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WEEGEE'S STORY

In the Paddy Wagon, January 27, 1942

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WEEGEE'S STORY

More than 220 rare vintage photos

By VIRGINIA HECKERT
CURATOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY; NORTON MUSEUM OF ART; WEST PALM BEACH, FLORIDA

There are two sides to every story—at least. The name Weegee is synonymous with images of crime and tragedy in New York during the 1930s and 1940s.

Wielding his 4 x 5 inch Speed Graphic camera with synchronized flash attachment as if with a sixth sense, the renowned tabloid photographer exposed gangsters lying in pools of their own blood, three and five alarm fires that left families homeless, domestic quarrels that were often resolved with brutal consequences, as well as the multitude of curious onlookers eager for a view of the action. Images such as these reveal the rawness, squalor, and brutality of life in Manhattan. To hear some tell the story, Weegee was a brazen voyeur who capitalized on the sensationalism of the events and human degradation he recorded with his camera; to hear others, he was the compassionate adopted native son who photographed the life of crime into which he might easily have fallen as a youth growing up on the Lower East Side. To hear others still, photography was the means by which he survived urban America and his images the legacy he provided as a model for a generation of photographers to come, including William Klein, Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand.

EXCLUSIVE

But told so, the story remains one-sided, since violence and tragedy account for only one aspect of Weegee's work. He also photographed those who loved New York City as much as he did and saw it as an arena in which to act out their lives and passions. Weekends at Coney Island, with beachgoers packed like sardines in the blistering noonday heat or locked in embraces under the cover of a dark, moonless night; Saturday afternoon matinees at the circus and the movies, where children's faces register unabashed glee and young lovers believe they have escaped for privacy; Saturday nights given up to the trance-like states induced by jazz in the Village or the revelry of drinks and burlesque at Sammy's in the Bowery, "the poor man's Stork Club," Sundays in Harlem for the celebration of Easter services and uplifting gospel music—images such as these tell the rest of the story about New Yorkers making an effort to forget their troubles and enjoy life during the Depression and War years. Weegee made it a point to intersperse these "human interest" stories with those of murder and tragedy. Thus, to some, he was unquestionably a humanist, while, to others, he managed to transform the most joyous (as well as the most grievous) situations into farce, showing people at a disadvantage.

Their First Murder, October 9, 1941

By 1945 Weegee had earned his self-assigned appellation "Weegee the Famous" with the publication of *Naked City*, the immensely successful book that illuminated the city he knew and loved in its myriad details ranging from the horrifyingly gruesome to the embarrassingly intimate, and with the exhibition of a selection of these images at the Museum of Modern Art that same year. There are even two stories as to how Weegee acquired his name. The first is that his adeptness at his first serious job as a darkroom assistant led to his being hailed "Squeegee Boy" to indicate that prints needed to be prepared for drying. The second derives from his uncanny ability to arrive at the scene of the crime before any other photographer, which inspired comparisons with the power of prediction reserved for the Ouija (pronounced wee-jee) board, a popular board game of the period in which the concentrated psychic energies of players who placed their fingers lightly on a pointer gave them the power to spell out the answers to a variety of questions.

After a brief period in Hollywood to capitalize on his success and explore his interest in film, Weegee concentrated his own energy on lecture circuits both around the country and abroad, and on developing trick lenses and refining darkroom techniques to transform ordinary portraits and landmarks into caricatures and abstract distortions that he referred to as "creative photography." Here, too, there are some who would insist that Weegee has never been truly appreciated for his "artistic" contributions to the medium, while others have noted that this self-proclaimed artist with a camera possessed a sufficient degree of self-reflectiveness to enable him to recognize that he was more than a press photographer but not to turn him into the kind of artist with which most of us are familiar.

Weegee has been dubbed an innocent, a primitive, and a nominally schooled naïf who learned to master the art of photography to overcome his own insecurities; he has also been acknowledged as a thoroughly trained professional who spent a dozen years perfecting his skills in the darkroom, before deciding to become a freelance photographer who appropriated the connections, licensed short-wave police radio, and restless night schedule required to enable him to arrive first at the scene of a crime or accident. Comparisons between the directness of his photographs and the sophistication of film noir have been convincingly argued, from the tight framing of his shots to his omniscient first-person narration, as have been parallels between his composite portrait of

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This essay has been reprinted with the kind permission of Virginia Heckert. It first appeared in "Weegee's Story;" Rupertinum Salzburg, Museum of Modern Art Oxford and Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall; Margit Zuckriegl, Editor.

Harry Maxwell Shot in Car, 1941

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New York and that of Paris by Brassaï, of London by Bill Brandt and of New York by Alfred Stieglitz.

