Eye on the Street

Photography in Urban Public Spaces

Jennifer Tucker

Street photographs are telling objects, portraying how individuals perform their identities in public: how they inhabit public spaces and situate themselves in relation to class, cultural, and gender norms.
—Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Incongruous Images: 'Before, During, and After' the Holocaust"

Some of the most powerful historical representations of streets and the people traversing them have been those served up by photographers. From photography's very beginning around 1838, as new camera technologies transformed lively public thoroughfares into open-air studios, photographs engendered diverse views of the city from artists, photojournalists, pedestrians, engineers, and advertisers. Public urban spaces are not merely subject matter for photography, however, since photographers themselves are actively engaged in navigating city streets fraught with politics and historically changing social meanings. An exploration of the many different appropriations of public spaces for photography shows that walking in city streets has not only been a central subject for fine art photography; it also has been one of its primary historical conditions.[1]

Initially the slow exposure times of early photographic processes impeded the creation of a photographic record of the liveliness of urban life or, indeed, of physical movement of any kind. People often complained about photographs in

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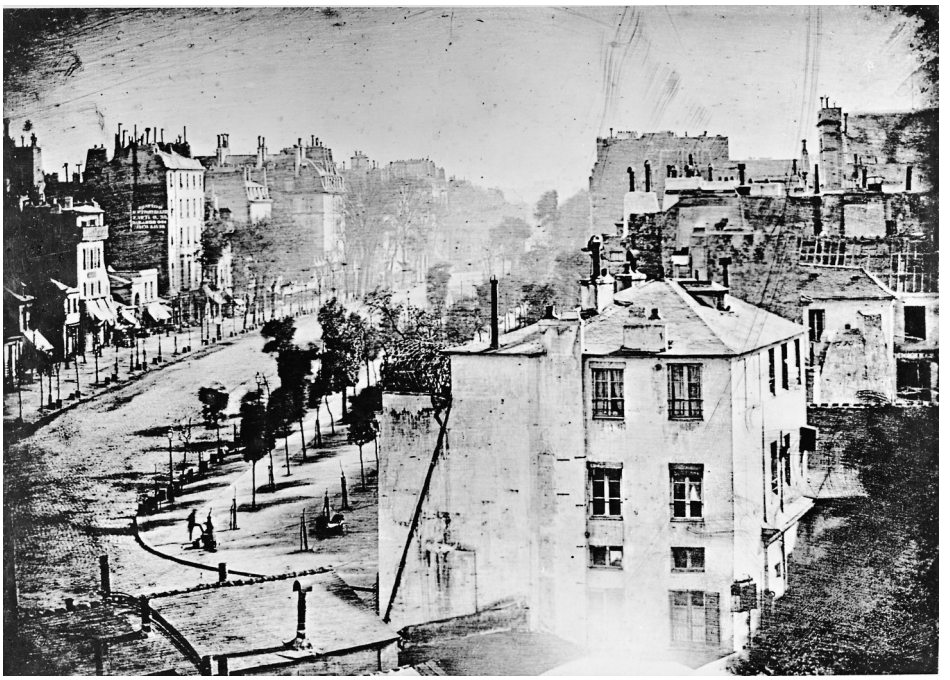

Figure 1. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *View of the Boulevard du Temple*, Paris, ca. 1838. Daguerreotype. Reproduced courtesy Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich

which dynamic city streets, filled with people, movement and traffic, appeared eerily spectral, deserted, and plague-stricken in photographically recorded images.

In a daguerreotype view of a street in Paris made by French photographer Louis-Jacque-Mandé Daguerre around 1838, for example, the only trace of a human figure visible is the body of a man having his shoes shined in the foreground (fig. 1). As the American painter and inventor Samuel Morse, upon seeing the photograph, reported: "his boots and legs were well defined, but he is without body or head, because these were in motion."[2]

Faster chemical exposures and the development of alternative processes for outdoor work made it possible for the first time in the 1850s to record photographic traces of motion, transforming the nature of future urban photographic engagement and experience of city spaces. A stereoscopic city view made in 1865 depicts the scene of human and vehicular traffic on a rainy day in New York from the vantage point of an upper story, wet pavement glistening and the movement of pedestrians captured (fig. 2).

