

# *Serge Assier Regards Our World*

When photography was new, photographers sallied forth to find unknown worlds and introduce their audiences to them: Maxime DuCamp to Egypt, Samuel Bourne to India, John Thompson to China. (Photographers still search for the unknown, but so much of the world has been eaten whole by the camera that only event photographers consistently put something new on the menu, and then it turns out that most news tends to look a lot like earlier news that took place somewhere else.) Nineteenth century photographers who stayed home made records of what was there, as accurately and sometimes as artistically as possible, but even then it was understood that the great trick was to look at things and places in an uncommon way: to refashion the world for visual consumption. Committed photographers think of life as a continuous treasure hunt and have a highly personal idea of treasure.

Serge Assier dashes into the hunt on the first page of this book: a reflection of a world upside down -- a beautiful if slightly eccentric picture of a Gothic church tower seen head down in a puddle of water. This image announces a photographer who delights in indirection and in looking at our daily environment from an unexpected perspective, a photographer who is on exceptionally good terms with reflection, which can mean images bounced off surfaces or thought itself. Lots of photographers have photographed reflections -- the mirror with a memory, as photography was sometimes referred to in the nineteenth century, has found mirrors an obliging subject -- yet I can't recall another photographic book that opens so brazenly with a reflection.

The second picture is merely baffling. People in a café seen through a window, a street on an odd, perhaps an impossible, level, a table in an indeterminate space, cars reflected or seen through another window or.... This is the contemporary city, which ever since nineteenth century store fronts (and twentieth century glass buildings) has offered a series of reflected images half seen within and atop others, a shifting scene mindful of how constantly modern life is in flux. Most of us would have passed this by. Only a photographer with the gifts of both sight and insight would take the trouble of showing us how unseeing we are -- and how imperfect sight is.

The second chapter, on Barcelona, opens with another kind of unexpected view: a skateboarder with a camera is photographing another skateboarder as he's about to jump, both framed in a perfect circle that is evidently the end of a large pipe. No one but a photographer (except possibly a little boy) would have seen, would have looked at, would have narrowed down this occurrence through a pipe; besides, the image mimics the view you would get through a camera lens if you could squeeze yourself inside the camera and ignore the viewfinder. That chapter ends with the blurred image of a woman walking on the street and seen through an open car window: movement in two directions producing another kind of defective vision, another product of the modern life.

That life moves on wheels -- here on cars, trains, buses, motor scooters, bicycles, carts, strollers, skateboards, even skis, and those old-fashioned conveyances, feet -- and

teases the eye with continual change. But in Europe and North Africa the cities themselves are old, with narrow streets and buildings of stone in the style of another age or of peeling plaster, all stolidly surveying the age of speed and waiting patiently as history rolls by. Old and new (and usually both), cities are the focus of our lives. Side by side with an account of a place of impermanent experience, Assier, a contemporary flaneur who prowls the streets, the bars and eating places, tracks the way people negotiate their public lives. They gather with friends in cafes, dance, romance sweethearts, trundle children, try out skills, take guided tours, look for bargains, make religious processions, scurry to and fro in all kinds of weather. He reports the way life goes on in a deceptively straightforward manner tinged with his keen notations and personal flourishes. These are the pictures of a man who's vitally interested in what social animals we are.

Cities are complex, and so is photography. Cameras can produce documentary reports as well as hints and mysteries and allusions; style on occasion superimposes the two approaches. Assier is more than capable of working in both camps. He is a photojournalist, having photographed for the newspaper *La Provence* (and its predecessor *Le Provencale*) for 32 years, as well as a street photographer, two genres that sometimes border on one another and are largely differentiated by where they appear and how they are used. Street photography was not markedly commercial for most of the years after its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, and its more self-assigned nature gives it greater leeway to experiment with composition and even with ideas than was traditionally accorded to photojournalism. Nevertheless, such photography has had great impact on photojournalism, which has moved closer toward it in the last 30 or 40 years.

Assier's street work springs from and remains within a mainstream tradition: that great moment in French street photography, the years after World War II when photographers like Robert Doisneau, Willy Ronis, and most notably Henri Cartier-Bresson were discovering that life in public was an aesthetic and informative gold mine where visual prizes were hidden in plain sight. In the plain sight, at any rate, of men (and a sprinkling of women) with quick reflexes, fast cameras, and a rare, intuitive appreciation of the rigors and whimsies of human existence in cities. The photographers saw and recorded haphazard events and juxtapositions that you and I would have missed had their cameras not isolated them from the rush of time, and their best pictures raised those minor happenings to major delights and turned fleeting into lasting. These men laid the foundation for street photography for decades to come – Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment was the inspirational watchword of hundreds of photographers – and it finds echoes today in this book.

