

ing the ominous, excessively dark and contrasty nature of the photographic prints, enhances these qualities. Klein cultivates extreme, sometimes obliterative, *black tones* in his work in the same way other photographers go for richly variegated detail. Often there is the sense that a great deal of incident is literally lost in the shadows of a Klein image—yet shadows are not the point. The harshness Klein seems to be after is like the glare of direct sunlight rather than the dankness or gloom of the late-afternoon picture. It is a harshness, moreover, achieved at significant cost to “photographic values.” The use of extreme blacks is far from the only weapon in Klein’s arsenal. He will sometimes use a grayed-out graininess characteristic of certain black-and-white 35mm films, not for a muting or softening effect, but for its sheer grittiness.

As do other photographers of the New York School—Weegee, Model, Levinstein—Klein often pushes the camera up against his subject. He occasionally creates images whose airlessness, whose compacting of faces and bodies and bizarre pieces of clothing, make Grossman’s or Model’s most clogged images look conventionally spacious. And he occasionally combines techniques of audacious image-framing and cropping with more radical dark-room methods. Many of the images in *New York* seem to have been solarized, or somehow reversed-to-negative, to create a look of forbidding “surreality.” Yet it is never that decorative Surrealism of so many of Man Ray’s solarized images; rather, Klein confronts us with a stark, uncomfortable vision of a frantic, violent, catapulting existence—life in the city as *théâtre noir*.

Weegee

Arthur Fellig, self-dubbed Weegee, after the clairvoyant mystery of the Ouija board, exists for us now not just through his remarkably pungent images and their impact on people like William Klein, but also through others’ recollections of him, and, most of all, through his own writings and other efforts on the subject of himself. One is struck by a quality of innate brashness, of a sort of relentless, and unwaveringly naïve, self-promotion. Corny humor was a stock in trade. This man, born in a part of Austria now within Poland’s borders, takes on a character of being permanently outside the tradition—of being determinedly and continually self-taught.

Weegee belongs squarely among the first-generation members of this group: he was born a year after Brodovitch, in 1899. He began his ten-year career as a Manhattan crime photographer in 1936—that same moment when the Photo League, *Life* magazine, and Brodovitch’s full reign of power at *Harper’s Bazaar*

commenced. Weegee was embraced relatively early by the photographic establishment: he was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, and continued to be shown there and at the Photo League. But without necessarily wanting to, he resisted the blandishments of the artistic/socially conscious establishments, at least insofar as they might have altered his photographic style.

Weegee picked up the craft of photography largely by working in a commercial photographer’s studio at a very young age and partly by shooting on the streets; to posit stylistic sources for him in the traditional ways seems an absurd exercise.¹⁸⁴ The images simply make most questions of “style” in photography irrelevant. This is not, however, to deny that Weegee forged an extraordinarily idiosyncratic photographic style or to ignore his considerable influence on other photographers. Virtually every member of the New York School learned from him; some among them, particularly Klein, Levitt, and Model, acknowledged his influence.¹⁸⁵

Weegee holds a special place within the universe of the New York School. In a sense, he personifies more purely than any other photographer one of the key *desiderata* of its practitioners. His best images came about in the service not of any intentional artfulness—and not, though he might dispute this, in deference to his clients’ values. His best work was done in the name of something intangible, some kind of pure intensity and presentness and momentary “truth” that *only photographs* could engage. Far from being a self-conscious, “socially conscious” magazine journalist, after the fashion of Margaret Bourke-White or W. Eugene Smith—and in an entirely differently spirit from most of the fashion or advertising photographers of the era—Weegee in his prime traveled a tough, risky, and always unpredictable course. He took his chances as a photographer, selling his pictures to the press after they were shot. For the decade with which we are most concerned, he doggedly covered the crime beat.

It is a mistake to see Weegee’s bold, harsh, often chaotic-seeming nocturnal police-call photographs as somehow *accidental*. Many have characterized these images’ paradoxical descriptive clarity and inventive framings as a side-effect of a “straight reportorial” intention. This is nonsense. These photographs, whose brilliant framings and masterful command of flash illumination, whether by day or night, bespeak an enormously disciplined and gifted artist. Weegee obviously prized successful “composition” in his printed images as much as did Model or Klein or Arbus. But, and to some extent this was also true of the others, to acknowledge any artistic aspirations was to betray a code that was ingrained in Weegee’s professional self-image.

The extent to which Weegee fooled even sophisticated afi-