Upon viewing commercial "Instantaneous Views of London," a contemporary newspaper reviewer marveled that "the cabs, omnibuses and pedestrians, in motion, some right in the foreground, (are) all perfectly defined."[3] A journalist around the same time similarly described glass stereoscopic "instantaneous" views

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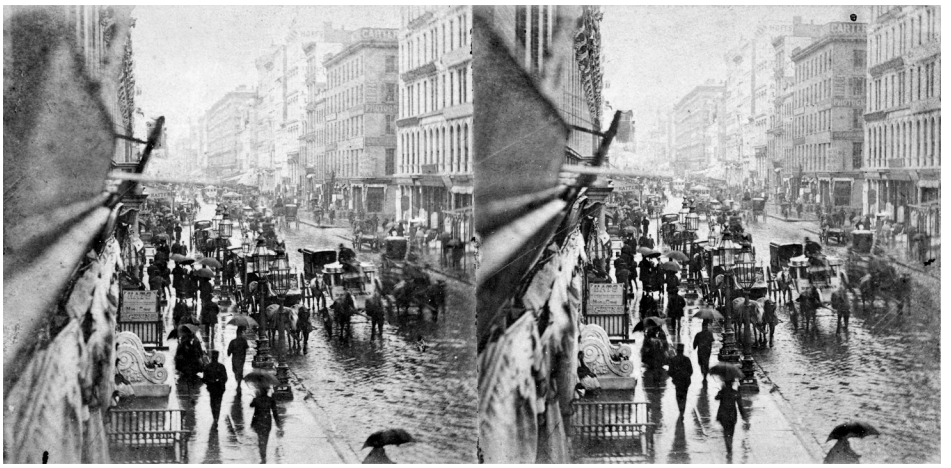

Figure 2. *Broadway on a Rainy Day*. "Anthony's Instantaneous Views," E. and H. T. Anthony and Co., unidentified photographer, ca. 1865. One-half of an albumen print stereograph. Reproduced courtesy George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film

of Paris as "perfect": "Not one of a thousand figures of all kinds, foot passengers and vehicles passing in all directions, shows the slightest sign of movement or imperfect definition. Figures standing in the shadows of porticos are all perfectly rendered, although the exposure was but the imperceptible fraction of a second."[4] Instantaneous photographs of pedestrians and vehicular traffic in motion presaged the photographic analysis of human motion by Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographs a few years later. The physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863 that "photographs of the streets and public places of Paris and New York, each of them showing numerous walking figures," furnished a "new source, accessible only within the last few years," for studying "natural limbs and movements," required for the design of artificial limbs for Civil War soldiers injured in battle or others who had lost limbs due to disease or accidents.[5]

Photography from the mid-nineteenth into the early twentieth century began shifting its gaze toward the everyday social arrangements and transactions of men and women. City streets were sites of human interest captured by photographers such as Eugène Atget, Berenice Abbot, Alfred Stiegliz, Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, James Van Der Zee, and Edward Weston, who pioneered new ways of seeing and picturing the city, often experimenting with new forms and representational modalities from higher contrast and sharper focus to a strong emphasis on underlying abstract geometries. Twentieth-century photojournalists who explored socially and politically significant urban subjects often aimed their photographs at the newspaper market: Roger Mayne, for example, embarked on a long-term project to photograph life on London's working-class streets during the 1950s, and Lutz Dille, a Canadian-based photographer and documentary filmmaker, undertook a number of

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Figure 3. Eugene de Salignac, Queensboro Bridge, from roof of shanty looking east, showing pedestrians on south foot walk, April 11, 1909. Courtesy New York Municipal Archives

worldwide projects in the 1960s with the deceptively simple idea of photographing people "just as they are"—a forerunner perhaps to the emulated street-style photographs on blogs like *The Sartorialist*.