What is most fascinating about this wide range of stories and theories is not the degree to which some of them would seem to be diametrically opposed, but the fact that portions of all of them are true. This dualism can be accounted for in part by the contradictions within Weegee's own personality. The first to praise his professional successes most vehemently, he was also the first to speak openly about his own personal insecurities. While aggressively pursuing photography to supply tabloids and newspapers with the images they demanded as a means to make a decent living for himself, he unwittingly helped to establish the spontaneity and fleetingness of action photography as legitimate contributions to the art of photography. The continued fascination with Weegee's photographs does not derive simply from his recognition of the city as "a repository of stories," but from the capacity of these photographs to continue to inspire countless theories and stories beyond those he himself told. Once a theory has been constructed, the evidence can be presented in a manner that is thoroughly persuasive. Once a caption has been affixed, the range of details about the situation depicted is narrowed; once the caption is changed, however, so too can the story be changed. Weegee understood this all too well and often recycled his photographs, changing the caption slightly to peddle his story to a different newspaper. Given the distance of several years, the immediacy and topicality of his images have been transformed into something quite different but not necessarily more static; as documents, Weegee's photographs commemorate the events that have become romanticized and mythicized in the minds of contemporary audiences reared on too many detective novels, action films and news dramas.

"I have no inhibitions, and neither has my camera."

No one was better at sustaining the myth about life in New York in the 1930s and 1940s and about Weegee as its unofficial chronicler than Weegee himself. As told in his own words, Weegee's story is not necessarily the most accurate, but it is certainly the one most in keeping with the intensity of his photographs and the spirit in which they were made. *Naked City*, the book that divided fires, murders, sudden death and the observers of all of these, as well as life on the Bowery and in Harlem and love on Coney Island into eighteen chapters, found a fitting sequel sixteen years later in *Weegee by Weegee: An Autobiography*, a book weighted more heavily toward text, but equally compelling in the balance it struck between human tragedy and comedy, including those in its author's own life. It is with a unique mixture of grandiosity and self-effacement, a ribald sense of humor and endearing sensitivity that Weegee told the story of his life and his successes as a photographer.

"I have no inhibitions, and neither has my camera. I have lived a full life and have tried everything. What may be abnormal to you is normal to me. If I had to live my life over again, I would do it all the same way…only more so. Everything I write about is true …and I have the pictures, the checks, the memories and the scars to prove it."

Weegee was born Usher Fellig in 1899 in the town of Zloczow, near Lemberg, Austria, now Lviv in the Ukraine. Preceded by their father, the Fellig family emigrated to the United States, arriving at Ellis Island in 1910, where immigration officers anglicized Weegee's given name to Arthur. Life on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where the family settled as did the vast majority of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, proved to be less than idyllic and Weegee describes the discrepancy between overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions and dreams for a better life in the land of opportunity. Demonstrating signs of restlessness and entrepreneurship at an early age, Weegee helped to support the family with several odd jobs that included selling candy and assisting a tintype photographer who made portraits of neighborhood children astride a donkey. Never fond of school, he dropped out at age fourteen and began assisting a commercial photographer who specialized in making pictures of those items that were too heavy for traveling salesmen to carry around with them. After several years, Weegee purchased a second-hand camera and rented a pony to set up his own portrait business. Moving out from home at age eighteen, he quickly came to experience the realities of life on his own, of short-lived stints in a variety of part time jobs during the day, roaming the city for burlesque entertainment and purchased affections during the night, sleeping in quarter-a-night rooms in flop houses when times were good and on park benches and in train stations when they were bad.

Always in search of an opportunity to further his interest in photography, Weegee secured several jobs that gave him the chance to refine his darkroom techniques. At age twenty-one, he found work in a downtown passport studio, where he learned to master the arts of retouching and selling pictures. Three years later, he landed a job in the *New York Times* darkroom, where he dried prints for this newspaper and others in the *World Wide Photos* syndication service. Not long afterwards, he began working as a technician in the darkroom of *Acme Newspictures*, which supplied images to the *Daily News*, the *World Telegram* and the *Herald Tribune*, as well as hundreds of other daily newspapers throughout the country. Weegee's beginning salary as a darkroom technician and printer with ambitions of being promoted to staff photographer was $20.00 a week. His promotion was long in coming, however, both because of his skill in the darkroom and because of his refusal to comply with the editors' requirement for staff photographers to wear a white shirt and tie. Instead, he messengered photographs taken by others, setting up a temporary darkroom wherever necessary—in the back of an ambulance or the conductor's car of the elevated train—to beat the competition to the telephone company office which transmitted the images all over the country:

"Over the developing trays in the dark room at *Acme*, history passed through my hands. Fires, explosions, railroad wrecks, ship collisions, prohibition gang wars, murders, kings, presidents, everybody famous and everything exciting that turned up in the Twenties. I handled the first flashbulb, produced by General Electric to take place of the dangerous and messy flash powder. I saw the first photograph of President Coolidge transmitted over telephone wires from the White House to New York City; I processed it. Photography was growing up, and so was I."

