

Rudy Burckhardt's A Walk Through Astoria and Other Places in Queens

By Christopher Sweet

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The photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt (1914–1999) arrived in New York in 1935 from his native Switzerland, and was quickly immersed in avant-garde circles and the New York School. His then partner and life-long friend, the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby (1903–1983), whom he had first met in Basel the year before, introduced him to Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Paul Bowles, and others and together they soon encountered and befriended their neighbor, an unknown painter at the time, Willem de Kooning. The two, together and separately, would become essential figures in the downtown cultural bohemian scene over the next several decades, with friends and artistic collaborators including John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Franz Kline, Joseph Cornell, Larry Rivers, Alex Katz, Red Grooms, and many others.

Burckhardt was initially daunted by what he called the “grandeur and ceaseless energy” of New York City, and it would take him two to three years before he began to photograph the city. In the meantime, he made his first film in 1936, a silent comedy set largely in his Chelsea loft and featuring Copland, Bowles, Thomson, and others. By 1939 he had created his first masterpiece, the photographic album *New York, N. Why?*, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The work consists of 67 photographs arranged and sequenced in three main movements, focusing on street facades, shops and signage, and the ebb and flow of people in the streets, along with six sonnets by Edwin Denby and an excerpt from a *New Yorker* article. It features many of Burckhardt's classic images of New York and attests to the artistic influence of his New York milieu of composers and poets, writers and painters, and his interest in filmmaking. The form, of the composed, arranged, and sequenced unique photographic album as a work of art in and of itself, is original to Burckhardt.

Within a year or so of *New York, N. Why?* Burckhardt made his first foray into Queens and produced another album, *An Afternoon in Astoria* (1940), more modest in scale, which is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. It is composed of 35 photographs made up of images taken in a single afternoon. The imagery flows from overgrown, rubble-strewn vacant lots and long empty streets to a Mobil gas station, an auto salvage yard, and a housing clearance site, to children digging in the dirt and gathered on the pavement, and closes with a scene of another empty lot, now by the river, Manhattan spires rising in the distance.

There is a documentary dimension to the images in the albums, Burckhardt explores a place, but less to portray it than to find aesthetic form and meaning in the things he sees there. He is not systematic in the way of Berenice Abbott nor does he have the brutal candor of Walker Evans. For all his love of the quotidian and contingent, Burckhardt's work maintains a classical elegance, aloofness, and occasional amusement—in contrast to the more engaged Americans. He had his share of decisive moments, but he was always drawn by the allure of a succession of moments. Inspired by Mondrian and narrowing his compositions to focus often on details and fragments parallel to the picture plane, of buildings and signage, Burckhardt's visual impulse was toward abstract form and composition and, above all, a melancholy poetic vision that ranges indelibly from the still quiet to the momentous, from comic to tragic, from the nondescript to searing beauty.

Burckhardt was the flâneur photographer who, in the words of Susan Sontag, was very much the “armed ... solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes.” Denby too, a modernist poet of the New York School with shifting tones and idiomatic language who nonetheless persisted in using the traditional form of the sonnet, all the while evinced a flâneur’s fascination with the city and the theater of the street.

In 1943 Burckhardt would produce his next major work, the album *A Walk through Astoria and Other Places in Queens*. By then the United States had entered the war, and Burckhardt had been drafted, though not yet a citizen of the country. The undeveloped and industrial districts of Queens were a strange, barren wilderness and fascinating to Burckhardt and offered a chance to escape the intensity of Manhattan, all in a day, just across the East River, a subway ride away. And, one suspects, Burckhardt’s sense of irony is at play, seeing in this proximate zone of desolation a striking contradiction of the phantasmagoric vision of a bright future offered up in another part of Queens just a few years earlier at the 1939 World’s Fair.

