

# The New York Times

## Six Hundred Signs, Doors, and Stoplights

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Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art

"New York City, 1963," by Lee Friedlander

AS a photographer, Lee Friedlander is revered, especially among critics and curators, for his crisp and canny pictures of everyday life. But his photos can also be easy to dismiss: his subjects are so common, so ordinary, that it can be hard to understand what the fuss is about.

At least, it will be until next week, when his 600-image-strong exhibition opens at the Museum of Modern Art - the largest single show the museum has ever mounted of an individual photographer. The museum's point will be unmistakable: as Peter Galassi, its chief curator of photography and the organizer of the show, claims, Mr. Friedlander is one of the great artists of the 20th century in any medium, positioning him not just within the confines of photography, but in the art world at large.

Mr. Friedlander is a prolific photographer with nearly 60,000 images in his archive as well as more than two dozen published books and portfolios of his photographs. MoMA purchased 1,000 images by Mr. Friedlander five years ago, their largest acquisition of work by a living photographer, adding to the 200 pictures by him already in their collection.

During a recent conversation in the museum's offices, Mr. Galassi was asked what he would say to those who scratch their heads at the significance of Mr. Friedlander's photographs. He argued that the very familiarity of the work - the storefronts, the nondescript intersections - is what gives it broad appeal. "The things that are in these pictures are not things that are made by or for or experienced by a tiny group of people," he said. "They're made by and for and experienced by essentially the whole nation. Why is this stuff relevant? Because it's so ubiquitous, it's so much a part of who we are."

The ordinary subject matter may be the reason for such varied opinions about Mr. Friedlander's work, but his photographs are by no means ordinary. To look at any one of them is to engage a riddle; even though the cars and buildings in a typical Friedlander street scene are familiar, the seemingly random elements come together in his picture frame as a magical reordering of the commonplace.

In one picture, "New York, 1963," a man and a woman appear to walk toward each other, layers of glass and spaces between them delineating not only a gender divide but a class divide as well. You're not sure who's entering and who's exiting, what's inside and what's outside; among the reflections in the glass is the photographer's own shadow, echoing the woman's silhouette. The longer you look at it, the deeper the conundrum, made all the more poignant by the lock at the center of the frame, as if waiting for a key to unlock the answer.



Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art

"New Mexico, 2001," by Lee Friedlander

In 1967, Mr. Friedlander was one of three photographers - the others were Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand - included in "New Documents," a landmark show at the Modern. In the wall text, John Szarkowski wrote: "A new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim is not to reform life, but to know it." Mr. Friedlander, now 70, outlived both Arbus, who died in 1971, and Winogrand, who died in 1984, continuing to photograph the same subject matter over and over again throughout his career with a curiosity that is less about documenting people, places and things than it is about picturing his experience of them.

Look at his picture, "Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1972." A dog sits perfectly still at a street corner; the fire hydrant, streetlights and telephone polls form a geometric jigsaw puzzle around it. Remove a single element and the entire composition falls apart. Mr. Friedlander finds natural patterns in the world in front of all of us, connecting dots we don't normally see until his pictures point them out to us. It's in his observations of the mundane that intelligence itself - perception, logic and insight - is rendered in visual terms.

In an interview with a fellow photographer, William Gedney, in 1987, Mr. Friedlander said that while "somebody else could walk two feet away to get those poles and trees and stuff out of the way, I almost walk two feet to get into it, because it is part of the game that I play, it isn't even conscious."

If the timing of the Friedlander show seems to correspond with the current Diane Arbus retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum (which closes tomorrow), it's merely a tidy historical coincidence. Mr. Galassi said that this retrospective had been approximately eight years in the making, during which time he spent one day every month or so at Mr. Friedlander's house in New City, N.Y. - initially at the photographer's invitation to select work for the museum, but also with the idea of mounting this show.

Mr. Friedlander had a surprisingly laissez-faire attitude toward the curator from MoMA who was mining his entire body of work. While Mr. Galassi pored over photos, "I was printing, editing, doing something else," Mr. Friedlander said in a recent telephone interview. "I was not involved in the selection. Only with the last 50 pictures or so, which were new. Peter hadn't seen them before." As for the bulk of the show, he said, "I wanted to be surprised."

Mr. Galassi agreed: "With a longer past behind him, older, deeply interested in his current experiments, Lee was ready to have someone else take on the job. I was the serendipitous beneficiary of this."

During MoMA's three-year residence in Queens, Mr. Galassi used several walls in the photography department's office to assemble grids of more than 1,000 note-sized copies of Friedlander photographs. He spent hours at a time rearranging images within groups in Rubik's cube fashion.

Curatorially, it made sense to begin with Mr. Friedlander's portraits of jazz musicians - from Count Basie to Ruth Brown to Miles Davis - which are placed together on a wall as you enter the exhibition. As a teenager in Washington State in the 1940's, Mr. Friedlander's interests in jazz and photography developed simultaneously. He started photographing his jazz heroes in Los Angeles in the early 1950's, and continued when he moved to New York several years later.

The association of jazz to the look of his photographs is not something Mr. Friedlander is willing to concede, but the appearance of improvisation in his pictures can't help but remind a viewer of the musical riffs of bebop or scat. Take his picture, "New Mexico, 2001." The telephone pole and the commercial and stop signs form a staccato arrangement of lines, shadow, and shapes, an improvisational visual riff on a generic, all-American street corner.

The rest of the show was harder to organize. Some of Mr. Friedlander's work is arranged by the subjects of his books - self-portraits, American monuments, nudes. What complicated the placement of pictures in the show, however, was the span of time over which Mr. Friedlander has returned to several distinct artistic preoccupations long after he published books on those subjects. For example, his book, "Self Portrait" was published in 1970, but he hasn't stopped photographing himself, his reflection in windows, or his presence in shadow. Toward the beginning of the exhibition, there is a grouping of 21 self-portraits, with others following throughout the show in loose chronological order.

At one point, when Mr. Galassi's sequencing for the show was still a work in progress, he invited Mr. Friedlander out to Queens to look at the grid walls. "Looks like an interesting photographer," was what Mr. Friedlander said when he saw it, recounted Mr. Galassi, who added that the photographer "regards the past as the past and doesn't want to be bogged down in it."

The exhibition may simply be too enormous to absorb in a single visit. But Mr. Galassi defends the size, explaining that Mr. Friedlander's constant revisiting of subjects and techniques has been there from the beginning. Part of what's fascinating, he said, is that Mr. Friedlander has been "able to keep making the same picture without it being the same picture." He added that, because the pictures will be in decisively organized groupings - for example, "Factory Valleys", "Nudes," "The Desert Seen" - "you could think of the show as having 70 or 80 works of art in it."

The last photographer to receive a show of this magnitude at the Museum of Modern Art was Eugène Atget, in the 1980's, and the work was divided into four individual exhibitions several years apart. So why didn't Mr. Galassi consider the same treatment for Mr. Friedlander? "The point of a retrospective is to try to see the thing whole," he said, adding, "You know, if you're measuring in square inches, then this show is a lot smaller than the Pollock show."

**Correction:** June 12, 2005, Sunday:

*An article, headline and picture caption on May 29 about the current exhibition of Lee Friedlander's work at the Museum of Modern Art misstated the number of images in the show. It is nearly 500, not 600.*