Occasionally, when staff photographers were fast asleep and editors preferred to avoid paying overtime wages, Weegee would be sent out to cover a story in the middle of the night. While he relished both the excitement of his work and the freedom of his lifestyle, he eventually tired of not being credited for the pictures he took. In 1935, after a dozen years at *Acme*, he left his weekly salary of $50.00, invested in his own camera outfit and set up business for himself. Although not an official police photographer, he worked out of Manhattan Police Headquarters and provided the editors at a variety of daily newspapers and weekly magazines with the images that they—and the public—demanded. Life as a freelance photographer was far from secure, however, and Weegee found that he was able to live in relative luxury at

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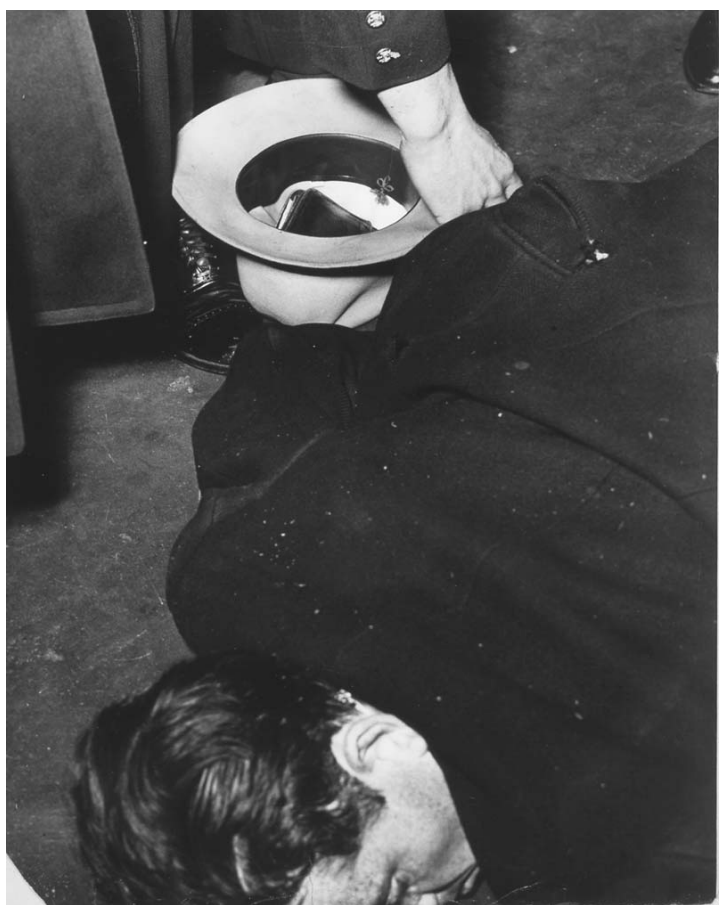

Dead Gangster, 1940s

CHRONOLOGY

1899 Born Usher Fellig on June 12 in Lemberg (also known as Lviv), Austria (now Ukraine) to Rachel and Bernard Fellig. Weegee is the second of seven children.

1906 Bernard Fellig leaves Europe for the United States.

1910 The family joins Bernard, emigrating to Manhattan's Lower East Side. Usher's name is changed to Arthur upon arrival.

1913 Weegee leaves school and begins working as a tintype photographer to help support his family. Soon after, Weegee starts assisting a commercial photographer. After several years of painstaking work, he quits to begin working as a street portrait photographer.

1917 Weegee decides to move out of his family home and for a time was homeless, finding shelter in missions, public parks and the Pennsylvania Railroad station. For several years, he holds a variety of jobs including day laborer, candy mixer (including a stint as a "hole puncher" at the Life Saver factory) and biscuit maker. All the while, he regularly looks for work with a photography studio.

1918 Weegee finds work at Ducket & Adler photography studio on Grand Street in Lower Manhattan.

1921 Lands a job as helper in the darkrooms of *The New York Times*, and their photo syndicate *Wide World Photos*, where he works for two years.

1920's Joins *Acme Newspictures* (later absorbed by *United Press International*) as darkroom technician and printer. While at *Acme*, fills in as news photographer.

1934 Rents a one-room apartment at 5 Center Market Place, where he lives until 1947.

1935 Leaves *Acme* to begin a freelance career. Activities centered around Manhattan police headquarters. Photographs published by *The Herald Tribune*, *World-Telegram*, *Daily News*, *Post*, *Journal-American*, *Sun*, and others. (This begins the period of Weegee's most significant work, generally produced in New York between 1935 and 1947.)

1938 Obtains permission to install a police radio in his Chevy Coupe. Around this time adopts the name Weegee. Story about Weegee appears in *Life* magazine.

1940 Given special position by the progressive evening newspaper, *PM*, to create photo-stories of his choice, or accept assignments from the newspaper's editors.

1941 "Weegee: Murder is My Business," exhibition opens at the Photo League, New York. Weegee begins to experiment with handheld 16mm movie camera.

1943 Five photographs acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and included in their exhibition, "Action Photography."

1945 Publication of *Naked City*, the first book of Weegee's photographs, and accompanying national publicity tour. Begins photographing for *Vogue*.

1946 Publication of *Weegee's People*. Lectures at The New School for Social Research, New York. Weegee sells the rights to the title of his book, *Naked City*, to Mark Hellinger for a Hollywood feature film.

1947 Marries Margaret Atwood. Late in the year leaves New York for Hollywood to serve as consultant on film version of *Naked City*. During the next several years, works as a technical consultant on films and plays minor film roles. He also experiments with a variety of lenses and other devices to begin creating his "distortion" series.

1948 Release of *Naked City* by Universal Pictures. Weegee appears as an extra in the film, *Every Girl Should Be Married*. His own (and first) film, *Weegee's New York* (20 minutes, black and white, 16mm), is completed. He is represented in the *50 Photographs by 50 Photographers* exhibition organized by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1949 Weegee and Margaret Atwood are separated and divorce a year later.

