

Contact: Barbara Livenstein, 212-534-1672, ext. 3337
blivenstein@mcny.org
jpegs upon request

NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY SYSTEM EXPLORED THROUGH EXHIBITIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS IN SALUTE TO CENTENNIAL

Press preview: Wednesday, October 13
10 a.m.—noon

Exhibition dates: *Subway: Photographs by Bruce Davidson*
October 13, 2004—January 17, 2005

Subway Memories: Photographs by Camilo José Vergara
October 13, 2004—January 17, 2005

Rebuilding the 1 & 9: Photographs by Sam Hollenshead
October 13, 2004—January 17, 2005

“I am a citizen of the New York City subway.”

--Camilo José Vergara

One of the most significant structures in world urban history will be the subject of three photographic exhibitions on view October 13, 2004, through January 17, 2005, at the Museum of the City of New York, 1220 Fifth Avenue at 104th Street. Works by Bruce Davidson, Camilo José Vergara, and Sam Hollenshead will comprise an exploration of the New York City subway during the past thirty years and honor the centennial of the system that contributed to New York City’s rise to become the quintessential 20th-century metropolis.

“The subway system is an icon of New York City, an instantly-recognized phenomenon, and an essential aspect of the urban experience,” commented Susan Henshaw Jones, President and Director, Museum of the City of New York. “Begun one century ago, the subway enabled the city to grow. It is truly one of our crowning achievements.”

The New York City subway system transports more than 4 million passengers on an average weekday, covering and maintaining some 2000 miles of tracks. The system is considered among the most important factors in shaping the economic, political, and social history of what is arguably the world's most emblematic 20th-century city.

A public referendum held in 1894 authorized construction of the subway; ground was broken in 1900 and the first section of the IRT subway began operations on October 27, 1904. By 1930, the system had become the lifeblood of New York City, transporting more than two billion passengers each year. As a result—in part—of postwar suburbanization throughout the 1950s, and exacerbated by the loss of jobs in New York City, the subway began to show signs of neglect which reached a peak during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. By 1977, annual ridership had decreased by one billion passengers and the system was notorious for graffiti and crime. The subway bounced back during the 1980s under the leadership of MTA chairman Richard Ravitch and Transit Authority president David L. Gunn. Since then, some \$39 billion has been spent on improvements.

The exhibitions on view at the Museum of the City of New York approach the subway from various points of view.

Subway, an exhibition of some 60 color photographs taken by Bruce Davidson, was first shown at the International Center of Photography in 1982. These images—many of them close-ups of people in the subway, taken from 1980 to 1981—document the stark reality of the subway system during its low point in the 20th century, and reveal signs of economic downturn and the wear of a half-century of uninterrupted usage. In his unflinching portrayal of the wide variety of riders using the subway even during this bleak time, Davidson's photographs can be read as an expressive portrait of all New Yorkers and of particular qualities associated with New Yorkers: resilience, perseverance, individuality.

Davidson's images also mark the period in photographic history when color became a more legitimate medium and was gaining acceptance as a part of the vocabulary of documentary photographers.

Davidson has said, "People in the subway, their flesh juxtaposed against the metallic surfaces, and even the hollow darkness itself, moved me to uncover a beauty that goes unnoticed by passengers..."

Chilean-born documentary photographer Camilo José Vergara, winner of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, has photographed the subway system since he first arrived in New York City in 1970. The 75 color images in *Subway Memories*, culled from the photographer's immense archive of images taken over the course of 34 years, document the changes that have occurred throughout the subway system and the city. Invaluable historical records as well as personal statements about his adopted hometown, Vergara's photographs document the passage of time in the ever-evolving city while offering a survey of stations, trains—graffiti-covered cars giving way to sleek, silver ones, riders, and the occasional view of the metropolis from the system's elevated stretches. The images invite the viewer to accompany the photographer—at first a newcomer and subsequently an inveterate New Yorker—as the subway became his conduit of discovery. They also dramatize the ubiquity of the subway in the life of the city, and its vital role in keeping all of the five boroughs, and all of the neighborhoods within—even those at the outermost reaches of the system—alive and flourishing.

Vergara has said, "There is something raw and unforgettable about the experience of burrowing underground in a city's whose signature building type thrusts upward into the sky. I am moved by riding in a car full of strangers and hearing peddlers and beggars do their pitch as they pass through the cars. I enjoy looking at the tunnels, and after the train goes above ground, glimpsing into people's apartments. Some stations resemble small town plazas with dressed-up children, women going to church, and cotton candy salesmen. Other stations are chaotic when school lets out. I am a citizen of the New York City subway."

Rebuilding the 1 & 9: Photographs by Sam Hollenshead chronicles the efforts of union workers including timberman, ironworkers, carpenters, and electricians as they rebuilt the tracks and tunnels of the 1/9 subway line destroyed in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. The exhibition will reveal the dedication of those involved in the painstaking process of rebuilding. The first reconstruction to take place at Ground Zero, it occurred precisely one century after the original building of the IRT, the anniversary of which is being celebrated this year. Inspired by Lewis Hine's images celebrating the skill and courage of the workers who built the Empire State Building, Hollenshead's images of an ethnically diverse community of workers recall the contributions of thousands of workers who have helped to build and renew the infrastructures of the city throughout its history. Some 45 black-and-white photographs will be on view.

Thomas Mellins, the curator of ***Subway Memories*** and Bob Shamis, the curator of ***Subway*** are both on staff at the Museum of the City of New York. Mr. Mellins had also curated an exhibition of photographs of the World Trade Center by Mr. Vergara, the body of work for which the photographer received a MacArthur Foundation award. Mr. Shamis most recently curated the Museum's presentation of ***Magnum's New Yorkers***. Mr. Shamis is also the curator of ***Rebuilding the 1 & 9***. Tanya Pramongkit, the Museum's head of graphic design, is designing the exhibitions.

The Museum of the City of New York maintains a collection of historic photographs and other images of the New York City subway system. A few examples can be found on the Museum's website at www.mcny.org. A more comprehensive selection of photographs can be researched, borrowed, and licensed by contacting the Museum's Department of Collections Access.

A variety of public programs is planned in conjunction with the exhibitions.

The Museum of the City of New York is a private not-for-profit institution that explores the past, present, and future of the city, and celebrates its diversity. The Museum's collections, changing special exhibitions, and educational programs are designed to foster understanding of New York City's evolution from a tiny settlement to one of the world's largest, most important, and most diverse cities.

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Visitor Information

Editors please note: the Museum will soon be open to the public on Tuesdays. Please contact the Museum for more information.

Hours: Wednesday through Sunday, 10:00 a.m. – 5 p.m.

The Museum is open on all Monday holidays including Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, President's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, and Columbus Day.

The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

The Museum Shop is open Monday noon to 5:00 p.m.;
Tuesday through Sunday, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

For more information, please call 212-534-1672.

For guided and self-guided tours, please call 212-534-1672.

Location: Fifth Avenue between 103rd and 104th Streets
By bus: M1, M3, M4, M106, or M102
By subway: #2, #3, or #6 trains

The Museum of the City of New York is accessible and welcomes visitors with special needs. For more information, please call 212-534-1672.

www.mcny.org