

# N

## A T H A N L E R N E R

### PHOTOGRAPHS 1932 1944

Today, being a student means serving time in preparation for the professional world. It is a goal-oriented process through which we graduate into the "real" world. Chicago photographer Nathan Lerner, however, spent his school years learning to be a student. Rather than mastering a trade or art form, he mastered the art of open-minded exploration which leads to creative achievement. As his teacher, László Moholy-Nagy, wrote: "Through technique man can be freed, if he finally realizes the purpose: a balanced life through free use of his liberated creative energies."<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, all of the work in this exhibition is student work. It documents the early portion of Lerner's pursuit to use photography as a medium to explore humanist concerns. Lerner's work illustrates how the belief in process, not final form, can generate creative thinking and insight. As he says, "It's not what you see, but what you feel about what you see that counts."<sup>2</sup>

This exhibition spans twelve years, when the artist was between nineteen and thirty-one years old. Because Lerner had taken these photographs as part of a learning process, (not originally thinking of them as individual works of art), the work was not exhibited until the 1970s, more than thirty years after most of it had been taken. Even more surprising, most of the work had never been printed before the 1970s.

Lerner was first encouraged to print this work in 1972, when the art historian Lloyd Engelbrecht was preparing an exhibition of New Bauhaus work at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. Engelbrecht was surprised that none of Lerner's work had previously been exhibited, and encouraged him to print the New Bauhaus as well as the Maxwell Street images.

The exhibition was well received and a number of other invitations to show Lerner's work followed. Since then, his photographs have entered numerous private and museum collections, and his work has been exhibited widely throughout the country.

It is not surprising that Lerner's photography was rediscovered by the art world. The work has both historical importance and contemporary relevance. It marks an important era in the development of photography — a time when artists believed that their work not only could effect social change, but was of little value if it didn't. The ideas represented in Lerner's photographs reflect an optimistic commitment toward contributing to and participating in the social order of the 1930s. As he has written: "Showing society what it looks like is not a gift the artist bestows on society. It is an obligation he fulfills."<sup>3</sup>

Documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott were using photography as just such a tool for education and social awareness. Others, such as László Moholy-Nagy, were utilizing photography as a means of conceptual enlightenment: "...to infuse meaning into the new experiences of a modern industrial world so as to enable us to redirect the industrial world toward a balance between a biologically sound human existence and the present industrial society."<sup>4</sup>

It was also a time when notions of the American Dream had abruptly fallen under the harsh realities of the Great Depression. In his presidential acceptance speech of 1929, Herbert Hoover asserted that "We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history



of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us." By 1933, the shocking inaccuracy of that statement could be witnessed in destitute towns throughout the country. Yet, while despair was evident in bread lines and soup kitchens, many Americans still clung to the optimism provided by the mass media, from *Readers Digest* and *Saturday Evening Post* magazine to Busby Berkeley films or billboards extolling big business propaganda. It was a time of identity crisis for the country, and artists such as Lerner used the medium of photography to explore and understand the turmoil.

## EARLY WORK

Nathan Lerner was born in Chicago in 1913 to Ukrainian parents. He grew up in the Maxwell Street area, a poor immigrant neighborhood where many Jewish settlers had established synagogues, Hebrew schools, Yiddish theaters and Kosher markets. Maxwell Street was a huge street market, an open-air bazaar, where every conceivable commodity could be purchased from pushcarts, open stalls or sidewalk displays. Street musicians, the call of vendors, and the throngs of people bargain hunting created a vibrant urban center. The Maxwell Street market had survived until this year, when its neighbor, the University of Illinois-Chicago, wanted the land for athletic fields and a parking lot.

Lerner was fond of the market, and says he would frequently be sent there as a child to fetch horseradish or other necessities. By the time he was nine years old, Lerner knew he wanted to be an artist and started taking weekend classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. Because of the Depression, Lerner quit high school to support himself and free his parents financially. He worked in a department store wrapping packages while also taking night classes on a scholarship at the School of the Art Institute. Lerner says that one night the person who picked up the packages he wrapped saw him writing a poem, which led to an instant friendship. That person

was Edmund Teske, who would later become a well known surrealist photographer on the west coast. The two of them began riding on street cars and taking photographs. Lerner said he was using a folding Kodak at the time. He would later purchase a Pierette, a small pop-up camera, for twelve dollars at a State Street pawn shop, which he used for most of the other images.