1952 Returns to New York after several years of living and working in Hollywood. Begins a series of distorted portraits of celebrities and political figures, which he calls caricatures.

1953 Publication of *Naked Hollywood* by Weegee and Mel Harris, the first book in which his distortions are published.

1955 Distorted portraits are published in July issue of *Vogue*.

1957 Diagnosed with diabetes, Weegee moves to West 47th Street, the home of Wilma Wilcox, who remains his companion until his death.

1958 Consultant for Stanley Kubrick's film, *Dr. Strangelove or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb*. Travels extensively in Europe until 1968, working for the *Daily Mirror* and on a variety of photography, film, lecture, and book projects.

1959 Lecture tour in USSR in conjunction with several exhibitions held here. Publication of *Weegee's Creative Camera.*

1960 Exhibits "Weegee: Caricatures of the Great" at Photokina, Cologne, Germany.

1961 Publication of *Weegee by Weegee: An Autobiography.*

1962 Exhibition at Photokina, Cologne, West Germany.

1964 Publication of *Weegee's Creative Photography.*

1965 Makes film *The Idiot Box* (5 minutes, black and white, sound, 16mm).

1968 Weegee dies in New York on December 26th at the age of 69.

"No bumping off was official until I arrived to take the last photo, and I tried to make their last photo a real work of art."

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times, while, at other times, he was tempted to pawn his camera:

"Being a freelance photographer was not the easiest way to make a living. There had to be a good meaty story to get the editors to buy the pictures. A truck crash with the driver trapped inside, his face a crisscross of blood…a tenement-house fire, with the screaming people being carried down the aerial ladder clutching their babies, dogs, cats, canaries, parrots, monkeys, even snakes…a just-shot gangster, lying in the gutter, well dressed in his dark suit and pearl hat, hot off the griddle, with a priest, who seemed to appear from nowhere, giving him the last rites…just-caught stick-up men, lady burglars, etc. These were the pictures that I took and sold. It was during the Depression, and people could forget their own troubles by reading about others."

Weegee never doubted that photography was his life's calling: "This was to be my world for the next ten years, my private island, my little niche. Crime was my oyster, and I liked it…my post-graduate course in life and photography." In 1938, following the increased attention he received from a story about him and his work that appeared in *Life* magazine, he purchased a brand new Chevy coupe and acquired a special permit to install a police radio in the car. The car gave him newfound mobility, and the radio a distinct advantage among the ranks of other staff and freelance photographers:

"My car became my home. It was a two-seater, with a special extra-large luggage compartment. I kept everything in there, an extra camera, cases of flash bulbs, extra loaded holders, a typewriter, fireman's boots, boxes of cigars, salami, infra-red film for shooting in the dark, uniforms, disguises, a change of underwear, and extra shoes and socks. I was no longer tied to the teletype machine at police headquarters. I had my wings. I no longer had to wait for crime to come to me; I could go after it. The police radio was my life line. My camera…my life and my love …was my Aladdin's lamp."

As with any other job, Weegee's life soon settled into a regularized routine—with the exception that his workday began at midnight:

"I would start my tour at midnight. First, I checked the police telety for background on what had been happening. Then, into my car. I would turn on the police radio. …Life was like a timetable, tragic, but on schedule, with little bits of comedy relief interspersed among the crimes. From midnight to one o'clock, I listened to calls to the station-houses about peeping Toms on the rooftops and fire escapes of nurses' dormitories. …From one to two o'clock, stick-ups of the still-open delicatessens…From two to three, auto accidents and fires…At four o'clock, things became livelier. At that hour the bars closed, and the boys were mellowed by drinks. The bartender would holler Closing up! But the customers would refuse to leave…why go home to their nagging wives? …Then, from four to five, came the calls on burglaries and the smashing of store windows. After five came the most tragic hours of all. People would have been up all night worrying about health, money, and love problems. They would be at their lowest physical and mental state and, finally, take a dive out of the window. I never photographed a dive…I would drive by…I was finished for the night."

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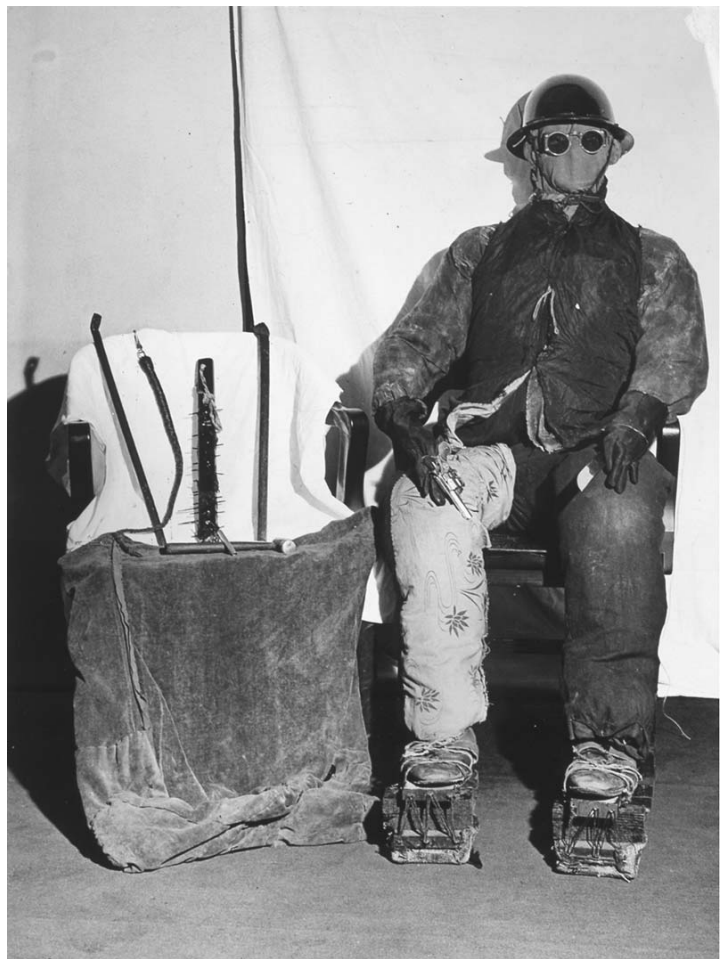

