

Ernst Haas



Ernst Haas
New York in Color
1952–1962

Foreword by Alex Haas
Essay by Phillip Prodger

Prestel
Munich – London – New York

Contents

Foreword 6

Alex Haas

Magic City 9

Phillip Prodger

Photographs 15

Afterword 207

Foreword

ALEX HAAS

My father loved New York. It was not only his home but also his muse, and this book is imbued with aspects of both. He used to say that if there were a passport for New Yorkers, he would be the first to have one. Ernst Haas had early success upon arriving there in 1951, which immediately gave him a sense of belonging. But his love of the city was not naive: he enjoyed its opportunities, its sophistication, and its driving pace, but was equally aware of its harsher realities. It was that awareness that made him a New York photographer: one day he could be photographing Albert Einstein at Princeton University for *Vogue*, the next the last displaced persons boat arriving at Ellis Island. It was during this time that he started experimenting with color photography in his city. These photographs would change the course of photographic history. A selection of them was published in 1953 in *Life* magazine in its first ever issue in color, and many are published here.

Ernst would often compare New York to Venice—a beautiful city on the verge of crumbling. Through the years, striving to support both his family and his creative practice, he often struggled financially; the pressure of survival pushed him to work very hard. But he thrived under that pressure. New York pushed him. When a

well-paying advertising job would come up, this would help finance his trips to the Himalayas or Japan, and he would return with a book project.

He chose the location of his large studio on Fifty-Fifth Street and Seventh Avenue because it was two blocks from the Museum of Modern Art—where his work was often shown—as well as Carnegie Hall and Central Park. His studio was divided between the living quarters and the working area. The very large living room was filled floor-to-ceiling with hundreds of books, records, Tibetan masks, kachina dolls, South American pottery, Navajo rugs, Balinese paintings, and found objects from around the world. His giant bed was covered with a buffalo hide—much to the horror of his many girlfriends. All this created a pleasant potpourri of smells that you recognized the moment you walked in the front door: you had definitely entered Ernst Haas's world.

The studio area was white but could be turned pitch-black to accommodate for projections. It had dozens of filing cabinets, containing all of his transparencies, negatives, and correspondences with old friends from Robert Capa to Henri Cartier-Bresson, all well organized by his longtime assistants Marilyn Schroeder, Todd Weinstein, and Marina Ospina. On top of the

cabinets sat a series of light tables where he would spend hours hunched with a loupe over one eye, working way into the night, when the city was quiet. With the air-conditioning set to Alpine temperatures, it was always freezing in there like his native Austria.

One night, after a long day of work, he asked me to assist him in photographing the neighborhood. It must have been around midnight. This was the late 1970s, when crime was rampant. We went out with all of his expensive Leica equipment, setting up for a shot. Ernst was so focused on and excited about what he was doing that he was oblivious to the fact that a group of gentlemen, who seemed very interested in the equipment, suddenly surrounded us. Upon seeing them, my father—without hesitation or understanding of the gravity of the situation—asked one of them to look through the viewfinder, explaining the technical aspects of what he was doing. He then invited the next one to take a look, and so on. Eventually, they walked away. I used to remind him of this story, of which he had no recollection.

My sister, Victoria, and I were born in New York City. My first memory of seeing, or rather feeling, New

York was coming back from Switzerland around the age of six. I was sitting in the back seat of a checker cab, sandwiched between my father and sister, approaching an August evening skyline with the clicking of the taxi meter keeping time. As we approached, there were giant billboards with my father's photographs of cowboys on horseback that he had taken for Marlboro. It felt as if we owned the city. Once we crossed the bridge from Queens into Manhattan everything became more intense: the heat, the noise, the crowds of people. We were now in the belly of a beast that was also home. Inside the beast, you no longer saw the buildings; instead, they saw you. When we would arrive at 853 Seventh Avenue, we were greeted by the doormen—who were practically extended family. The studio was across the street from the Carnegie Deli. My father always took us there for our first meal back home. Very different from Swiss food.

