burckhardt was gazing into the distance above Manhattan, the young Robert Frank arrived in New York and began to explore America anew, from below, so to speak. For his part, Burckhardt made trips to Europe and, from 1950-51, studied at the Art Academy in Naples. In addition to his intense preoccupation with painting there, he, as a photographer, again encountered a large city that fascinated him. This time it was the people of Naples, above all the children, whom he met in the city’s narrow alleyways and to whom he made direct contact thanks to his camera.

Rudy Burckhardt created his photographic oeuvre in New York in a relatively short space of time. That oeuvre thrives on the contrast between a filmic gaze at the hustle and bustle of life and the inquiring gaze of an urban engineer; it hovers between roving poetry and formal strictness, is neither documentary nor openly socio-critical, nor is it reportage or object photography. Instead it reveals an unbiased and highly personal view of the modern big city, a view that still surprises and fascinates people today.

Martin Gasser

The main focus of the exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz is on Rudy Burckhardt's New York photographs dating from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, complemented by a selection of photographs taken after 1945 on trips to Europe. In a separate room at the heart of the exhibition, selected 16mm short films can be seen from the years 1937-59 on the theme of New York.

All the photographs on show are vintage or later prints made by Rudy Burckhardt. They originate from the artist's estate, from the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which has represented his work since 1995, as well as from the collection of The Friends of the Fotostiftung Schweiz and from Mayfish Fine Art Ltd., Zurich. The digital copies of the films shown in the exhibition were produced by the artist's son, Jacob Burckhardt.

The exhibition was organised in collaboration with the estate of Rudy Burckhardt and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York. Martin Gasser is curator of the exhibition.

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Publication:

An illustrated booklet containing essays by Vincent Katz and Hannes Schüpbach will be published to accompany the exhibition.

Film matinée:

On Sunday, 26 October 2014, 11.30 a.m., the artist and film-maker Hannes Schüpbach, from Winterthur, will give an introduction to the films of the photographer Rudy Burckhardt and present a selection of little-known 16mm short films dating from 1943 to 1986. This will be followed by a conversation (in English) with the photographer's widow, the reputed artist Yvonne Jacqueline Burckhardt, who lives in New York.

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