

MAN ON THE STREET

PHOTOGRAPHER LEN SPEIER CAPTURES MORE THAN SEVEN DECADES OF NEW YORKERS

by Naomi Howell / GAL '14

Len Speier (LAW '52) was one of the last young men to be called to serve in World War II. The bombs had already dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the emperor had surrendered by the time he was assigned to Asaka, Japan. Speier was quickly promoted to corporal and worked as a clerk in the division's adjutant general's office there. In his free time, he explored, always with his camera, snapping images of everyday Japanese citizens. In one such photograph, boys play sandlot baseball in a ruined Tokyo street. Though the brutality of war was still fresh, Speier says that he came to develop a "compassion [for the Japanese that] never left me."

That sensibility followed him back to New York, where he finished college, and then NYU Law School. Speier started a private practice as a commercial trial lawyer but couldn't shake his love of being behind the lens. So after shifting his specialty to intellectual property, and continuing to take photos all the while, he began to teach a class at the New School: What Every Photographer Should Know About the Law. As his portfolio grew, he went on to teach photographic legal procedures at the Fashion Institute of Technology, as well as courses on black-and-white photography, the darkroom, and printing. By the 1970s, Speier had vastly reduced his legal practice and was immersed in street photography,

where his goal was always the same: "Confronting the ordinary person, doing their ordinary things, in a, hopefully, magical way."

Speier found plenty of magic on the streets of New York. He was particularly drawn to what he calls "the blending of architecture, design, and social consciousness." For

By riding the bus through Manhattan with his camera, 85-year-old Speier has captured spontaneous and award-winning scenes of city life.

Speier, "architecture" is not about physical structures; rather, it's the emotional environment he sees his subjects occupying. "People are unaware they place themselves in an architecture, a situation," Speier says. "I like to find those, see that, and create for them what they don't even realize they're a part of." His pictures can now be found in the permanent collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Museum of the City of New York, the International Center of Photography, and the photo archive of the New York Public Library. He has also been widely exhibited—after a recent retrospective at NYU's Kimmel Center, Speier is preparing for a solo show of his work at Calumet Photographic this spring. And his commercial work for Random House, *Forbes* magazine, and Eyewitness

News has taken him as far as China, France, and England.

Born in 1927 to a working-class Jewish family in the Bronx, Speier developed an early awareness of social issues, calling out family members who expressed racism, which he considered as insidious as the anti-Semitism he had experienced.

His activist inclinations later led to working with the NAACP's ACT-SO cultural program, where he was photography coach to minority high school students. It also instilled in Speier, who got his first camera at age 13, an urge to "make a comment about the human condition." One of his favorite photos



depicts an elderly, homeless African-American woman sitting against a graffiti-ridden building in lower Manhattan with the words "Fight Racism" most prominent. "Hooded Figure in Snow," a lonely, haunting image he shot from his Upper West Side apartment, shows a dark silhouette of a person walking atop a wintry hill in Central Park. The photo was used on the cover of an Australian novel, *The Book Thief*. Another classic New York photo depicts five elderly women perched on a grungy stoop, surrounded by shopping bags.

In 2003, Speier suffered a stroke, leaving him with balance issues and unable to carry much equipment. One day, he climbed aboard the M5 bus in Manhattan and soaked in the atmosphere. He found the characters inspiring and the opportunity to snap pictures

"amazingly fluid." And so, his "Bus Series" was born. Seated on a side bench, using a small digital camera, he has captured spontaneous and poignant scenes of city life: two sisters in matching outfits, an elegant old woman, a father saddled with three sleeping children. The latter image won first prize in the Salmagundi Club art contest, and the father—to whom Speier sent a copy of the photo—thanked him for "the most beautiful picture of my family I have ever seen."

Speier rarely informs the subject until after he's taken their photos—a method that has helped him capture New Yorkers at their most candid moments for decades. "I try not to disturb the elements I see," he says. "I try to become an agent of design, art, truth, things like that. When it happens, I'm very happy." ■



SPEIER'S DECADES OF NEW YORK CITY PHOTOS INCLUDE (CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT): "5TH AVE PARADE, BELUSHI MASKS" (1986); "DAD PLUS THREE, BUS SERIES" (2011); AND "HOODED FIGURE IN SNOW" (1972).

PHOTOS COURTESY LEN SPEIER

CULTURE

gallery

HIGH ART, YOUNG DUDES

A TEMPORARY SPACE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

by Alyson Krueger / GSAS '12

Walking into TEMP, a new art space in Tribeca that promotes young talent, one can't help but think: This is different.

