

# NY Perspectives

Amsterdam discovered by NY photographers

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Hortusplantsoen, 2008 © Richard Rothman



Untitled (ADM 1b), 2009 © Joshua Lutz

# *NY Perspectives*

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## *Amsterdam Drift*

Text: Rachel Esner

Cover: Yellow Van, from the series *Night*, 2008 © Carl Wooley/Collection Stadsarchief Amsterdam

↳ In general it seems that convention and commercialism dictate our image of the city, especially cities we do not know. A tourist arriving from abroad will automatically gravitate to those places and spaces he or she knows from postcards and film, and will re-photograph them from the same perspective, with or without the addition of their travelling companion. A stereotyped image is thus produced, appropriated, and reproduced more or less ad infinitum. The tourist gaze, as John Urry and others have pointed out, is the gaze that consumes; the experience of the tourist is one that is mediated and dictated by capitalism, and is therefore in end effect nothing but a simulacrum of experience.

A city's denizens, on the other hand, experience their environment very differently. Their atlas is not the Blue Guide or Baedeker and their points of reference are not the city's monuments and attractions. Theirs is an *atlas of emotion*, tender spots within the urban fabric that relate to daily life, to friends and family, to work and play. They move through the city along very personal paths, determined by habit and thus negotiated with consummate ease. The inhabitant of a city is not an all-consuming eye; instead his or her experience of the city is a fully embodied one; the inhabitant of a city is not a *voyeur*, but a true *voyageur* – despite the fact of having remained at home. Yet habit also dulls the senses, and at times the true city may become as invisible to its residents as it is to its visitors.

Throughout the history of photography, though, there have also been photographers who have sought to undermine the clichéd image of particular cities – usually their own. The *terrain vague* was of course a favourite haunt

of the Surrealists, the formless peripheral space, neither city nor country, so perfectly captured in Man Ray's photograph of the same name (1929). And we need only think of Eugène Atget's ragpickers' encampments, Eli Lothar's abattoirs, Jacques-André Boiffard's flea markets, or Brassai's dimly lit alleyways to conjure up a Paris that is not the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. Such photographers draw our attention not only away from the monumental and towards the everyday, the things usually overlooked, but simultaneously endow these with a sense of mystery that is often absent in our daily encounters with our surroundings. But can an outsider achieve such images? To conceive of the city in such a way requires the kind of intimate knowledge only a resident can have. Or does it?

The four New York photographers commissioned for *NY Perspectives*, an exhibition coinciding with and celebrating the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's discovery of the island of Manhattan, were strangers to Amsterdam on arrival. Yet the photographs they produced during their three brief weeks in the city are nothing short of remarkable in the penetrating and unconventional portrait they create of the Dutch capital and its immediate environs.

Each of the four photographers was given a particular theme to explore: the street, the night, the water, and the outskirts. Rather than taking an encyclopaedic or typological approach, they appear instead to have employed a practice closely related to that of the Situationist *dérive* or 'drift', an aimless wandering through the built environment that represents a total rejection of the ordering of the urban landscape to facilitate either the flow of goods and people or the omnivorous tourist

gaze. The results are four series of images which are by turns banal and uncanny, commonplace and fantastical, ordinary and poetic, and which map the city in new and unexpected ways.

Without a doubt Amsterdam's most central and striking feature are its canals. Water is the silver thread that holds the urban fabric together. It is, in fact, what made Amsterdam a city: without water there would have been no commerce or trade, and without the ability to control the water Amsterdam would have remained the tiny fishing village it was before the damming of the Amstel in the thirteenth century. Yet, as the photographs of **Richard Rothman** demonstrate, Amsterdam's waterways are more than a tourist attraction and an element in town planning. They are not only a place where people live and work, but also a place where nature remains a compelling, if often unseen or ignored, presence. In his distinctive black and white photographs, Rothman forces the city to conform to the conventions of landscape photography, focusing our attention on the natural that continues to survive and thrive even in the most built-up environment. In this way, he reveals the mutual dependency of the manmade and the organic, how nature and culture are intimately intertwined, even where it seems this could not possibly be the case.

In comparison to its canals, Amsterdam's streets are not in themselves anything special. Particularly in the centre of town they look like those in most cities of the world, filled with chain stores and shopping pedestrians who interact with their environment only in the guise of consumers. **Gus Powell's** pedestrians (*voetgangers*), however, are different. Although alienated from one another – particularly in his images of the city's peripheral and more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods we are confronted with a community of strangers – his ingenious use of windows and reflections embeds them firmly in their environment. These citizens actively produce and are produced by their surroundings, rather than passively enjoying them like the traditional *flâneur*. At the same time, the reflections muddle the usual orderliness of the street, confusing inside and outside, and dissolving the city into its reflection, making it opaque, dream-like and impenetrable, and therefore something to be experienced, navigated, rather than merely consumed.