Some of the most iconic images of city streets came from the camera work of photographers who worked for municipalities or newspapers and magazines, however. Eugene de Salignac, for example, the sole photographer for the New York City Department of Bridges from 1903 to 1934, ventured out into the city on assignment to document the progress of the building of the city's infrastructure: bridges, subway construction, ferryboats, buses, the waterfront, and signal towers for traffic.[6] His photographs are records both of the city's pedestrians and of his own experiences as an adventurous urban walker (fig. 3).

To take a series of panoramas from the top of one of the Brooklyn Bridge

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towers, for example, de Salignac had to walk up the two-foot-wide cable from the road to the tower, hundreds of feet above the river. While not made for circulation beyond the municipal agency that employed him, his photographs of street life, from images of construction and office workers to traffic disasters, eventually became iconic, reproduced without attribution in newspapers, documentary films, posters, postcards and history books, often to engender a view of New York streets as a demonic symbol of modernity—"a city in motion."[7] Likewise, photographers who are often comparatively little known were responsible for making hundreds of the photographs chronicling revolutions, protests, and parades in urban public places, from the historic photograph of Soviet troops raising the flag of the USSR over the German Reichstag building in 1945 to photographs of civil rights demonstrators resisting arrest in Birmingham, Alabama, to recent images of political protesters on the streets of Cairo and Moscow.[8] As photographs of urban spaces that are simultaneously icons of history, street photographs like these cross genres of photography; more importantly, they illustrate the power of photography for documenting historic events acted out in public spaces, for testing the boundaries of ownership of public urban spaces, and for injecting new voices into public conflicts over who belongs in which streets, and on what terms.

As cameras became smaller, cheaper, and easier to use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of amateurs armed with cameras joined professional photographers in recording pictures of urban public spaces not only in the United States, France, and Britain but also in cities across India, Russia, Japan, and many other nations, raising a new set of issues around the appropriation of public spaces for private purposes. In 1888, the American inventor George Eastman set out a new philosophy of amateur photography in an advertisement for the Kodak camera, announcing that "anybody, man, woman or child, who has sufficient intelligence to point a box straight and press a button" could take a picture because the Kodak system reduced picture making to three simple, easily explained steps.[9] Mobilized by expanding systems of conveyance, including sidewalks, trolleys, railways, and cars, male and female pedestrians and cyclists with cameras went "looking out for views."[10] Guidebooks such as "How to Take Street Photographs" constituted a genre of advice literature that instructed camera novices in the art, laws, and diplomacy of taking photographs in public places. Meanwhile, the incorporation of photographic equipment into fashionable dress prefigured the wearing of portable camera devices (a historical forerunner, perhaps, of "glogging"—from "cyborg logs": walking around with a portable camera, like a personal digital diary, which can function as visual memory prosthetic).

The *New York Times* compared the new craze for "instantaneous" street photography to the cholera epidemic sweeping through Europe in 1884, as the "photographic rambler" became a recognizable urban type: a walker with a camera who attracted extensive news commentary, pictorial illustration, and comic journalism,

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becoming what might be seen as a forerunner of today's "citizen photographer."[11] While often out of the picture, photographers were themselves part of urban spectacle: stopping for views, unpacking equipment, focusing the lens, and attracting attention from passersby ranging from curiosity to irritation. Commercial street photographers, viewed as a public nuisance in many cities, were widely prohibited legally from working in urban spaces outside portrait studios.[12] Interactions between photographers and their subjects in the moment of photographing were more than a mechanical operation; they were also from the outset sexualized, class- and racially inflected relationships that extended as well to the contexts of photographic exhibition and display. As the noted American female journalist Fanny Fern explained in the 1850s, the mass circulation of the photographic portrait enabled by mechanical reproduction was representative of a kind of prostitution of the self: "People like their faces to hang out at street doors."[13]

Efforts to make photography in urban public spaces more surreptitious sparked a host of conflicts over who, exactly, was entitled to photograph in those spaces. In 1881, Thomas Bolas received a patent for his detective camera, a twin-lens reflex camera designed for police use. Other patents for detective cameras swiftly followed, including patents for a method for quick-focusing the instrument without viewing the image on the ground glass (1883); a method of changing the plates to conceal the operating parts of the camera from public view (1885); and an invention of roll-holders adapted to the support of a strip of sensitized paper or film while successive exposures are made (1886). A cartoon accompanying an 1890 *Punch* article about amateur photography depicts a scene in which photographers take pictures against their subjects' will, showing how photography was viewed in ways experienced as prurient and invasive.