First, there is the art—all made or curated by up-and-comers under the age of 30—which is sometimes hard to distinguish inside the cavernous two-story, 4,500-square-foot space of exposed brick and iron piping. On a recent visit, a patron helped explain that the video of the sleeping girl on the train was art, but the bicycle in the corner was just someone's ride. And the crowd of early twen-

tysomethings dressed in thick glasses and hoodies is a far cry from the cliché image of "uptown" gallery regulars. Finally, there are TEMP's 24-year-old founders, Ari Lipkis (CAS '11) and Alex Ahn (CAS '11), who are as eccentric as their exhibits. Lipkis, a smiley, bow-tie wearing Manhattan native, and his colleague, Ahn, a petite Los Angeleno, run around hugging visitors warmly and giggling.

If all TEMP did was display the work of young artists, it would stand out. The financial and reputational risks of taking on untried artists are so high that most institutions simply don't do it. But Lipkis and Ahn go even further by

offering unknowns the opportunity to curate exhibitions and produce shows. At its core, TEMP gives the "nameless" artist a forum to strut.

And people are noticing. Art-

lite location when these kids hit 30." And Lipkis and Ahn were giddy last fall because an art critic from *The New York Times* had just been in touch. The Independent Curators International and the

"What is really great about the art world is that it is very much a community," TEMP co-founder Alex Ahn says.

info, an online guide to what's hot in art, has featured TEMP twice. The Huffington Post declared: "Here's betting on a Chelsea satel-

Contemporary Arts Centre, the largest art hub in the Baltic states, have worked with the gallery on exhibitions, and scholars such as

PHOTO COURTESY TEMP ART SPACE

ARI LIPKIS (LEFT) AND ALEX AHN, BOTH 24, QUIT THEIR JOBS TO OPEN A TRIBECA GALLERY FOR UP-AND-COMING ARTISTS.

selves, like many of their friends, too insignificant in the industry to have any impact. So over a drink, the duo decided to stop "bemoaning the difficulty of being young in the art world," and to do something bold.

Fortune struck when a family friend of Ahn loaned them the space to use for a year (hence the name, TEMP). Paying no rent and using personal savings, they quit their jobs and taught themselves the basics of installing artwork and drafting legal contracts. The NYU art scene network then helped them find plenty of options for their first exhibition, "Working On It," which opened last fall and showcased 12 artists chosen "because their art reflected the new culture of today," Ahn says. The show's inventory made it clear that no one style or subject defines the new generation. One wall featured Dean Levin's "So Series," which offered pastel-colored word bubbles with phrases such as So Chill!, So Down!, and So Cool! The opposite wall featured Sandy Kim's expressive photos of, among others, a naked woman with Xs taped across her nipples.

TEMP's next show consisted of mini exhibitions set up by contemporary arts collectives across the world, including Videotage (Hong Kong), Matadero Madrid, and the Raw Material Company (Dakar). Not surprisingly, young artists and curators have rushed in as word has spread about the experiment, so finding new talent isn't an issue. The better question is what happens this August when TEMP is scheduled to shut its doors. Ahn is hopeful that the ride isn't over. "Maybe there will be a TEMP 2," he suggests. "Or maybe the landlord will be generous and let us extend our lease." ■

CREDITS

ALUMNI WIN BIG

At this year's Academy Awards, **ANG LEE** (TSOA '84, HON '01) won Best Director for *Life of Pi*, while *The Spectacular Now*'s **MILES TELLER** (TSOA '09) won the dramatic Special Jury Award for Acting. *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, starring **ROONEY MARA** (GAL '10) as a young Texas outlaw, was also nominated in the U.S. Dramatic Competition. —Renée Alfuso

At this year's Academy Awards, **ANG LEE** (TSOA '84, HON '01) won Best Director for *Life of Pi*, while *Argo*, executive produced by **DAVID KLAWANS** (TSOA '91), took home Best Picture... **TONY KUSHNER**'s (TSOA '84) *Lincoln* earned him a nod for Best Adapted Screenplay, while **LUCY ALIBAR** (TSOA '05) was nominated in the same category for co-writing the bayou fable *Beasts of the Southern Wild*... **PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN** (TSOA '89) also scored a Best Supporting Actor nod for playing the titular cult-leader role in *The Master*... Meanwhile at the Primetime Emmy Awards, *Modern Family* was named Outstanding Comedy Series for the third straight year, with gold statuettes going to writer-producers **PAUL CORRIGAN** (TSOA '94), **BRAD WALSH** (TSOA '94), and **BILL WRUBEL** (TSOA '94). Outstanding Miniseries or Movie went to the HBO political drama *Game Change*, produced by **AMY SAYRES** (TSOA '76) and written by Tisch adjunct professor **DANNY STRONG**... The dramatic Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival went to true-

life tragedy *Fruitvale*, starring **MELONIE DIAZ** (TSOA '08), while *The Spectacular Now*'s **MILES TELLER** (TSOA '09) won the dramatic Special Jury Award for Acting. *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, starring **ROONEY MARA** (GAL '10) as a young Texas outlaw, was also nominated in the U.S. Dramatic Competition. —Renée Alfuso



ANG LEE

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