At age eighteen, Lerner began studying painting privately with Samuel Ostrofsky, a Post-Impressionist painter. He studied with Ostrofsky for three years, all the while continuing his own photography excursions. Maxwell Street became the focus for these wanderings and provided ample material. Lerner says he took these images (from about 1934 to 1937) because he wanted to sharpen his compositional skills, not because he was interested in photography. Often, without film in the camera, he would merely study images in the viewfinder. When he did shoot film, he developed it but didn't make prints. Lerner says that through this process he developed an "absolutely automatic sense of good composition. I can immediately sense when I look through a viewfinder now whether or not something is lacking or something is too heavy. It has not only an organization but some kind of relationship to what I think is important—the meaning—something that isn't part of the picture but it's there anyway, something behind the picture. The structure has to relate to the meaning."<sup>5</sup>

The Maxwell Street body of work, besides reflecting Lerner's interest in composition, tonality and organization, also shows an empathy to the social conditions of the time. The Images' similarities to the work of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and other documentary photographers of the period is uncanny. For example, it was the same year, 1937, that Lerner took his "Quality Folks" picture and Margaret Bourke-White published a similar image in *Life* magazine. Lerner's image shows a line of unemployed men seated beneath a Pabst beer billboard that pictures a black bellboy, knocking



on a hotel door, with the caption: "These Sho am Quality Folks." Bourke-White's photograph shows a line of poor black people waiting for relief food in front of a National Association of Manufacturer's billboard of a prosperous, white family riding in their new car. The billboard slogans read "World's Highest Standard of Living" and "There's no way like the American way."

Working in different parts of the country, Lerner, Bourke-White and the Farm Security Administration photographers were drawn to the blatant visual ironies presented by the Depression, each in their own way looking for images that encapsulated the cataclysmic repercussions of this social upheaval. Yet Lerner says he had no knowledge of these photographers' work. "I had no interest in photography then," he said. "I was a painter." In accounting for this shared vision, Lerner says that there was "something in the air, a strong feeling by many people about the injustice that workers were going through. People were suffering, and I think that other photographers' pictures and my pictures of Maxwell Street show that kind of feeling toward people."

The Maxwell Street photographs indeed reflect Lerner's compassion. He saw in the many faces of the children he photographed a certain gritty, street-level fusing of toughness and innocence, the weight of poverty against inextinguishable optimism. The exhaustion of the unemployed—men sleeping on the streets, crumpled into postures of the irrefutable—became expressions of a broader moral condition. Lerner never became immune to feeling the toll that the Great Depression took on individuals. He has written that the 1930s was a time when "there still existed the feeling that each person had a responsibility for others... What I felt was the enervating sense of hopelessness, of men standing around, aimlessly waiting, often sleeping to forget..."<sup>6</sup>

Compared to Dorothea Lange's work, Lerner's Maxwell Street images are more difficult to enter visually. While Lange's pictures often have an immediate impact, directly engaging the viewer in their narrative, Lerner's compositions,

such as *Man Feeding Pigeons*, *Milk Depot*, or *Marbles*, contain a more curious mutability. Many of his images don't narrate in a traditional documentary sense, but instead imply more non-specific sets of conditions. In some ways, the Maxwell Street work foreshadows Lerner's later New Bauhaus studies. His aggressive formal structuring, his interest in light patterns, the oblique angle and odd croppings all presciently reflect the ideology of the school he would soon enter.

During this time, when Lerner was twenty-three years old and taking the Maxwell Street photographs, he came to the painful conclusion that his studies with his painting teacher Ostrofsky, who had become like a father to him, were too limited. The Renoir- and Bonnard-influenced still lifes were ensconced in a tradition that Lerner sensed was too bounded in "rendering." When he explained to his teacher that he had become more interested in Picasso and Matisse, Ostrofsky's response was: "Nathan, they're just poster painters." Lerner reluctantly ended his tenure with Ostrofsky.