Mugger's Disguise, 1940s

"Over the developing trays...history passed through my hands."

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Weegee didn't bother to file the images of crime and tragedy he amassed over the years, but simply deposited the negatives and extra prints in a barrel, instructing those who requested one of the murders or fires he offered as his "daily specials" to come and search for it. He was so certain that these events would occur on a daily basis that he informed editors and other interested parties that, if they were willing to wait twenty-four hours, they would have a new group from which to choose.

Even if Weegee devoted a relatively short chapter in *Naked City* to the subject of murder, it occupies a more prominent place in his autobiography. Here he relates how he would sit in his favorite chair in the lobby of the police headquarters, his camera loaded at his side and a lit cigar in his mouth, simply biding his time until the parade of small-time racketeers would file past him, handcuffed to the detectives who had arrested them. Or, if he was waiting in the room he rented just around the corner from police headquarters, news that someone had been killed would be announced with a knock on his door—he had no telephone—which was the cue for him to get up, grab a cup of coffee and a supply of cigars at the nearby diner before taking a leisurely ride to the scene, since there was "no rush …the stiff couldn't get up and walk away."
Weegee photographed so many murders that he was able to claim that "no racketeer on the FBI's list of the top ten public enemies made the grade until he had been photographed by Weegee" and that the police showed their appreciation for his contribution to crime fighting by dubbing him "the official photographer for Murder, Inc."

Weegee recognized the value of this honor, as well as the certainty of the murders that guaranteed his livelihood:

"Come to think of it, for over ten years I made a lush living covering murders from Manhattan Police Headquarters. I was on the job twenty-four hours a day; seven days a week, including Sundays and legal and bank holidays. No eight-hour day for Murder, Inc., no punching time clocks, no two-week vacation, no unemployment insurance or social security—and what beautiful productions! Each 'job' was a classic, and so were the photos I took. They were published in newspapers and magazines all over the world."

Rattling off the inventory of the ten press cameras and five cars he used during his decade as a freelance photographer, and the twenty cigars and twenty cups of coffee that fueled him every night, Weegee found that, for him, "crime had paid—in a very lush way. But crime did not pay for the gangster …who wants to wind up in the gutter with his brains splattered on the sidewalk?" If his camera was the instrument that guaranteed his livelihood, it represented a lethal weapon to gangsters. For, as Weegee wrote, once they had been photographed alive, it was only a matter of time before they would be photographed lying dead in the gutter, "face up, in their black suits, shiny patent leather shoes and pearl gray hats…dressed to kill. No bumping off was official until I arrived to take the last photo, and I tried to make their last photo a real work of art."

Eventually, however, Weegee recognized that the market for murder had become oversaturated:

"Part of the trouble with my freelance photography, I decided, was over-production. There were so many dead gangsters stretched out in various localities every night that the editors were getting real choosy. 'After all,' they said, 'this is a family newspaper!' I was taking some of the best killing pictures of my career. Sometimes I even used Rembrandt side lighting, not letting too much blood show. And I made the stiff look real cosy, as if he were taking a short nap. But the market was flooded. I had so many unsold murder pictures lying around my room that I felt as if I were renting out a wing of the City Morgue."

Newspaper and magazine editors lost no time letting him know what their audiences wanted and what sold papers, as Weegee's recounting of a conversation with one editor reveals:

" 'So killings ain't saleable anymore?' I asked. The editor would give me a long look. 'Sex,' he said gently. 'Women, Weegee!' I said, 'Look, the only women I know are hookers, pickpockets and shop lifters.' 'Then start practicing on them. But no more dead gangsters. We want live bodies to dress up the front page.' "
Supply and demand were critical factors of Weegee's success. The introduction to a chapter of *Naked City* entitled "The Escapists" helps to remind us of the more immediate concerns of the rest of urban America in the early 1940s. "Laugh—it's good for you," Weegee writes, "…forget all about shoe coupons…red stamps … and gas rationing…and that lonely ache in your heart every night waiting for First Class Private G.I. Joe to come home safely: That's the kind of picture I like to take…it's funny; people will laugh and have a good time when they have money for a ticket. I even laughed myself…and forgot all about my inferiority complexes."

