

Photographers tend to say that photography is all about light.

* It is not an overstatement to say that SONIA HANDELMAN MEYER came INTO THE LIGHT in 2007 before which time she was virtually unknown.

* This is a photo of her taken last year at the Montgomery Museum Fine Art – Unfortunately couldn't be here for our opening because of hip problems.

* This is a photo of her back then – Born in 1920 of Eastern European Immigrants in Lakewood, NJ, she joined the Photo League in 1942 The **Photo League** was a cooperative of amateur and professional photographers in New York who banded together around a range of common social and creative causes. The League was active from 1936 to 1951 and included among its members many of the most famous photographers of the 20th century.

* The League's origins can be traced back to a project of the Workers International Relief (WIR), which was a socialist-type association based in Berlin. In 1930 the WIR established the Worker's Camera League in New York City, which soon came to be known as the Film and Photo League. The goals of the Film and Photo League were to “struggle against and expose reactionary film; to produce documentary films reflecting the lives and struggles of the American workers; and to spread and popularize the great artistic and revolutionary Soviet productions.”[1]

* In 1934 the still photographers and the filmmakers in the League began having differences of opinion over social and production interests, and by 1936 they had formed separate groups. **Paul Strand** and **Ralph Steiner** established Frontier Films,

* At the same time Strand and Bernice Abbott renamed the original group to simply “The Photo League”. The two organizations remained friendly, with members from one group often participating in activities of the other.

* The goal of the newly reformed Photo League was to “put the camera back into the hands of honest photographers who...use it to photograph America.”[2]

* The League was also active as the caretaker of the Lewis Hine Memorial Collection, which Hine's son had given the the League in recognition of

their role in fostering social activism through photography as his father had done. Hine's images were always direct and revealing.

* **Lewis Wickes Hine** (September 26, 1874 – November 3, 1940) born 1874, died 1940, was an American sociologist and photographer.

* Hine used his camera as a tool for social reform. His photographs were instrumental in changing the child labor laws in the United States. [1]

* In 1907, he became the photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). Over the next decade, Hine documented child labor in American industry to aid the NCLC's lobbying efforts to end the practice.

* His photos of the situations in which these children were being used were revealing and very touching.

* In 1908, Hine photographed the people and life in the steel-making districts of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – at a time when photography was not considered a fine art; this image to me is amazing.

* In addition Hine made a series of "work portraits," which emphasized the human contribution to modern industry. In 1930, he was commissioned to document the construction of The Empire State Building. This is known as the Icarus image. Hine photographed the workers in precarious positions while they secured the iron and steel framework of the structure, taking many of the same risks the workers endured. In order to obtain the best vantage points, Hine was swung out in a specially designed basket 1,000 feet above Fifth Avenue.

* **Bernice Abbott, was one of the co-founders of the Photo League as it functioned in the 40s**

* Although Abbott photographed in the streets she was best known for her black-and-white photography of New York City architecture and urban design of the 1930s.

* Using a large format camera, Abbott photographed New York City with the diligence and attention to detail she had so admired in Eugène Atget with whom she studied.

* She wrote: I am an American, who, after eight years' residence in Europe, come back to view America with new eyes. I have just realized America—its extraordinary potentialities, its size, its youth, its unlimited material for the photographic art, and its state of flux particularly as applying to the city of New York....

* Her work has provided a historical chronicle of many now-destroyed buildings and neighborhoods of Manhattan.

* **Paul Strand** – kept his finger in both Frontier Films and the Photo League. His first film was *Manhattan* (1921), also known as *New York the Magnificent*, a silent film showing the day-to-day life of New York City

* Strand helped establish photography as an art form in the 20th century. His diverse body of work, spanning six decades, covers numerous genres and subjects throughout the Americas, Europe and Africa.

* Many of Strand's works reflect his interest in using the camera as a tool for social reform – advocated using the art of photography to promote social and political causes.

* Others of this early work, like the well-known "Wall Street," experimented with formal abstractions. In 1941 Strand moved to France, beginning his long exile from the prevailing climate of McCarthyism in the United States

* **The list of famous Photo League members is much longer than I could begin to show you in the time we have here but I will highlight a number, beginning with Aaron Siskind –**

* Siskind was an American abstract expressionist photographer. In his biography he wrote that he began his foray into photography when he received a camera for a wedding gift and began taking pictures on his honeymoon. He quickly realized the artistic potential this offered.

* His vision remained strong throughout his life.

* Early in his career Siskind as a member of the New York Photo League produced several significant socially conscious series of images. Among them the "Harlem Document" remains the most famous. He originally was a grade school English teacher in the New York Public School System.

* **Margaret Burke-White** born in the Bronx, New York in 1904

* In 1922, she began studying herpetology at Columbia University, where she developed an interest in photography and never looked back

* She was a war correspondent and the first woman to be allowed to work in combat zones during World War II

* Her images of the war were powerful and heartbreaking.

* Bourke-White and novelist Erskine Caldwell were married FROM 1939 to 1942, and together they collaborated on *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), a book about conditions in the South during the Great Depression.