The theme of capturing elusive objects is worked out in the image of photographers running with tripods in hand, the coverings of their cameras flapping behind them like butterfly nets (fig. 4). A "Photo-Balloon" soars in one corner—balloons, like cameras, being symbols of surveillance—while a man with a gun lies in wait behind a sign that reads "Photographers Beware!" Although most of the photographers pictured are male, a few female photographers are also depicted, such as the two women portrayed photographing historic architecture, and another leading a pack of male photographers in pursuit of a picture of a "picturesque" rustic figure.

The *Punch* cartoon captured polite society's growing distaste for "unruly snapshooters" and the threat they seemed to pose to civilized values, including indifference to traditional notions of good manners and lack of respect for privacy. If a primary issue in the early history of photography was how technically to capture street life in photographic terms, photography's later history records evidence of the

Figure 4 (next page). Harry Furniss, "The Amateur Photographic Pest." Pen and ink cartoon, reproduced in *Punch*, October 4, 1890, 166

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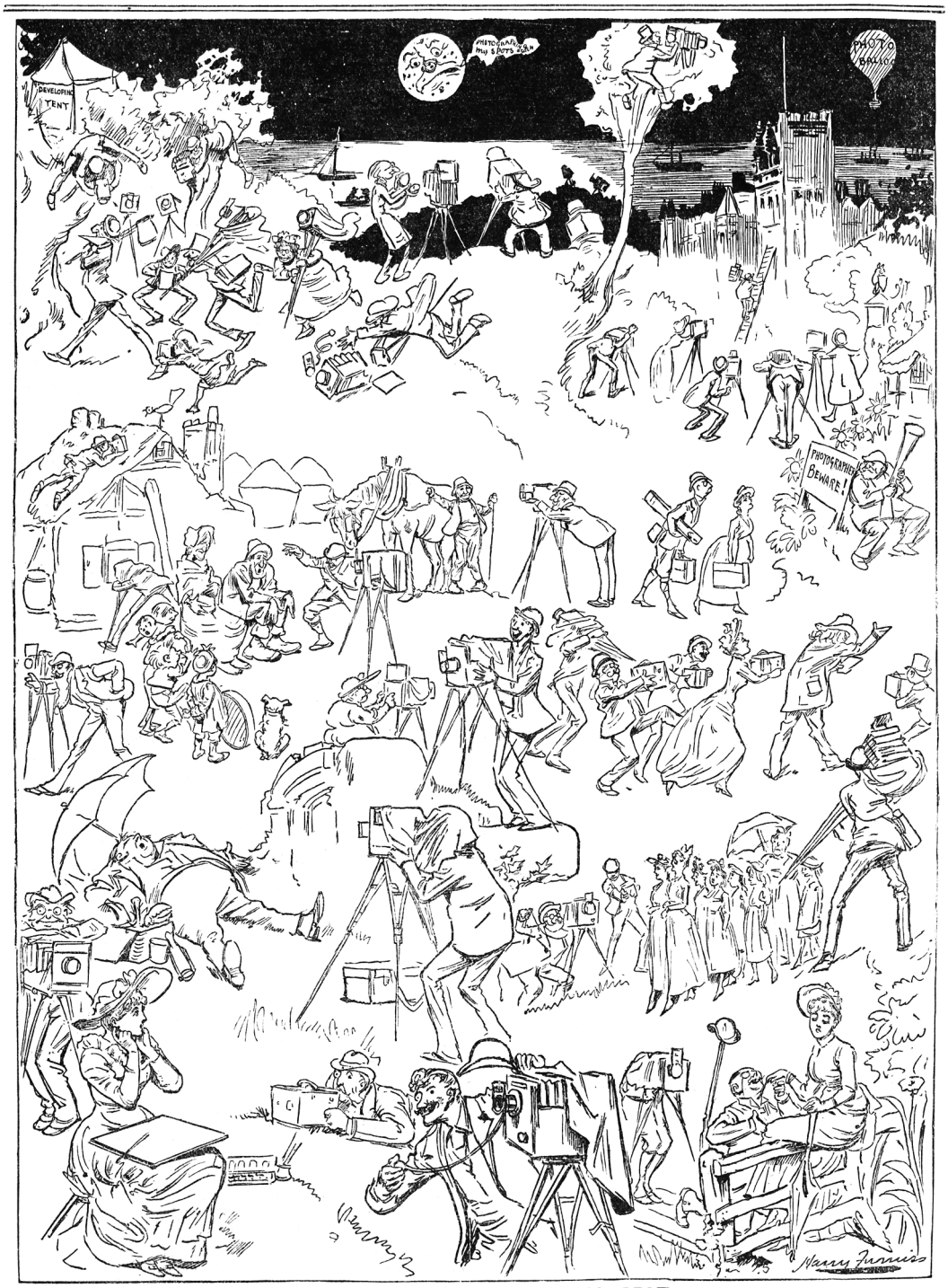