Not knowing exactly what to do, Lerner then spent several months photographing the condition of miners in southern Illinois, in collaboration with a writer friend who hoped to publish the work as a book. Back in Chicago, and without a course of study, Lerner picked up a newspaper one day and saw that the Russian-born Cubist artist Alexander Archipenko was opening a studio in the city. Lerner had some familiarity with Archipenko, having earlier bought a thin volume of his work while randomly perusing bookstore shelves. Lerner decided to visit him at his studio. "I brought some paintings with me and an idea I had for a stage set. He looked at the work and said, 'of course you can study with me, but you know I'll be teaching at this new school called the New Bauhaus.'"

Lerner then set up an appointment to see László Moholy-Nagy at the new school. Moholy-Nagy looked at his work and said, "You know, you're a very good Renoir painter," and gave Lerner a scholarship.



## NEW BAUHAUS

The turning point for Lerner was during this first meeting with Moholy-Nagy. Lerner recalled being seated across from this strange-sounding Hungarian man who looked like a bank president in his pinstriped suit, and glancing in awe around the office. "His walls were covered with paintings constructed of clear plastic sheets slightly raised above white panels. The sheets were scratched and painted to cast shadows... Overhead, suspended from the ceiling, thick twisted plastic shapes floated, catching and reflecting light as they moved. I became aware for the first time that light itself, like clay or paint, could be a medium."<sup>7</sup>

Lerner, at age twenty-four, could not have stumbled upon a more significant mentor. Moholy-Nagy had been teaching at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany, a school of art and design headed by Walter Gropius. In 1937, he moved to Chicago where he had been invited by the Association of Arts and Industries to organize and direct a new design school. Lerner was in the school's first class of students.

It was Moholy-Nagy's credo that the world could be made more beautiful through design. Moholy-Nagy himself was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, industrial designer, typographic designer, filmmaker and photographer. His teaching approach was interdisciplinary, at a time when the concept was completely novel. Even today, while the term interdisciplinary is a much-discussed concept, it is rarely so profoundly applied. Progressive programs still struggle to fully incorporate the idea that all disciplines prosper from an overlapping base of reference.

Moholy-Nagy's concepts of education in the late 1930s were radically insightful, ahead of their time then and now. He did not believe in a hierarchy of art forms. Design, painting, photography and typography had equal significance and were interrelated. To even include photography as an integral part of a broader curriculum was an

innovation. Photography, before the 1960s, was primarily learned through apprenticeships with other photographers or independently.

Regarding photography, Moholy-Nagy believed that "the salvation of photography comes from the experiment. The experimenter has no preconceived idea about photography...He does not think that the photographic mistakes should be avoided since they are usually 'mistakes' only from the routine angle of the historic development."<sup>8</sup> Moholy-Nagy felt that "creation springs from inner necessity" and that it should not be "burdened with accretions from the past..."<sup>9</sup>

Lerner said he was "thunderstruck" by these ideas, which couldn't have been further removed from the formal training he had received as a painter. Each of the introductory courses Lerner took was intended to heighten awareness and sensitivity to various media. The required two semesters of New Bauhaus foundation courses were thought of as "sensory training." The objective, according to Moholy-Nagy, was to "...keep in the work of the grown-up the sincerity of emotion, the truth of observation, the fantasy and the creativeness of the child."<sup>10</sup>

Lerner said one of his first assignments was to take a block of wood and make something that "feels good." "We called it blindman's structure. You closed your eyes and felt the form. It was a very artful way to make yourself familiar with tools. The exercises were all somehow in that nature...The basic objective was to learn to see with your own eyes and feel. Through this process you became a person, you'd become somebody who knew their own mind. What could be more important than that?"