* **Richard Avedon** was an American photographer well known for his portraits. After briefly attending Columbia University, he started as a photographer for the Merchant Marines in 1942, taking identification

pictures of the crewmen with his Rolleiflex camera given to him by his father as a going-away present

- * Images such as this one of Marilyn Monroe appeared in Life Magazine, in which a number of Photo League members had their work published

- * Avedon capitalized on his early success in fashion photography and expanded into the realm of fine art.

- *—But he was also on the streets with the Photo League.

- * **Weegee** (an alias for this American photographer and photojournalist) was known for his stark black and white street photography.

- * He wandered the streets, inevitably coming up with striking images that create a narrative in the mind's eye.

- * Weegee worked in the Lower East Side of New York City as a press photographer during the 30's and 40's, and he developed his signature style by following the city's emergency services and documenting their activity. [Much of his work depicted unflinchingly realistic scenes of urban life, crime, injury and death

- * **Dorothea Lange** was an influential American documentary photographer, particularly active in the 30s.

- * Lang's immortal image of an immigrant mother and child is part of the visual history of our country.

- * She was a photojournalist, best known for her Depression-era work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

- * Lange's photographs humanized the tragic consequences of the Great Depression

- * And profoundly influenced the development of documentary photography.

And then there were any number of photographers who did not live in New York but joined the league and supported its aims.

- * **Ansel Adams** is particularly known by those studying photography because of his research and development in the field.

- * He is an American photographer and environmentalist, best known for his black-and-white photographs of the American West, especially in Yosemite National Park.

- * **Minor White** began his career in photography, first joining the Oregon Camera Club, and then taking on assignments from the Works Progress Administration

- * He earned a degree in botany with a minor in English and was known for his ability to create symbols to represent emotions. He often accompanied his images with text or placed them in sequence.

* **Edward Weston** was another member of the League who was not on the streets photographing.

* He was an American photographer, and co-founder of Group f/64, instrumental in the early days of creating work to be acknowledged as Fine Art.

* Most of his work was done using an 8 by 10 inch view camera. He was interested in the transition from pictorialism to straight photography, becoming "the pioneer of precise and sharp presentation"

* after 1927, Weston worked mainly with nudes,

* and still life — his shells and vegetable studies were especially important in the history of photography

* **Next I would like to tell you about some of the WOMEN OF THE PHOTO LEAGUE – you may recognize the names of a few but others will be unknown. It was focusing on this segment of the Photo League that brought Sonia out into the Light.**

* **Helen Levitt** (1913-1009) was born in 1913 and died just last year. She had numerous photographs printed in Life Magazine.

* James Agee described her photographs as Major poetic work

* She is best know for her timeless series of children playing

* **Nancy Bulkley** (1913 –) Also born in 1913 is still living. This often shown photograph of the Financial District is a good example of her skill.

* **Vivian Cherry** (1921 –), Born in 1921, entitled this photo "Game of Lynching" Her photographs was often published in Life Magazine. – She has dedicated her later life to dance and music--

* **Ida Wyman** (1926 --) also still living, was known for her Ability to make the specific universal and visa versa

***Lee Sievan** (1908-1990) was married to the painter Maurice Sievan. She documented his career. Lee had an egalitarian interest in people of all walks of life – This image she titled humorously: "Think I'll Find Me Another Job"

* **Lisette Model** (1901-1983) was Austrian born and did not come to the US until 1933. Her signature style is close-up, unsentimental and unretouched expositions of vanity, insecurity and loneliness. This photograph is titled "The Honor of their sons"

* **Marion Palfi** (1907-1978) was born in Germany in 1907. Her father was an important theater director. She was particularly interested in racial discrimination – She published two books: “There is no More time” (on Jim Crow and Lynching) and “Suffer Little Children” (about child neglect)

* **Nancy Newhall** (1908-1974) was married to Beaumont Newhall, author of the classic volume History of Photography. She stated that the camera should approach an object as an actual spectator does, and, like him, be influenced by empathy

* Nancy also was very involved in the Sierra Club and Conservation – This is an image of “Point Lobos” in CA

* **Rae Russell** (1925 -), born in 1925 was particularly interested in the homeless and their plight. He work was published in This Wee, Colliers and Life.

* She also did a **series of Native American Indian portraits of the Seminole tribe on the Big Cypress Reservation in Florida**

* **Rebecca Lepkoff** (1916-) born in 1916 is still living and even has her own website. Beginning in the 1930s, she captured families sitting out on stoops and curbs to escape overcrowded, sweltering tenements – all with an artist’s eye.

* She produced strong images from the streets and is now working in ceramics and quilting.

* **Consuela Kanaga** (1894-1978) titled this photograph; “Her children see her as the tree of life” Consuela remained socially active and was arrested in 1963 on a Walk for Peace in Albany, GA

* **Lida Moser** (1920 -) born in 1920 was a photojournalist, showing here the well knows American jazz musician, composer, bandleader, and human rights activist, Charles Mingus

* Here she is documenting Aaron Siskind at work. He was instrumental was active in reorganizing the Photo League after it split from the early Film and Photo League

* **Angela Calomiris** (1916-1995) –was an active member of the Photo League in the 1940s. She was also working as an FBI informant.