The album opens with an introductory poem by Denby, invoking “this backyard of exploitation and refuse,” followed by a sequence of images of the rail yards that separate Sunnyside from Astoria. Warehouses punctuated with water towers gather in the distance along the middle horizontal axis, while in the foreground lie expanses of scrubby terrain scored by railroad tracks or road beds of bald asphalt. Bridges stretch across the rail yards, the siding either a lattice of steel strips or solid walls of steel reminiscent of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, all supine under flat, pale skies, demarcated with almost surreal utility poles and electric pylons, and street lamps of impoverished gentility. Nary a soul in sight and hardly a vehicle, a sense of emptiness and foreboding reigns.

Two more Denby sonnets follow and then the space closes in and Burckhardt concentrates on clusters of industrial buildings in white concrete and dark fenestration, self-contained, silent on a Sunday, exploring their rectilinearity frontally and on the diagonal. A bare wall may block out half a picture while the street alongside sweeps away into the distance. And then the imagery shifts again, to a sequence of empty lots. The Manhattan skyline appears in the distance as a place to aspire to and, on the facing page, denizens of the neighborhood saunter onto the scene. The men invariably in coat and tie, the ladies in hats or adorned with a flower or a new permanent. A sudden syncopation occurs in the sizing, sequencing, and configuration of images on the album page. It is as if they were gathering for an audition to a Beckett play. Odd telling details follow, a stoop leads nowhere, a Dadaistic horse rears up, a For Sale sign, a Victory Garden – Keep Off. The war is faraway and close to home. And then the main movement closes with the image of an empty sandlot and Manhattan still beckoning in the distance.

Turning the page is the Laurel Hill subsection, the concluding sequence of the album. Laurel Hill is a wedge of friable terrain between two vast Queens cemeteries. In the photographs it looks like a mining town in the Wild West at high noon. No one on the street, there is no movement. It is a ghost town. All the roads are dead ends. One powerful image shows a nondescript house and a small church (which Brett Weston also happened to photograph a couple of years later) dropping just below the foreground of gravel and stone and dirt while beyond the opaque structures, in the distance, lies a cemetery, a dense conglomeration of monuments. And in the middle distance

suspended in the air as if above the cemetery, the elevated expressway passes over, stretching across the picture, its steel beams seeming to crush the grave stones into gravel.

The photographer then wanders behind some buildings where the earth is in heaps, scourged and strewn with barrels and rubbish and there he comes upon some children playing among the refuse, bundled against the cold, sullen cherubs. The album closes with, and Burckhardt's usual equanimity gives way to harrowing images of utter desolation, as if a Golgotha on a sunny day. Denby reconsidered the last lines of his poem as included in the album, and in the final published version they read:

Far away is right here on a plain sky
Air anywhere to change, anywhere to die.

In Denby's *The Complete Poems* (Knopf, 1983), in a section called "Poems written to accompany photographs by Rudy Burckhardt," the poems included in *A Walk Through Astoria* are titled as follows, in order, "Five Reflections 1," which opens the album and speaks generally of Queens and in relation to Manhattan, followed by "Five Reflections 2 [and] 3," which appear after the first sequence of images around the rail yards. Reflection 2 invokes visual details of the preceding sequence while Reflection 3 does so for the images that follow. The album concludes, on the last page, after Burckhardt has inscribed "The End" on the prior, penultimate page, with the poems "Northern Boulevard" and "Laurel Hill" which tease out details of the final two sequences of images.

A Walk Through Astoria and Other Places in Queens was first exhibited along with the album *An Afternoon in Queens* at the Museum of Modern Art in 2002 at its Queens location during the reconstruction of its main building in Manhattan.

About the Author:

Christopher Sweet is an art book editor and occasional writer on art and photography. He first met Rudy Burckhardt in the early 1980s and they became close friends. He worked on several of Rudy's films in the 1980s and 90s and they collaborated on the film Central Park in the Dark (1985). He also commissioned and edited the monograph Rudy Burckhardt by Philip Lopate and Vincent Katz (2004).