

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

The Swiss 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 early 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

## Short films shown in the exhibition

### ***Seeing the World – Part One: A Visit to New York, N.Y. (1937)***

Film 16mm, b/w, 10 mins. With John Becker, Virginia Welles, Joseph Cotton, Edwin Denby.  
Sound: Jacob Burckhardt, 1970s; speaker: Donnie Brooke Alderson.

Alternating between a portrait of the city and brief episodes “from the life of New Yorkers” acted out by friends, Burckhardt develops a number of approaches which from then on would determine the way he made films and took photographs. The avenues of Midtown file by against the backdrop of the Hudson River, an empty pier or a passenger in the subway appears.

### ***The Pursuit of Happiness (1940)***

Film 16mm, b/w, 7 mins., silent.

Having observed and filmed people walking in Haiti in 1938, Burckhardt then went in search of chance happenings in New York: setting himself up among the passers-by in Midtown, he condenses the patterns they form within the camera frame and, by means of stopped images, links film and photography.

### ***Montgomery, Alabama (1941)***

Film 16mm, colour, 4 mins., music by Earl Hines (piano).

In his first film in colour, Burckhardt strings together views of passers-by, traffic, shop fronts and buildings to create a moving frieze, made in the free time he had as a soldier in Montgomery, where he was stationed before being redeployed in Trinidad, and where “whites” and “coloureds” may often have lived separately, but came together in public places.

### ***Up and Down the Waterfront (1946)***

Film 16mm, b/w, 10 mins., music by Willie “The Lion” Smith (piano).

Burckhardt discovered the activities involved in the unloading of goods along the periphery of Manhattan. In addition to these, he shows details of cars or else presents real situations as he finds them on the piers or in bars, in just a few images. Some nimble-footed jazz music accompanies the world of the haulers and the general run of events.

### ***The Climate of New York (1948)***

Film 16mm, b/w (one part in colour), 21 mins., music by William Flanagan.

With intertitles from *In Public, in Private* by Edwin Denby.

This expansive lyrical city portrait shows roof landscapes, passers-by and buildings, and at one point a street crossing viewed from above. At eye level, Burckhardt captures private moments “exhibited” in the city, someone telephoning, people gliding by on an escalator or simply doing nothing during a trip on the subway.

### ***Under the Brooklyn Bridge (1953)***

Film 16mm, b/w, 15 mins., music by Debussy, Poulenc played on two pianos by Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale.

Burckhardt observes how buildings are being demolished around his studio in Brooklyn. Their structures are dissolved, brick after brick, and as full volumes when filmed from a distance. Boys are seen swimming in the East River, workers and employees walking to a restaurant or to the subway. This poetic study highlights a secondary location, but one that has a rhythm of its own, quite different from Manhattan.

### ***Eastside Summer (1959)***

Film 16mm, colour, 11 mins., music by Thelonious Monk (piano).

Mixing in among the people on the streets in summer, Burckhardt roams the East Side with his camera, looking in, and out of, the shop windows, discovering the peacefully busy city as a terrain for all sorts of undertakings by adults and children – an almost utopian, colourful juxtaposition.

## Rudy Burckhardt

- 1914 born in Basel.
- 1929 experimented with a pinhole camera.
- 1933 took photographs in London and compiled them in an album.
- 1934 rented a studio in Kleinbasel and got to know Edwin Denby.
- 1935 followed Edwin Denby to New York, where he rented a loft on 145 W 21st Street for himself and Denby.
- 1936 made his first 16mm film *145 West 21*.
- 1937 began taking photographs on the streets of New York with his 9x12cm large format camera.
- 1938 spent more than nine months in Haiti, the first weeks with Edwin Denby.
- 1939 opted for a compact camera and compiled a three-part album entitled *New York, N. Why?*
- 1940 compiled another album, *An Afternoon in Astoria*, with photographs of Queens.
- 1941–44 served in the U.S. Army; two years as an army photographer in Trinidad; gained American citizenship.
- 1947 took photographs on the subway and of the roof landscapes of Manhattan; travelled to Europe and compiled albums of photographs of Paris and Italy.
- 1948 finished *The Climate of New York*, his first large film portrait of a city; Edwin Denby's volume of poetry *In Public, In Private* was published, with photographs by Rudy Burckhardt.
- 1948–49 studied painting with Amédée Ozenfant in New York.
- from 1950 portrayed artists in their studios for the magazine *Art News*.
- 1950–51 studied painting at the academy in Naples; travelled around Italy and Greece.
- 1953 did his second city portrait, *Under the Brooklyn Bridge*.
- 1956 publication of *Mediterranean Cities* with sonnets by Edwin Denby and photographs of Italy and Greece by Burckhardt.
- from 1963 spent the summer months in Maine, where he devoted more time to photography and filming.
- 1967–75 taught film and painting at the University of Pennsylvania.
- 1979 publication of his book *Mobile Homes* with photographs and autobiographical texts.
- 1987 film retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1998 first comprehensive retrospective exhibition of photographs, films and paintings in Valencia, Spain.
- 1999 committed suicide in Maine.
- 2004 publication of a monograph with texts by Phillip Lopate and Vincent Katz.

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.

To accompany the exhibition an illustrated booklet will be published with essays by Vincent Katz and Hannes Schüpbach, pp. 48, 54 illustrations (only available in the museum shop).

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