One of my most cherished memories was opening the refrigerator to find it jam-packed—row upon row of orange boxes of Kodachrome film. Not an ounce of food to be found. There was no doubt what my father did for a living.



Magic City

ESSAY BY PHILLIP PRODGER

The spectacular photographs Ernst Haas made in New York over the course of decades began to germinate long before his arrival in the city in 1951 at the age of twenty-nine. Their seeds were planted in the rubble of Vienna after the Second World War, in years spent toiling in a German prison camp, and in the unspeakable prejudice that caused his expulsion from medical school for his Jewish heritage. Their radiant colors were forged in the return of some six hundred prisoners of war at the Vienna Hauptbahnhof in 1947—late releases from territory held by Soviet troops at war’s end. Haas witnessed their homecoming, and the heartrending photographs he took that day—first published in the American propaganda magazine *Heute*, and later, famously, in *Life*—led the famous photographer Robert Capa not only to invite him to join the fledgling Magnum Photos cooperative in New York, but also to serve as its vice president. Haas accepted, and upon arrival found a city that was dynamic, confident, and inspiring—a place utterly unlike postwar Central Europe. In New York, anything seemed possible. The city, full of promise and bursting with energy, offered creative freedom and a fresh start. These were the ideal circumstances to create “a new philosophy of seeing,” as Haas would later call it.¹ The city released him.

For Haas, New York was both a place and a time. He would often profess his love for it, ever mindful of its bleak aspects, even in the 1950s. Initially he took the bad with the good, seeing the city’s failings as the unavoidable rough edges of a bold and diverse metropolis. Many of the photographs in this volume reveal moments where reality and expectation do not quite meet—the cab of a disused truck crowning a junk pile or a rusty old sign, for example (pages 121, 130). Yet all are vividly alive.

At first, Haas struggled to photograph in New York. Its linear architecture and gridded streets confounded him, while its plunging perspectives and fragmented forms seemed strange and unfamiliar. Gradually, he built up a vocabulary in which the city’s distinctive characteristics collide: taxis and torn posters, mirrors and glass. Reflections seduced him. “From the very beginning,” Haas said, “I found New York fabulous, not only for its shops, theater, music, museums, but as a city of glass abounding with reflections. They have continued to haunt me ever since in the windows of stores and offices, glancing off the Lever and Seagram buildings, repeated along mirror-like Sixth Avenue—everywhere. The soul of the city seems to be the accumulated art of its reflections.”²

Haas refrained from overt social criticism in his pictures, instead allowing viewers to contemplate their mystery, to savor them, to roll them on the tongue. Three policemen look menacing as they ride motorcycles down both sides of an open road, their backs toward the viewer (page 82). Are they thugs or are they innocent–Rockwellian emblems of American peace and order? Children play in blacktop playgrounds (page 193). Do we see the joy of childhood or the deprivations of urban poverty? A man rifles through a trash can while well-heeled ladies walk by laden with shopping bags (page 113). Is the man happier than the women, despite his apparent circumstances? Haas’s New York is full of provocations and visual surprises. Through his lens, even a splash of engine oil in a puddle becomes a glimmering, iridescent sun (page 161).

Over time, particularly during the social and economic upheavals of the 1970s, Haas became more mindful of the city’s problems and less inclined to forgive its uglier qualities. Yet Haas’s New York photographs were never meant as “documentary” photographs in the sense that their primary purpose is to record specific circumstances or situations—he generally considered black-and-white photography superior for that purpose. Instead, they reflect experiences and observations, poignant visual poems as he liked to call them, expressing moments of recognition as the artist moved intuitively through the city. “Whenever I am free,” he would later write, “I wander around New York, trying to catch moments of its extreme dynamism.”³

