

T. Lux Feininger

PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE 1930s and 40s – Opening Address (1983)

Opening address and introduction by T. Lux Feininger on his Exhibition "T. Lux Feininger – Photographs of the 30s and 40s" at the Prakapas Gallery New York, June 17 – July 15 1983

Shall I write about these pictures, or shall I write about pictures? – A photograph is quickly made; but prior to the moment of exposure, a good deal of preparation was necessary. First, there had to be film in the camera; then, the subject, model, scene or event, had to be found, at which to aim the camera. – Afterwards, there is a post-history, which nominally ends with the darkroom work, but ideally this is not so. The picture is now part of a „collection“, and it must speak for itself if it is to receive any consideration.

I want to write about time: A picture made yesterday is not what it is going to be in thirty or forty years. But not it changes – I do, who am looking at it. And it is curious, how little the question of authorship has to do with this predictable change. Unlike the kind of love which is most current between people, man's love for his artifact distinctly grows with age. But it must be understood that by „artifact“ I mean the scene or milieu portrayed in the picture as much as I mean the picture itself.

I used to love to photograph crowds in the streets; people, groups of vehicles, movement, animation. But first, I wish to attract your attention to another subject, which I think should be pivotal in the exhibition (No. 20) „Dead horse in 24th St.“

[20] Dead Horse in 24th St., 1949 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpg=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=8&category=8&q=dead+horse+in+24



It is probably unimportant to mention that this is the street I lived in for nine years, and the horse was photographed just one block East of my house (between Lexington and Third Avenues).

The reason why I call it pivotal is, that only this horse would have done for my picture, whereas my crowds were anonymous: Any bunch of people would have served, when the mood to take a picture was on me.

This was so, because the real theme was agitation, bustle; briefly, what is called „life“ in the streets of Manhattan.

The individuals in the throng, whether wage-earners or holiday-makers, were either going to lunch, or coming from lunch, but this horse wasn't going anywhere. What was going to happen to my office workers, had already

happened to the animal; and when the Department of Sanitation gets around to cleaning up the mess, it will take away a carcass; but the horse is done with its job.

If we now turn to (No. 73) „Old white horse and truck“, we see a horse that still has things to do – it is still alive.

[73] Old white horse and truck, 1950 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=8&category=8q=old+white+horse



A better look at the picture may elicit the exclamation:

„That's living?“ – but this is mere quibbling:

Of course it is alive. Such, then, is „life“ in the streets of Manhattan, amongst a few other things which it also is.

Work can be fun: I used to love to see the office ladies stream to work, rain or shine; or, at noon-time, stream to Horn & Hardarts's or Bickford's, or whatever, and then stream back again.

[23] Windy corner at 4th Ave and 24th St, 1946. https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=8&category=8q=windy+corner+at+40



Their work was my fun; and if they got soaked in a suddedn slop of a New York's summer rain, I did not mind one bit getting wet with them, so long as I could photograph them.

I used to dislike the Manhattan winds, and nowadays I positively hate all wind; but forty years ago, wind did not stop me from lying in wait with my camera at certain street-corners (Nos. 23, 54, 55)

We suffered together, the secretaries and I; but they had to cross that avenue, and I was there because I wanted to be.

[54] The windy corner (four women), 1946 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=&category=&q=the+windy+corner

[55] 2nd Ave. Red Bus, people hurrying, 1940-41 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=&category=&q=2nd+ave+red+bu



Fun can also be „work“; witness the line-up for the steamer at the Battery (No. 12)

Here they are, roasting in the sun, worrying whether they'll get a good seat etc. But I, without either time, or cash, for a trip to Rye Beach or Playland, had my fun while working as a reporter for the *Perry Street Evening Bulletin*.

[12] Passengers at the Battery..., 1940 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=&category=&q=passengers+at+the+battery



Little segments of time, taken out of Life by means of snapping the shutter. After an interval (burial in the „collection“) some new form of life returns to these fragments of long ago.

I was looking at life when I exposed the film; now the picture is looking at me.

What is a photograph? It is a view of three-dimensional space transformed into a two-dimensional pattern of grays. It is an entirely mechanical process without any „art“ to it. If the lens was focussed on something recognizable at the moment of transformation, the resultant picture, after darkroom processing, will emerge as something identifiable: „Such-and-Such a street corner“, or „my parents in 1941 and a couple of friends“ etc. The mind of the viewer of the respective snapshot responds to the illusion of space; he recognizes the scene and all is well; there is no mystery here.

But time, this alter ego of space, behaves according to its own laws. The time of the snapping shutter, and the time of the spectator viewing the picture that was taken, own a subtle difference: „I know this street, and I remember the little steam-roller; but I never noticed this little girl dodging into the doorway!“ (No. 2).

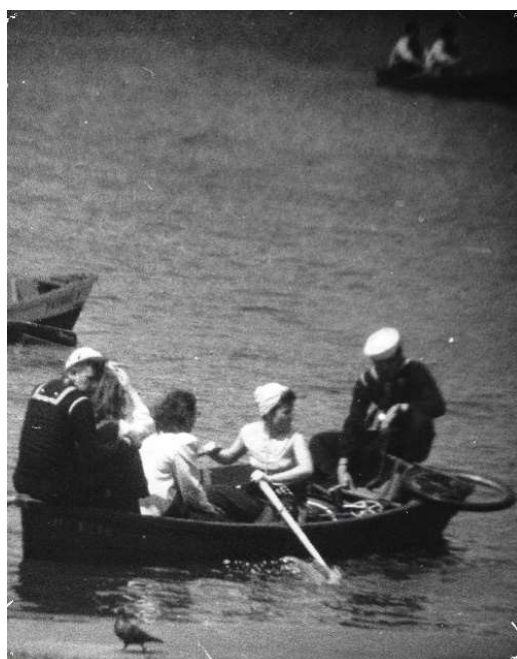
[2] Four pedestrians, 24th St, 1946-47 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/vvz/t_lux_feininger/works/four_pedestrians_24th_st_in_front_of_amend_drug_chemical_co/type/all