THE AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHIC PEST

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growing public debate over the laws and moral conduct of street photography, from contests over the rights of private individuals to photograph in urban public spaces and the rights of government agencies and businesses to install cameras for street surveillance, to the legal rights to privacy of individuals who are photographically depicted in urban public spaces. New techniques of surveillance and recording in the nineteenth century bore directly on the social body in new ways, raising fundamental questions about the issues of privacy and who was allowed to photograph in public spaces, and for what purposes. In 1876, John Thomson, the Scottish photographer, travel writer, and fellow of the Royal Geographical Society began, along with the radical journalist Adolphe Smith, a monthly journal, "Street Life in London," a pioneering exercise in the genre of photojournalism that exposed the harsh social realities of working people and reinforced familiar archetypes, circulating as icons of the Victorian past.[14] The Danish American police reporter and photographer Jacob Riis was among the first photographers to use flash photography in his and others' efforts to investigate (and ultimately to campaign against the metropolitan presence of) the immigrant poor. An article about Riis published in 1888 in the *New York Sun*, titled "Flashes from the Slums," including drawings based on Riis's photographs, reported how a "mysterious party has lately been startling the town o'nights" by a "ghostly tripod, some weird and uncanny movements, the blinding flash" of a camera and then "the patter of retreating footsteps" by "mysterious visitors."[15]

Photographic historian John Tagg has noted in *The Burden of Representation* that the coupling of evidence and photography in the second half of the nineteenth century "was bound up with the emergence of new institutions and new practices of observation and record-keeping; that is, those new techniques of representation and regulation which were so central to the restructuring of the local and national state in industrialized societies at that time and to the development of a network of disciplinary institutions—the police, prisons, asylums, hospitals, departments of public health, schools, and even the modern factory system itself."[16] Urban reformers used photographs to advocate for reimagined city streets that were "cleansed and open" spaces where "God's sanitary law" would prevail; indeed, photographs of streets scheduled for demolition were among the first occasions on which photographs were presented as evidence to a select parliamentary committee in Britain.[17] Alan Sekula has suggested that discourses centered on the body, such as physiognomy, phrenology, and photography, linked photography during the nineteenth century to popular investigative methods for quickly assessing the character of strangers "in the dangerous and congested spaces of the nineteenth-century city."[18]

Presaging twenty-first-century metropolitan police uses of digital mobile photography at protest rallies, a New York lawyer suggested as early as 1873 that "in case of riot, photographs of the riotous assemblage be taken at intervals for use in subsequent legal proceedings."[19] The 1990s witnessed a dramatic increase in the use of digital multiplexing, which allowed for several cameras at once to record, and