* In 1949, Calomiris publicly testified that members of the Photo League organization were Communist.

It is difficult, at this remove in time, to imagine the hysteria that existed in 1947. Goaded by reactionary columnists such as

Westbrook Pegler, Congress' House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and the Senate committee, headed by the infamous Senator Joe McCarthy, held hearing after hearing, seeking to uncover Communists and conspirators. The Attorney General published a list of individuals and organizations suspected of such activities and those named typically lost their jobs and could not find new employment. With no real evidence, the Photo League found itself on this list. Two years later, an informant testified during a trial that the League was a "Communist front." Membership declined and the media, once supportive, stopped listing the League's shows or reviewing them.

* Angela Calomiris spent seven years posing as a Communist for the FBI's Subversive Squad -- "Red Masquerade", Set in 1942 is based on the real life story of Calomiris, a key witness in the sensational trial of the Communist 11, a group that was convicted of trying to overthrow the U.S. government in 1949.

* *House Un-Am activities committee:*

□□ Like the Arts Students League, the Photo League was investigated by the House of Un-American Activities Committee during the late 1940s. This led to members being blacklisted

During the anti-liberal climate that emerged towards the end of the 1940s the Photo League, with its broadly social outlook, found itself listed by the US Attorney General as a 'subversive' organization. When anti-libertarian ideology became further entrenched and the League was unable to clear itself—there being no procedure for this—its membership drained away and in 1952 it was forced to cease its activities.

* Unfortunately human beings seem to have a need to label people and words often become weapons of discrimination and destruction. The ideals of the socialist orientation of the Photo League are for me closely related to our Unitarian Principals, particularly
The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
World issues today are creating, for many people, lives in which these principals are not always functioning properly.

*On Friday I received Aperture, the premiere magazine of photography and discovered the work of Paolo Pelligrin. His work focuses on the Iraqi Diaspora. More than 2 million Iraqis are living as refugees in other countries. Scott Anderson quotes a friend saying, "What the Americans have created in Iraq is the new Palestine, referring to the Palestinian Refugee crisis and its bloody consequences. This kind of empathetic honest photography has its roots in the work of the Photo League.

* So let's come back to the work of a Photo League member, virtually unknown until recently -- Sonia Handelman Meyer. She was asked to write some things about her experience in the League and I will read some of what she wrote as we look at some of her images and the people that influenced her.

Quote: I first heard of the Photo League from

* **Lou Stoumen** (1917-1991) in Puerto Rico in 1942 (this is her image)

Sonia wrote: I was working for the US Army Signal Corps. When I returned to NYC I walked up the rickety stairs to League Headquarters and took a beginners class.

* I bought a used Rolleicord for a precious \$100 and dared to go out on the **city streets** to photograph the life around me

Soon the guys began to come back from the war and the heady life of Photo League workshops, exhibits, lectures and committee assignments intensified.

* I took eye-heart-soul opening workshops with

Sid Grossman (1914-1955 – this is his photograph), I worked as a paid (!) secretary for a year or so and worked on the Lewis Hine Committee.

***Morris Huberland** (1909-2003 – his photograph) and I volunteered to take stills at Sydenham Hospital in Harlem for a fund raising film.

*(She personally calls this her beautiful boy – a favorite) 60% of the patients at Sydenham had no financial resources for treatment.

* Sonia wrote: I photographed in Spanish Harlem, in Greenwich Village, In midtown Manhattan, at the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, at an anti-lynching rally in Madison Sq. Park, at a Jehovah's Witness convention in Yankee Stadium, and on Coney Island.

* Mostly I photographed children and reflections of my city, rough-edged, tender and very beautiful in its diversity.

* The heartbreaking end of the League coincided with a huge change in my personal life. I got married, my husband went to college and we left NYC for a while.

* I took a workshop from

David Vestal (1924 – this is one of his images), worked as a medical photographer for a short while, very unhappily, and then worked with

* **Ralph Steiner** (1899-1986 whose photograph this is) in a public relations firm – working under Ralph was a great experience – He was one of the major architects of the Photo League.

We were building a family house in the foothills of the Catskills so City girl is introduced to nature.

(I'm sorry I don't have any images of her wildflowers and trees)

She continues: Then the biggest change: our own family arrived and the joys of our son and later our daughter, absorbed my time.

* Prints and negatives were stashed away in boxes and I lost track of all the old friends at the League. In 1978 I was thrilled when Anne Tucker found me and used three of my photographs in a show in NYC called This Was the Photo League.

* In 2002 I moved to Charlotte, NC to be near my son and his family. (I would like to credit Jerry Seigel with this photograph of Sonia) She continues: A few years earlier my son had met Lili Corbus Geer, professor of Art History at University of North Carolina Charlotte and she assigned a student to archive my work. We spent months cleaning, cataloging and rediscovering my work which was organized and printed for an exhibition at Hodges Taylor Gallery.

After so many years of being in the shadow, forgotten by the editors and curators who have shown renewed interest in the League, you can imagine my pleasure, at 90 years, to have my photographs out of their boxes and onto the walls where they can be seen, thought about and enjoyed – and perhaps again take their place in the history of the Photo League.