Haas has been described, justly, as a pioneer of color photography. His two-part photo-essay on New York, “Images of a Magic City,” which appeared in the September 14 and September 21, 1953, editions of *Life*, was one of the first prominent uses of color photography in a pictorial magazine, influencing countless readers and setting the tone for what would follow in his career. Included in this book, the pictures published in “Images” remain as fresh and compelling as when they were first conceived. Opening with a view of traffic flowing down FDR Drive toward the Brooklyn Bridge at dawn (page 77), the reader turned the page to see what is arguably Haas’s most conspicuously metaphoric photograph, a row of four coin-operated binoculars set against a railing on the edge of Battery Park, a group of high-rise buildings in the background (page 184). The editors of *Life* described the viewers as “standing guard like primitive

fetishes,” and notwithstanding the cultural relativism implied, indeed they do have an anthropomorphic quality, like Moai sculptures on Easter Island, with lenses for eyes and locks for noses. Or perhaps they are robots—unfeeling in their regard, vaguely comical in their aspect. Significantly, Haas presented the binoculars facing toward the camera, so these somewhat whimsical figures look at the viewer even as the viewer looks at them. While we engage in this dance of mutual regard, Haas casts the entire scene in carefully choreographed colors—the blue of the sky contrasting with the russet and green of early autumn leaves; the reds, yellows, and greens of the buildings creating a pleasing tapestry in the background; the metallic green posts of the binoculars echoing the color of a distant lamppost. While we probe the picture for details, the binoculars stare back at us. Who is looking at whom?

There is little doubt Haas’s innovative use of color materials in *Life* and elsewhere would influence the direction of contemporary art. For a time in the late 1950s and early 1960s, his name was all but synonymous with color fine art photography. His one-man exhibition *Ernst Haas: Color Photography* was famously shown at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, from August 21 to October 28, 1962, some fourteen years before *Photographs by William Eggleston*, which is sometimes erroneously identified as the first color photography exhibition at the museum. The real story is subtler; for all the importance of Haas’s show, it was given a relatively modest space in the corridors outside the museum’s Auditorium Gallery.⁴ Few papers reviewed it, with the notable exception of the *New York Times*, which nevertheless described it in glowing terms. “A milestone in color photography’s development as an artistic medium,” it raved, “it may well be that the show is the first to indicate on a full scale the enormous potentials of the color medium when it is used imaginatively.”⁵ Despite such prescience, few other venues expressed interest in exhibiting the work. Had it not been for the concurrent four-part television series on photography hosted by Haas, called *The Art of Seeing*, the exhibition might have come and gone with a whimper.⁶ *Ernst Haas: Color Photography* appeared again one year later in Baltimore, in Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s newly completed office building, One Charles Center, where it received enthusiastic reviews, before it was dispersed.⁷

Haas was at the forefront of a wave of photographers who experimented with color in the 1950s and 1960s. By the time he came on the scene, color was already routinely used in commercial and advertising photography; it was also beginning to catch hold in the consumer market with the increased availability of affordable film to make color snapshots. At a time when personal color televisions did not yet exist, such pictures carried tremendous visual impact. Visionary photographers such as Paul Outerbridge had begun to make color exhibition prints as early as the 1930s, but by the 1950s the number of aspiring fine art photographers swelled considerably.

As early as 1958, and undoubtedly due in part to Haas's ministrations, Magnum was actively encouraging its photographers to experiment with color materials and even make photojournalistic pictures in color. Haas was held up as an example of how movement, in particular, could be captured in Kodachrome.⁸ In 1961, the year before his MoMA monograph, Haas curated an exhibition of seventy-two photographs by Magnum photographers, including many in color. Beginning in Tokyo, the exhibition traveled to the Library of Congress before proceeding to New York, where it was shown at the Pepsi-Cola Building at 500 Park Avenue, a stone's throw from MoMA's galleries.⁹ In November of the same year, the exhibition *Photography and the Fine Arts* arrived at Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology, formerly home of the so-called New Bauhaus. A prodigious exhibition made up of 176 works, it boasted 49 examples in color, including images by Haas, Margaret Bourke-White, and Dmitri Kessel.¹⁰