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introduced time-lapse and motion-only recording.[20] After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, more cameras have been installed in public spaces including housing projects, public transportation systems, and public parks, and police officers and undercover detectives increasingly use cell-phone cameras and street-level surveillance at crowd gatherings and political protests. The British state through most of the twentieth century had extended rights of photographers to take pictures in public spaces. But in recent years this has changed: under the Terrorism Act of 2000, a new criminal offense was created of collecting or making a record of information "likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism." It is estimated that there are more than five million CCTV cameras across Britain today, many enhanced with "smart" software designed to record and recognize faces and even to pick up "behavioral oddities" among individuals and groups. When London's Metropolitan Police launched a counterterrorism poster in 2008, they encouraged members of the public to report via a telephone hotline what they termed "suspicious photography." The poster, picturing hundreds of identical cameras, with one highlighted, said: "*Thousands of people take photos every day. What if one of them seems odd?*"

New forms of surveillance have also stimulated counter-surveillance movements. Groups of citizen photographers and video journalists have now formed, using panoptic technologies to confront the pervasiveness of surveillance by officials and customer service personnel in contemporary Western society, sometimes referred to as "sousveillance."[21] These include, for example, "I-Witness," a New York-based video collective that uses photography and video to protect civil liberties; "Cop Watch," a network of activist organizations founded in 1990 in Canada and the United States that monitors and videotapes police activity; and "FIT Watch," a group formed in the United Kingdom in response to the creation of Forward Intelligence Teams: UK police teams who use cameras and camcorders to conduct overt surveillance and police public order. Photographic surveillance efforts by local police and storeowners also have encouraged the emergence of new vernacular art genres. The Surveillance Camera Players, a group formed in 1996 by a small group of people from New York City who oppose the use of surveillance cameras in public places, have expressed their opposition by adapting, writing, and performing antisurveillance plays in public places, making maps of camera locations, and offering walking tours based on those maps.[22] At a recent event held in London, "Why Does Street Photography Make Us Paranoid?" participants viewed a film, "Stand Your Ground" (2011), directed and produced by Hannah White, that challenges the policing of photography in public space in London.[23]

Contemporary photographers are among those attending most acutely to questions about how urban spaces are fraught with politics and social meaning. British photographer Sarah Pickering, for example, explores the anxieties that can accompany security measures and the role of visual technologies designed to con-

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Figure 5. Sarah Pickering, "Farrance Street," 2004. Courtesy the artist and Meessen De Clercq Gallery, Brussels

trol the production and experience of street life. Her photographs for a series called "Public Order" completed at the Metropolitan Police Public Order Training Centre in 2005 depict scenes from a simulated public urban environment, where officers rehearse responses to various scenarios of civic unrest.

Police train in a huge network of fake streets and facades with the hallmarks of a British working-class town that has been artificially transformed into a militarized urban space (fig. 5). Separated by more than 170 years from Daguerre's photograph of the Boulevard of Paris, the empty streets captured in her photographs are eerie for their lack of human figures, perhaps because of the way they make palpable, in Jean Baudrillard's words, the "invisible violence of security."[24]

The production of the vast visual historic photographic archive of global urban spaces and publics from 1830 to today raises a set of important questions for historians. Whose visions of urban spaces and futures are represented? Why and with what consequences are urban spaces appropriated as visual records? To answer questions like these requires a consideration not only of photography's central role as a technology used to control the production and experience of street life but also of how, in the hands of individuals from a diverse set of backgrounds moving

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through different kinds of urban spaces, the camera also has been allied to practices of engaging and experiencing city spaces. The questions we should be asking about pictures of public places are therefore not only what do the photographs show or discover about urban streets, but how did the politics and social construction of walking and the nature of mobility shape photographic narratives of urban life, and therefore what social meanings and structures do they inflect? In short, we need histories not only about the flow and exchange of photographs as objects (the traffic in images) but also stories about photographers in transit.