The era that Weegee documented in his photographs is a decade that began during the height of the Depression and ended with V-Day

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Simply Add Boiling Water, 1941

Pseudo Hermophide, 1940s

Street Lamp with Lone Pedestrian at Night, 1940s

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at the close of World War II. At the beginning of this era, men fought for non-existent jobs and, at the end, were sent off to fight for their country. Money was tight throughout, except, of course, for Fifth Avenue society types who claimed to be doing their part by "keeping up appearances," which did not escape the prying eye of Weegee's camera. Entitled "Signs of the Times," another chapter in *Naked City* consists entirely of images of humorous or unusual signs, but the title might also summarize an undercurrent that runs through the book. While it is true that Weegee often included movie marquees, shop signs, posters, banners and other forms of signage in his images as clever commentaries on the events depicted; it is also true that the topicality of his work as a whole transforms it into a document or a sign of the times during which he worked. Thus, Weegee could refer to his photographs of murder in the same breath as "the documents of a violent era" and "the soul of the city I knew and loved."

If Weegee boasted that newspaper editors clamored to purchase the famous pictures of murder and tragedy, he also took pride in his ability to catch New Yorkers "with their masks off…not afraid to Laugh, Cry, or make Love" and his ability to photograph what he himself felt, laughing and crying with those whom he photographed. Surprisingly, it was not only the stuff of tabloid headlines and unabashed revelry and love-making that captured his attention. He also dealt with issues that might otherwise have been left unaddressed; *Naked City* and his second book, *Weegee's People*, show isolated sequences devoted to cross-dressing, or transsexuality, for which one could be arrested, to racial discrimination and the practice of separating blacks from whites in the theater, as well as to instances of extreme nationalism during World War II. Staged or not, "The Critic" deals with the issue of social discrimination and the inequities of a capitalist society. While these images might not carry the combined ideological impact of the work that photographers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn and Jack Delano contributed to the Farm Security Administration's documentation of rural America, they nonetheless shed light on some of the concerns of urban American society that did not quite belong to the underground but festered just below the surface.

The story that I find most revealing in relation to Weegee sheds light on the photographer's perception of himself. Here, too, it might have been possible to tell two very different stories. Virtually every sentence that Weegee spoke with regard to his ability to create incredible photographs demonstrates his inflated ego. Ironically, he apparently viewed this ability with some modesty, as can be deduced from the words of advice he gave to amateurs who loved photography and fancied themselves capable of following in his footsteps. In *Naked City*'s final chapter, entitled "Camera Tips," he proffers the following advice:

"How does one get started?…It's not hard… after you have shot your pictures, take them to the city editor of your home town newspaper, or if the pictures are of more than local interest, mail them special delivery-air mail to *Life* magazine if there is not a local *Life* office in your town. If your photographs are accepted it means national recognition for you and a fat check besides…If you are puzzled about the kind of camera to buy, get a Speed Graphic… for two reasons…it is a good camera and moreover, it is standard equipment for all press photographers… with a camera like that the cops will assume that you belong on the scene and will let you get beyond the police lines. (Later after you have sold some pictures, the editors will help you to get a press card.)…just go about taking pictures without getting in anyone's way. …There is one last question which really needs no answer, but I hear it again and again. What pull does one need to be able to sell pictures? You don't need any. Editors buy pictures on their merit and their timeliness. You can best approach the problem of selling your work by studying the papers and magazines to see how other photographers handle any given story: Figure out how you would have covered it yourself. Remember…the field is wide open."

As if it were that easy! What Weegee neglected to explain was just how one acquired the talent, desire, perseverance and stamina required to succeed as a freelance photographer, and, above all, the compassion to identify with one's fellow man. His parting words to the beginner to "be original and develop your own style, but don't forget above anything and everything else…be human…think …feel. When you find yourself beginning to feel a bond between yourself and the people you photograph, when you laugh and cry with their laughter and tears, you will know you are on the right track" may have provided the secret of his own success, but fell short of offering a recipe for others to follow.

"I was taking some of the best killing pictures of my career. Sometimes I even used Rembrandt side lighting..."

Drowning Victim, ca. 1940

Weegee took some of the best pictures of his career during his decade as a freelance photographer. Fires and murders were his "two bestsellers," his "bread and butter." Among his best known

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images of fire are "Simply Add Boiling Water" and "I Cried When I Took This Picture," among his best known murders: "Balcony Seats at a Murder" and "Their First Murder." To get some of these photographs, Weegee capitalized on what he referred to as his psychic ability to arrive at the scene of a tragedy or crime before others—often even before the event occurred—and his ability to position himself and his camera to make the one shot that counted, that summed up the event in its entirety. Photographing almost exclusively at night, Weegee worked literally and figuratively in the dark and thus could not know how his photographs would turn out. Equipped with sufficient film and flash bulbs, however, and a mastery of the camera's settings for focal lengths of six feet and ten feet, he was prepared to move in close and act quickly. Working in the frenzy of the moment, he did not always have time to wait until just the right moment (Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment") at which all of the elements of his composition coalesced. Often, the immediate drama and harsh contrast of tragic scenes lit up for a brief instant by a powerful flash and flattened into a pattern of harsh tonal contrasts by fast film was enough to make an image unforgettable. Sometimes he had to aim his camera blindly into the dark, using infra-red film to reveal subjects that were invisible to the naked eye. If his intuition and hyper-awareness of his surroundings and favorite haunts did not result in a dynamic photograph, the situation could be remedied with his skill in the darkroom or with selective editing of the best images well after the fact, as exemplified in his book *Naked City*.