The MoMA exhibition in 1962 occurred at the cusp of a change in attitudes toward color photography in the public imagination. Internally at MoMA, it also marked a moment of transition between curator John Szarkowski and his predecessor, Edward Steichen. In the run-up to his retirement, Steichen had become increasingly interested in the possibilities of color, arranging a series of six lectures on color photography by select practitioners, including Haas, in November of 1961.¹¹ Steichen himself presented a landmark lecture on the subject just months before Haas's show opened—the press dryly reported that the lecture included photographs by Haas and “a number of relatively unfamiliar names.”¹² Booking *Ernst Haas: Color Photography* was one of Steichen's last acts as director. He left it for Szarkowski to execute.

The generational shift caused by the change of directors created pronounced differences in the understanding and interpretation of photography. Steichen described Haas rather chirpily as a “free spirit, untrammelled by tradition and theory, who has gone out and found beauty unparalleled in photography.”¹³ Szarkowski, by contrast, was more circumspect:

The color in color photography has often seemed an irrelevant decorative screen between the viewer and the fact of the picture. Ernst Haas resolved this conflict by making the color sensation itself the subject matter of the work.¹⁴

When a museum visitor queried Szarkowski on Haas's choice of subject matter, Szarkowski doubled down. “The color sensation itself is the subject matter,” he insisted.¹⁵ Perhaps as an antidote to Steichen's slide lecture the year before Haas's show, Szarkowski went on to present a one-night “exhibition” of color slides by Helen Levitt, William Garnett, and Roman Vishniac the year after. This time, Haas was not included.

Szarkowski was toying with an idea that was beginning to percolate in photo theory at the time, borrowed from the contemporaneous critic Clement Greenberg's analysis of New York abstract expressionist paintings, that an artistic medium could itself convey meaning. This was a notion that Szarkowski would refine and expertly express in his analysis of William Eggleston's 1976 exhibition, which he also organized. However, in Haas's case the argument is less convincing, as the New York pictures demonstrate. Although their recognizable content varies, they are not *about* color in any direct sense; rather, they explore connections between optical verisimilitude, color, and meaning. Haas put it another way:

Bored with the obvious reality, I find my only fascination in transforming it into a subjective point of view. Without touching my subject, I want to come to the moment when, through the pure concentration of seeing, the composed picture becomes more “made” than taken. Without a descriptive caption to justify its existence, I would rather see it speaking for itself: less descriptive—

more imaginative; less information—more suggestion; less prose—more poetry.¹⁶

To make his pictures, Haas immersed himself in New York. The “reality” they depict is not fixed and mechanical, but fluid and visceral. Color—riotous and disorienting one moment, restrained and soothing the next—was an integral part of this approach. As Haas explained, “Colors are only recognizable intuitively . . . color photography I feel lends itself especially to expressing a visual kind of poetry.”¹⁷

To create the most experiential pictures of the city he could, Haas employed a lightweight, 35mm Leica camera more commonly associated with documentary photojournalism. In Austria he had begun his career using a medium-format Rolleiflex, which he famously acquired on the black market in exchange for twenty pounds of margarine on his twenty-fifth birthday. However, like most of his Magnum colleagues, by the 1950s Haas had embraced roll film and the relatively portable 35mm format when on assignment for magazines or other commercial clients. The use of small-format cameras in professional photography was hardly new; Haas’s hero, the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, had used Leicas since the 1930s. Considering Haas began his career as a photojournalist, the use of such a camera was a natural extension of his usual practice.

The creative use of 35mm color materials for artistic purposes is another of Haas’s lasting legacies. While the Leica was widely accepted as a practical tool for street photography in black and white, its use in color photography was unusual. The best available color film, early Kodachrome, was excruciatingly slow by modern standards and not obviously suited to street photography. Before the release of ISO 25 Kodachrome II in 1961, the fastest available material had an ISO, or speed rating, of 10 (for most of his New York work, Haas used tortoise-like Kodachrome Professional daylight film, with an ASA of 8). At that speed, a camera will fail to register objects in motion unless they are brightly lit. However, Haas embraced the blur he obtained with early Kodachrome, with figures emerging from murky shadow, making what others might have seen as shortcomings an integral part of his work. Later, Haas would develop an extensive series of photographs of blurred motion, which grew out of his experience photographing on New York City streets.