Notes

1. For a rich historical introduction, see especially Katherine Bussard, Frazer Ward, and Lydia Yee, *Street Art, Street Life: From the 1950s to Now* (New York: Bronx Museum and Aperture, 2009); Joel Meyerowitz and Colin Westerbeck, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001); Clive Scott, *Street Photography from Atget to Cartier-Bresson* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Geoffrey Batchen, "Seeing and Saying: A Response to 'Incongruous Images,'" in "THEME ISSUE 48: Photography and Historical Interpretation," special issue, *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 26–33; and Mitchell Schwarzer, *Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).
2. Samuel F. B. Morse, "The Daguerrotipe" [*sic*], *New-York Observer*, April 20, 1839.
3. "Instantaneous Views of London," *Photographic News*, January 10, 1862.
4. *Photographic News*, May 24, 1861.
5. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Human Wheel, Its Spokes and Felloes," *Atlantic Monthly* 11, May 1863, 567–80.
6. Michael Lorenzini, "Eugene de Salignac: Out of the Shadows," in *New York Rises: Photographs by Eugene de Salignac from the Collections of the New York City Department of Records/Municipal Archives* (New York: Aperture, 2007), 7–20; and Kevin Moore, "A Ragged Order," in *New York Rises*, 21–33.
7. Federal Writer's Project, *New York Panorama: A Companion to the WPA Guide to New York City* (New York: Random House, 1938), 346.
8. Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
9. David Collins, *The Story of Kodak* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990).
10. Discussed in Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 146–47.
11. "The Camera Epidemic," *New York Times*, August 20, 1884. On the British "photographic rambler" and urban space see Elizabeth Edwards, "Urban Survivals and Anticipated Futures: Photographic Survey in England, 1885–1918," in *Urban Photography and Cultural Ideas*, ed. Tom Verschaffel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).
12. Discussed in George Chernoff and Herschel Sarbin, *Photography and the Law* (New York: Amphoto, 1958).
13. Quoted in Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 93. See also Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

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14. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 2 (London: Verso, 1994), 315–49. Miss Olive Christian Malvery went undercover in disguise to investigate and record the lives and conditions of London's poor. See Judith Walkowitz, "The Indian Woman, the Flower Girl, and the Jew: Photojournalism in Edwardian London," *Victorian Studies* 42 (Autumn 1998/1999): 3–46.
15. "Flashes from the Slums: Pictures Taken in Dark Places by the Lighting Process: Some of the Results of a Journey through the City with an Instantaneous Camera—The Poor, the Idle and the Vicious," *New York Sun*, February 12, 1888.
16. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 5.
17. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 129, 141–43.
18. Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 3–64, 12.
19. *Albany Law Journal* 50 (January 25, 1873): 50. See also "The Legal Relations of Photographs," *American Law Register* 1 (January 1869): 3–4.
20. The first US city to install video in a commercial business street was Olean, New York, in 1968. By 1973, cameras were installed in Times Square, New York City.
21. Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments," *Surveillance and Society* 1, no. 3 (2003): 331–55. "One way to challenge and problematize both surveillance and acquiescence to it is to resituate these technologies of control on individuals, offering panoptic technologies to help them observe those in authority. We call this inverse panopticon "*sous*veillance."
22. *We Know You Are Watching: Surveillance Camera Players, 1996–2006* (New York: Factory School, 2006) contains the group's founding documents, performance scripts and diaries, maps, position papers, and instructions on "How to Stage Your Own 'Surveillance Camera Theater.'"
23. On Tuesday, June 21, 2011, six photographers were assigned different areas of the city to photograph to test the policing of public and private space by private security firms and their reaction to photographers. All were instructed to keep to public land and photograph the area as they would on a normal day. All six photographers were stopped on at least one occasion; three encounters led to police intervention. The film can be viewed on youtube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJH9F7Hcluo.
24. Karen Irvine, introduction, in Sarah Pickering, *Explosions, Fires, and Public Order* (New York: Aperture, 2009), 6.

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