Less than two weeks after entering the school, Lerner developed a light box, which allowed him to experiment with and control light. The box was approximately 16" x 24" x 16" deep. It had holes in the top and sides through which he could hang various objects and then introduce light. "It was a world of darkness and light over which I had complete con-



trol," he said. "I wanted to experience light in the same way you'd experience a brush and pigment and learn how to apply it." It is important to note that Lerner did not arrange the objects in the light box with the objective of creating an image. He used the light box as a small stage to set and continually rearrange the play of light. "I put the paper down. I put the light on, then I saw the light through the string, through the paper. I remembered that it was like what I used to feel when I walked down the street and saw the tree leaves against the street lamp and saw the shadow." The fact that he documented this work with photographs was a fortunate coincidence.

Images such as *Eye and String*, *Light Box Study: Eggs and String*, and *Paper on String*, reveal Lerner's graceful tonal proddings, as rivulets of light travel the strings, fall into darkness and create a general rhythm of patterns. Lerner wrote that: "Usually light was not considered as plastic means, only as an auxiliary medium to indicate material existence. Now a new period starts where light will be used as a genuine means of expression because of its own qualities, own characteristics."<sup>11</sup> Lerner was credited as the first photographer to develop the light box, which is still used in art schools today as a teaching tool.

Lerner continued such studies with his penlight "paintings," where he'd stand in front of the camera and draw with a penlight during a time exposure. He would then burn cotton wadding so the smoke would soften the hard-edge of his light beam.

Other work from this period, such as *Eye and Barbed Wire*, *Brown's Face*, *Eye on Nails* and *Charlie's Eye* reintroduce human subject matter, but now possess a sense of distortion as Lerner combines jarringly dissimilar objects. Moholy-Nagy termed this work "montage without scissors," and again credited Lerner with this innovation. While undoubtedly influenced by Moholy-Nagy's photograms and collages that echoed a Dada sensibility of tapping into unconscious associations and

a constructivist obliteration of pictorial space, Lerner says that ultimately he was exploring the mechanical possibilities of the camera. Noting the differences between the way a human eye and a camera focus, Lerner says he attempted to make the camera subjective, like the human eye. In *Brown's Face* for example, he put a piece of lucite over the lens and held it over the man's mouth to exaggerate it, mimicking the way the eye is first drawn to one area.

The eye motif also began reappearing in Lerner's work at this time, serving as a self-referential symbol, reflecting his own vision and search. The process of seeing became the content of the work. For Lerner, it was the "seeing" not the rendering that opened and defined worlds. He combined the eye with barbed wire and nails the week Hitler invaded Poland as anti-war statements.

The New Bauhaus only lasted one year due to funding problems. A year later, however, in 1939 Moholy-Nagy opened its reincarnation, The School of Design. Lerner returned to the school as both a twenty-six-year-old student and faculty member, assisting György Kepes, who was head of the Light Workshop. After Kepes left the school in 1941, Lerner was named head of the photography department. That appointment was short-lived, with Lerner having to leave the school to avoid the draft. Lerner took a job in a tool and dye company and then in 1943 was called to New York City to work as a designer of Navy training aids.

When the bells of D-Day rang outside his office, however, Lerner immediately returned to Chicago where he was then appointed head of Product Design and acting dean of the school. Moholy-Nagy died of leukemia in 1946 at age fifty-one. Lerner left the school in 1949 when its direction had veered too far from its original philosophical base. It had merged with the Illinois Institute of Technology and had become "a service to industry, not a service to humanity as Moholy-Nagy would have had it."<sup>12</sup>



Lerner then became independently employed as a product designer. For twenty years, he designed toys, bottles (his Tender Touch bottle for Helene Curtis is still in use today), furniture, and the widely-known honey bear container. Lerner says that the philosophy of design he learned at the New Bauhaus influenced all of his work. "It's very different today," he says, "because we think of the marketplace as providing mostly useless things for people. We forget that the people at the marketplace are expressions of human desires, and that it is useful things that really make life better."

For Lerner, the merging of art and life was never a question. He continues to look for new solutions with the open-minded inquisitiveness of the student. At age eighty-one, Lerner still practices photography, in the last few years exploring color. He still marvels at the inextricable entwining of light and life and feels that all of the work he has done, in various media, is essentially in tribute to his teacher, Moholy-Nagy.

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