Assier owns the street; and relishes its funny surprises: a flea-market salesman with an exuberant beard stands by a bulbous woven bird and its companion, both of which do good imitations of snow men; a tattooed man (perhaps only tricked out in fake tattoos) in a bathing suit wears a large, swinging dildo; marionettes accost passers-by; a public scribe (in this day and age!) walks with a typewriter slung about his neck. Photography itself has a way of causing surprises: in Rabat, the camera angle makes a strange hybrid of a butcher, who not only is decapitated by the carcass of exposed joints and cavities he

carries on his shoulders but who also bears, in the crook of his arm, the animal's skull staring back at us.

Adept at framing, Assier finds uncommon opportunities, like that pipe in Barcelona, or a car window, an arch, a modern sculpture, the windows of a café, a colonnade, all conspiring to frame the view twice, once by the camera, once by another structure. Or by two young women who smile at the camera from opposite sides of the picture, unaware that a short way off in the empty space between them is the real subject, a pair of lovers. Assier has a quick eye for lovers (what Frenchman does not?) who kiss or at least embrace everywhere – on a train platform, on a bicycle, under an umbrella, in a flea market, in the rotunda of an ancient university.

He relishes patterns too. In a café in Anvers, striped shirts, blouses, and napkins bind a motley crew together. The stately, insistently striped church façade in Marseille is approached by zigzag stripes of shadows on the stairs and commented on by long strips of windows on a ferry parked nearby. Outside a café in Anvers, a worker stands among the repetitive circular mouths of beer barrels; off at an angle, buildings with what look like infinitely repeated vertical pilasters veer off into the distance.

It's just possible that Assier has been everywhere and seen everything, and it's certain he's recorded more life than many of us will ever encounter. How many moments he's saved from history's destructive impulse... This book begins with a reflection in water and ends with a man reflecting on the watery universe: a tiny figure on a high cliff looks out to sea. At the end, three looks: the man's, the photographer's, and ours. *Un regard*, ricocheting off the page.

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As it happens, Assier had no intention of being a photographer when he was young. His life is a patchwork of experiences so far out of the ordinary they verge on fiction. His family had money until they gambled it down to the last sou; he was taken from them at the age of thirteen by a social worker and placed with a farmer's family as a shepherd. He hated it, ran away to Paris to be a singer, ended up a chochard, very ill. The police rounded him up and put him in a hospital, where a doctor stripped him down and exhibited him to a crew of medical students; Assier was so furious at being treated like an animal or an object that he simply left. Not long after, he moved to Marseille, where he worked as a docker, an auto mechanic, a baker, a waiter, and a chauffeur – which didn't leave a lot of space for higher education.

Around the age of twenty, having taught himself photography, he began taking pictures obsessively; one day, he simply decided to become a photographer. Soon he was driving a taxi at night – even photographers have to eat -- as if it were a race car; he claims he was the fastest taxi in Marseille. He enlisted the entire troop of nighttime cabbies as his special agents: if one spotted a crime, especially a murder, he'd call Serge to say in code something like 'a special passenger is waiting at such and such an intersection'. Assier would throw his current passenger out and speed off to a photograph

a corpse. Like Weegee in America, he often arrived before the police did, and he supplied the press copiously with what it hungered for. So the journals began assigning him anything gory that came along; that and the pressure of working for 17 different publications, as he did by his late twenties, gave him nightmares and then a heart attack.

He changed his life, slowing down to mere high speed, but he continued to roam Europe and beyond, photograph the celebrities at Cannes, report for *La Provencale*, and photograph as if his life depended on it, which in a way it did. He became friends of leading authors (some of them in this book) and illustrated their books. He won awards, he was featured on television. He personally printed, framed, hung and remained as guard of his nineteen one-man shows – this is his twentieth -- and then packed them up afterward by himself, all the while refusing to sell a print other than those that earned him a living as a reporter. If his life has slowed down his career has not, and his *regard* is as swift and sure as ever.

*Vicki Goldberg*

*Is an (American) photography critic, author, and photo historian*