What becomes clear from the pictures selected for this book is that Weegee came from the ranks of those whom he photographed, that he was complicit with them and identified with them in every way. In particular, he identified with being a spectator and with the act of viewing as the most compelling and emotional aspect of an event. He was, in fact, the ultimate spectator who, unlike the others, had come prepared with a press camera and flash bulbs, as well as an intuitive sense of how to frame and when to shoot his image that became refined with practice. Weegee succeeded in photographing others not as passive spectators, but as active participants in the countless and varied dramas that unfolded in New York — bit players and extras, perhaps, but no less essential to authenticate and complete the scene. This is particularly true in an image like "Balcony Seats at a Murder" in which the elements of the dead gangster's crumpled body, the setting of a store-front window of a cafe in Little Italy, the detectives waiting outside with hands thrust in their coat pockets, and the curious neighbors leaning out of windows and from fire escapes all contribute essential elements. It becomes intensified in an image such as "Their First Murder," in which the murder of a local small-time racketeer is upstaged by the spectators, a group of excited children, ostensibly vying for a glimpse of the dead body, but appearing to mug for the photographer himself. He also captured New Yorkers at play in their varied functions as audiences, whether

I Cried When I Took This Picture, December 15, 1939

the swooning teenage fan at a Frank Sinatra concert, teenagers secretively embracing in darkened movie theaters, or the crowd of beachgoers at Coney Island turned en masse to greet him eagerly and strike memorable poses.

Weegee was unique, in part because of the complexities of his personality and in part because of the complex time during which he lived and created his signature work. Whatever has been theorized about his work, it remains memorable because of the untold stories that every picture is capable of revealing to the eyes of each new viewer. To leave Weegee with the last word: "And that's that!"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Weegee's Story

May 6 — July 23, 2004
Reception: Wednesday, May 5th
6:30 – 9:00 PM

The Critic, 1943

Ubu Gallery is pleased to present **WEEGEE's STORY**, an exhibition of more than 220 vintage photographs offering a rare survey of Weegee's greatest images. Arguably the single most important collection of Weegee's photographs, the group reveals the range within the photographer's expansive body of work, including sensational, photojournalistic documents of gangland murders and five-alarm fires; captivating and raw depictions of urban America; and sympathetic portraits of New York City's endless parade of human oddities.

Weegee, born Usher Fellig in 1899 near Lemberg, Austria (now Lviv, Ukraine), emigrated with his family to the United States in 1910. Upon entry, "Usher" was anglicized to "Arthur," the name he kept until 1938, when he became, simply, "Weegee"—a reference to both an old nickname from his job drying prints ("Squeegee Boy") in the Acme Newspictures darkroom and to his uncanny ability to arrive first on the scene of a crime or accident—often before police and always before other photographers—invoking references to the "Ouija" (pronounced "weegee") board, a popular game of the time utilizing "psychic powers."

In 1924, six years after moving out of his family's cramped tenement apartment, Weegee began as a press photographer for Acme Newspictures. The lack of formal, published credit for his work prompted him to quit Acme in 1935 and become a freelance photojournalist. Responding to the demands of the tabloid news market, Weegee trained his lens on the crime and despair of late-1930s New York, still in the throes of the Depression and heading towards World War II. He stayed close to the New York Police Department and, in 1938, was granted special permission to tune in to the police radio frequency. Operating from a customized car – a mobile office stocked with cameras, flashbulbs, a makeshift darkroom and plenty of cigars—he often arrived on the scene before the authorities, allowing him substantial compositional leeway in his images. For nearly a decade, he worked all night long following the radio's trail of mafia shootings, auto accidents, suicides, building fires and the like, publishing the shocking images in all the major tabloid newspapers.

Simultaneously, Weegee was making photographs of New York's nightlife and high society, of quiet streetscapes, and of people existing at the margins of society—from the city's ethnic minorities to its transsexuals and prostitutes—all of which generated broad public interest in his work. His growing popularity helped secure Weegee's first public exhibition of photographs in 1941, entitled "Murder is My Business," at the Photo League in New York and his first sale of photographs to a museum—the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Building on these successes, Weegee published his first book, *Naked City*, in 1945, following it in 1946 with *Weegee's People*. In 1947, after 12 years of intense photojournalistic work (his output from this period is thought to be in excess of 5,000 images), Weegee began shifting his attention to other more purely artistic interests, including avant-garde film and experimental photography. His interest in film sprang from his role as a consultant on a film production of *Naked City* and, in 1947, Weegee relocated to Hollywood, where he spent the next five years working on film and photo projects, including his "Distortions," a series of manipulated images, principally portraits.