Haas enjoyed the effects he could obtain using Kodachrome, despite the film’s technical limitations. The rich, red-inflected palette of the film resulted in vibrant, commanding colors that when printed in dye transfer—his preferred mode of printing—gave his pictures an intense, almost liquid appearance. Furthermore, due to the unique chemical formulation of Kodachrome, images can develop subtle silver-halide outlines, adding to their aesthetic appeal.

The Leica, too, had advantages when working in an urban environment like New York. Unlike a single lens reflex camera in which the photographer looks through the lens until depressing the shutter (at which time a mirror flips out of the way allowing light to pass directly to film), in rangefinder cameras such as Leicas the operator never sees directly through the lens itself. Instead, the eyepiece is mounted on the body of the camera a few centimeters away from the lens, providing an approximate view of what the lens records. Consequently, when using a rangefinder the photographer cannot see depth of focus, and must rely on experience and skill in setting the camera correctly, using gauges etched on the outside of the lens. Rangefinders were attractive for their mechanical simplicity, light weight, and versatility; also, because their shutter mechanisms are mirrorless, operation is nearly silent. Yet when using this equipment to photograph in New York, Haas did not always know exactly what the camera would record. Instead, he worked from instinct and imagination. Equipped with his rangefinder, he could go virtually anywhere undetected. He could blend in, improvise, test, and explore. He could all but melt into the city.

All of Haas’s decisions, technical and artistic, were designed to create the kaleidoscope of photographs contained in this book. He did not want them to be about color per se, or composition, or cameras—but something deeper. To know Ernst Haas’s New York is to know something of the artist himself, to know what he saw and felt as he passed through his city, the product of another place and time. It does not really matter if you have never been to New York in the flesh. To enjoy the photos best, let Haas guide you. Let him show you the wondrous and the quizzical. Let him remind you of the feel on your skin of a warm summer’s day, the pungent smell of fresh exhaust, the bleat of a car horn, or the distant sound of a public school bell. These are all things we may feel and experience in the city. Surprisingly, Haas reveals, these are all photographic things.

NOTES

1. Press Release, "Ernst Haas: Color Photography," no. 96, August 4, 1962, MoMA Archives.
2. Ernst Haas, *In America* (New York: Viking, 1975), 12.
3. *Ibid.*, 143.
4. Jacob Deschin, "Color in Motion," *New York Times*, September 2, 1962, 75.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Richard Doan, "Listen, Minow, This Is No Wasteland," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 16, 1962, 8A.
7. "Exhibition of Haas Photos," *Baltimore Sun*, May 12, 1963, A14.
8. Vincent Ferrers, "Press Photography Notes," *British Journal of Photography*, 105:5144, December 19, 1958, 696.
9. Irving Desfor, "Photography's Universal Language: Camera Column," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 23, 1961, 15.
10. Erwin Bach, "Exhibit Includes 176 Prints," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1962, W4.
11. "Camera Notes: Lecture Series by Six Top Photographers," *New York Times*, November 5, 1961, X24. Haas's lecture was titled, "Ernst Haas: Evolution of a Photojournalist."
12. "Camera Notes: Abstractions in Color Presented by Steichen," *New York Times*, February 25, 1962, X22.
13. *Baltimore Sun*, A14.
14. Press Release, MoMA Archives.
15. Jacob Deschin, "Color in Motion."
16. Ernst Haas, *Ernst Haas Color Photography*, (New York: Abrams, 1989), 12-13.
17. *Ibid.*, 12.

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Photographs



Third Avenue El, 1952



Untitled, 1962



Untitled, c. 1955



Rush Hour in Motion, 1957