Without the centre, no margins; without the margins, no centre: the city and its suburbs are indissolubly linked, each providing the other with definition. But the boundary between the two is never – can never be – entirely clear:

somewhere there will always be a messy transition, and it is precisely such spaces that **Joshua Lutz** seeks out. Fascinated by the classic *terrain vague*, his images of Amsterdam are a blunt refusal of the compact neatness upon which the city prides itself. Lutz's Amsterdam is ragged at the edges, its order is disturbed; it is neither culture nor nature. This is no city, no territory of adorable and idiosyncratic canal houses, but one of abandoned trailer homes and innumerable look-alike dwellings, distinguishable only by the cars that are parked in front of them. Nor is it country, dominated as it is by gas tanks, derelict cargo containers and indeterminate industry. Inconclusive and undefined, such locations defy possession and resist commodification; they are in essence un-represented and un-representable, the exact opposite of the touristic picturesque.

For his series, **Carl Wooley** has also chosen the marginal and undefined. His drifting through the city in search of bright spots in the night took him away from Amsterdam's garishly lit canals and squares to streets only the neighbourhood denizens would know. In themselves banal, Wooley's technique endows them with a mysterious air. Here and there brightly illuminated windows stand out, piquing our curiosity, making us wonder what is going on behind them; open garage doors and entranceways bathed in neon light are simultaneously inviting and forbidding. As in a good thriller or horror film, we both want to know and don't. In contemplating these images, one cannot help thinking of Walter Benjamin's famous statement regarding Atget. Atget, he wrote, had photographed Paris' streets as if they were the scene of a crime; like a crime scene they are deserted and photographed for the purposes of establishing evidence. But here, as in Atget, we ask ourselves: evidence of what? That perhaps every inch of the city, as Benjamin suggests, is the scene of a crime, and every passerby – including the photographer – a culprit?

So, in the end, it does seem that even outsiders may grasp the secrets of a city, secrets usually reserved for its inhabitants alone. If, that is, they let themselves drift. Each of the four series in some way reveals the flip side of the tourist image of Amsterdam: canals that are not for recreation, but where people live and work; streets not designed for passive consumption but for experiential negotiation; a city that ends not where the tourist map does, neat and clean, but spreads itself out into the unknown; and a night time made not for entertainment but for serious business, whether that be simply contemplation or even murder. This, too, is



Doorway, 2008 © Carl Wooley



Amsterdam: No. 0530, 2008 © Gus Powell



Amsterdam: No. 0279, 2008 © Gus Powell



Untitled (102fm3), 2009 © Joshua Lutz

Amsterdam, as we, its inhabitants, experience it every day: biking along our waterways, doing our daily chores, passing through or living on its outskirts, and returning home late at night to our deserted neighbourhoods. Or: as we could experience it, were we to open ourselves to the strangeness around us. In other words, these four photographers have with ease adopted the citizen-role of *voyageur*, as if they themselves were perfectly at home. As if there was some kind of primeval link between them and the city. Could it be that this has something to do with the fact that New York was, once upon a time, Nieuw Amsterdam? +

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*All images: Collection Stadsarchief Amsterdam*

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To mark Hudson's 400th anniversary, Foam and City Archives Amsterdam, in cooperation with the John Adams Institute, organised *NY Perspectives*, a photo exhibition about Amsterdam, as seen through the eyes of New York photographers. Four American photographers were each commissioned to explore a different aspect of the city: the street, the night, the water and the outskirts. This resulted in surprising images that revealed an unknown side of the Dutch capital.

Street photographer **Gus Powell** (b. 1974, New York) lives in Brooklyn, NY. After graduating in 1997, he became an assistant to Joel Meyerowitz, a leading figure in the street photography tradition. From 2000 to 2004, Powell was photo editor at *The New Yorker* magazine, and in recent years he has worked as a freelance photographer. His first book appeared in 2003, *The Company of Strangers*, featuring street photos of New York. He took most of these in the early afternoon, inspired by *The Lunch Poems* (1964) by New York poet Frank O'Hara.

Photographer and cinematographer **Carl Wooley** (b. 1977, San Francisco) lives in Brooklyn, NY. He studied cinematography at Hunter College, NY. His first film, *Cotton Candy* is set in New York and reached the final round of the 2005 *Kurosawa Short Film Competition*. Two years later he won the Grand Jury Prize at Seattle with a documentary on Colombian cacao farmers, *Chocolate Country*. In recent years, Wooley has also worked as a freelance architectural photographer, following a course at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York.

**Joshua Lutz** (b. 1975, New York) lives and works in New York. At the ICP he studied under Stephen Shore, whose work has influenced generations of landscape photographers in the United States and abroad since his astonishing 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics*. Lutz is currently teaching at the ICP himself. In 2008, he published his first photo book, *Meadowlands*, the result of eight years of photographing in the wetlands between New Jersey and New York City.

Landscape photographer **Richard Rothman** (p. 1956, Philadelphia) lives and works in New York, where he teaches at the ICP and the School of Visual Arts. His theme is the relationship between the nature and the urban environment, as in his series *Landscaped: New York, New Jersey, Los Angeles* (2002). In 2004, he began work on *Redwood Saw*, a project about the destruction of the sequoia forests on the west coast of the United States, and fortunes of the town of Crescent City.

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