In 1952, Weegee returned to New York, living on 47th Street until his death in 1968. He spent his last years traveling, lecturing, and continuing his book, film and exhibition projects. It was not until the 1970s, however, that Weegee's centrality to the development of modern photojournalism was properly recognized with national and international exhibitions of his work. The collection to be displayed at Ubu has recently completed a nearly four-year museum tour, with stops at the Rupertinum, Salzburg, Austria (which organized and originated the exhibition); the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England; Magasin 3 Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden; Sk Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, Germany; the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; the Philadelphia Art Alliance, Pennsylvania; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

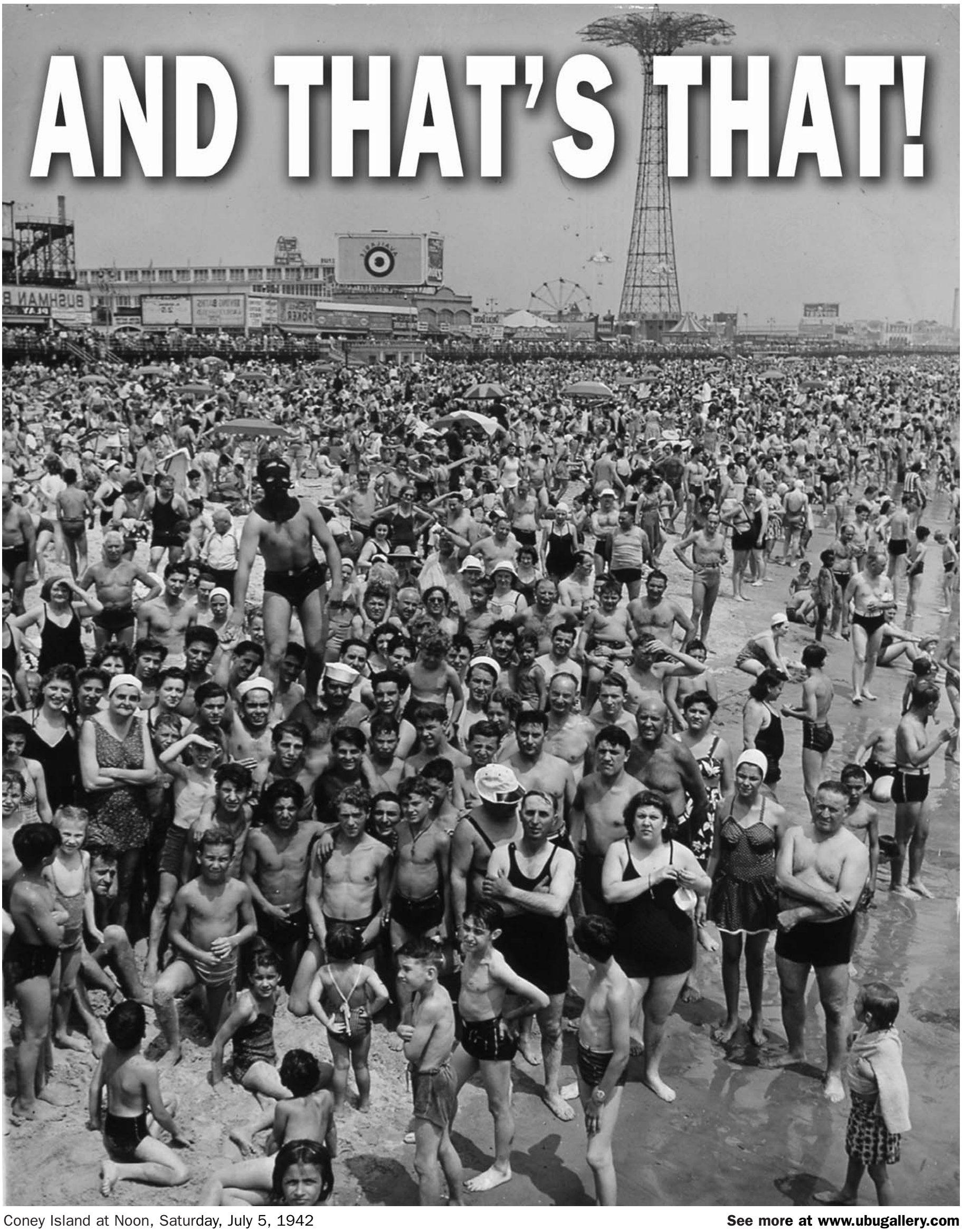
The exhibition will run from May 6 – July 23, 2004, with a reception on Wednesday, May 5th, 6:30 – 9:00 PM. Gallery hours are 11:00 AM – 6:00 PM, Tuesday through Saturday (closed Saturdays after Memorial Day) and by appointment. Ubu Gallery is located at 416 East 59th Street between First Avenue and Sutton Place.

For further information or for visuals, please contact Adam J. Boxer, Gile R. Downes, Jr. or Miriam Kienle at (212) 753 4444.

RECEPTION: Wednesday, May 5th, 6:30 – 9:00 pm

GALLERY ★★★★ FINAL

AND THAT'S THAT!



Coney Island at Noon, Saturday, July 5, 1942

UBU GALLERY
416 EAST 59 STREET
NEW YORK NY 10022

Tel: 212.753.4444
Fax: 212.753.4470
info@ubugallery.com
www.ubugallery.com

00212 753444400

EXHIBITION May 6–July 23, 2004