[3] Group of Four, Rte. 7, Lime Rock, 1941 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/vvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=&category=&q=group+of+four%2C+rath



Or again (No. 3): „This was in Connecticut, in 1941; this is Mr. K. .. and Mr. R. .. and that is my mother, but what on earth is she doing?“ Dodging girl and frenzied maternal grimace were not calculated by the cameraman, but there they are nevertheless.

[19] Central Park rowing boat with two Navy sailors, 1948 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/vvz/t_lux_feininger/works/central_park_rowing_boat_with_two_navy_sailors_and_pigeon/type/all



[The telescope view] (No. 19) was photographed through an opera glass and represents a scene which I particularly wanted to get, and which I did get; but the pigeon walking on the lake shore I did not „want“, because I did not see it.

I hope that I'll be allowed one last example.

[This is] (No. 59) a view from my window, in the slummiest of several slummy dwellings I have inhabited in my earlier years in New York.

I felt good and sorry for myself, when I exposed the shot; but more than forty years had to elapse before I noticed that my misery was shared by

others in the picture; so, if you want to learn something, please don't lay the picture down until you have discovered the people in it.

[59] Courtyard, with clothesline and washing, 1941 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/en/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works/courtyard_with_clothesline_and_washing/type/all



If all this is largely a matter of perception and of the ability to observe a multitude of features rapidly, which varies with the individual – in other words, of psychology – and if this were all that there is to „old pictures“, we would be on a level with computers, so far as reaction to pictures is concerned. Psychology knows not ethics, but morals, or *moeurs* (or manners) are part of a different science.

The picture of past scenes not only shows, but evokes, something belonging to it and to me, too; it tolls a bell in showing what it was like, once; what we did and how we looked. This appeal involves the viewer in the same way as reading fiction involves the reader: Added to the rational photographic qualities, something irrational enters the scene: be it love, regret, longing, relief, these sensations are not part of a laboratory science and if they can be induced, they cannot be controlled by the manipulator (in this case, the photographer).

An alert sense of time is bound to sharpen one's perceptions of space, too. The telescope aids us in enjoying the view of things too distant for the naked eye. I am not an astronomer, but I have heard of radio telescopes, and I am under the impression that man either is now, or soon will be, able to gaze into such distances as to capture the sight of things which no longer „exist“.

Well! No need to go so far.

The „telescope“ through which I took some of my pictures was, mostly, an opera glass; for gala occasions (Nos. 46, 88, 89, 90). I used a pair of ancient prismatic field glasses of 8-power magnification.

[46] Watertower, the East River and Brooklyn, 1946

https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/vvvt_kuv_fotinger/works?y=grd&top=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=&category=&q=Watertower%2C+the+East+River+and+Brooklyn%2C+long-range+view+from+11th+floor+window+of+a+building+on+Second+Avenue%3B



This equipment got me what I wanted – more or less – the problem of lengthy exposure times for the big set was considerable, as it was very difficult to hold the camera steady, but the chief effect, the feature I was after, was assured, even if the picture was a little blurred.

I am referring to the familiar flattening of the dimension of depth.

It seemed to me in essence to approach that impossible adventure of coming closer in time to the heart's desire. Since it only

seemed so, let me say that I loved this „seeming“, and we may content ourselves with assuming that the telescope perspective became emblematic – perhaps symbolic – of the yearning for other times.

[88] Cargo Steamer Coming up the East River, 1946 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=8&category=8q=Cargo+Steamer+Coming+up+the+East+River+%28telescope+view%29+%28Brooklyn+Across+the+East+River%29

[89] Cargo steamers, docked, East River, 1947 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=8&category=8q=Cargo+steamers%2C+docked%2C+East+River+%28telescope+view%29



Love, yearning, etc., are not exact sciences, but there were (and are) quite measurable and distinctly partial aspects to telescopic (or opera-glass) photography, from which I learned much for purposes of pictorial composition.

I should like to single out two of these features. Firstly, the relation of three-dimensional bodies in space to a limited field of vision; secondly, the awesome power of silhouetted form (No. 90), "Morning Haze over East River, Puffing Tug".

[90] Morning Haze over East River, Puffing, 1947 https://www.kunst-archiv.net/de/wvz/t_lux_feininger/works?v=grid&hpp=25&start=0&group=type&filter=all&medium=8&category=8q=Morning+Haze+over+East+River%2C+Puffing+Tug+%28telescope+view%29



This second aspect proved particularly fruitful also for use in painting (I am much more of a painter than I am a photographer), inasmuch as this quality must be striven for through choosing one's point of site in relation not only to the scene to be portrayed, but also to the respective source of light.

When this conjunction of ideal conditions has been found, the resultant picture exercises its magic at the expense of tactile values, of surface modulations etc., and this is of moral value, because it is a counter-agent to the greed of wanting to possess.

Possession, participation – vanities! – The Promised Land is beheld, not entered. Not in this life – and here we are back at (No. 20), or the „Dead Horse“.



T. Lux Feininger
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Address given by T. Lux Feininger on the opening of his Exhibition of "Photographs of the 30s and 40s" at the Prakash Gallery New York, June 17 – July 15 1983

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