

Alvin Baltrop

30 April - 19 June 2021

Galerie Buchholz is proud to present an exhibition of photographs by Alvin Baltrop (1948-2004) at our Berlin gallery. Coinciding with Gallery Weekend Berlin, this exhibition is the second solo exhibition of the artist with Galerie Buchholz.

The gallery was first introduced to the work of Alvin Baltrop through the art historian and cultural critic Douglas Crimp (1944-2019). Crimp was instrumental in making Baltrop's work more widely known through his writing and curating, beginning with his *Artforum* cover story for Baltrop in 2008, and then through the exhibitions "Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970 - present" (curated with Lynne Cooke, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2010) and "Greater New York" (MoMA PS1, 2015). The gallery's first times exhibiting Baltrop were in the context of shows organized together with Crimp, first in Berlin ("Pictures, Before and After", 2014) and then in New York ("Before Pictures: New York City, 1967-1977", 2016). Crimp then introduced us to the *Alvin Baltrop Trust*, which is run by Randal Wilcox and Yona Backer of *Third Streaming*. In 2017 we presented our first Baltrop solo exhibition, which was curated by Douglas Crimp, and for which he also wrote an introductory text. In 2019 The Bronx Museum of the Arts presented the first comprehensive exhibition and catalogue of Alvin Baltrop, curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa.

The largest group of photographs left behind by Baltrop depict Manhattan's dilapidated *West Side Piers* and the surrounding area from 1975 to 1986, when it was the city's epicenter of gay social and sexual experimentation. Baltrop's photography poetically documents the excitement and danger of this moment. This May, the Whitney Museum in New York is commemorating the history of this neighborhood through a new public art installation by David Hammons. Titled "Day's End" in reference to Gordon Matta-Clark's famous architectural interventions into *Pier 52*, which Baltrop photographed and which Crimp wrote about in his memoir "Before Pictures", Hammons's sculpture reconstructs the outline of the most notorious Pier. In tandem with the project's realization, the Whitney presented "Around Day's End: Downtown New York, 1970-1986", an exhibition which featured artworks that relate to the pier, including works by Baltrop from the Whitney's collection.

Alvin Baltrop's posthumous legacy is indebted first and foremost to Randal Wilcox, an artist, friend of Baltrop in his lifetime, and a trustee of *The Alvin Baltrop Trust*. In 2012 he published a biographical text on Baltrop in the journal *Atlántica*. The below text is a selected adaptation of that text.

Alvin Jerome Baltrop was born in the Bronx, New York, on December 11, 1948, shortly after Dorothy Mae Baltrop, his mother, moved to the North from Virginia along with her oldest son, James. Alvin's first exposure to art was James's drawings; the younger Baltrop picked up a Yashica-C camera in order to respond to his older brother. Baltrop began his career as a teenager shooting on the streets of New York. Early on he also photographed the patrons of the *Stonewall Inn*, New York's famous gay bar, to which he and other gay teenage friends gained entry by lying about their age, prior to the famous *Stonewall Riots* of 1969. The energy of this downtown community clearly had an effect on Baltrop, as he would later move to the *East Village* and live there for nearly three decades.

Unfortunately his mother, Dorothy Mae Baltrop, who was a devout Jehovah's Witness and was often in conflict with Baltrop over his homosexuality, destroyed most of her son's early photographs and negatives. One surviving print from this period is a photograph from 1965 [included in the present show], depicting a seated elderly woman reading a book at The Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park. This print anticipates many qualities that Baltrop would explore in his later photography. Baltrop frequently captured people engaged in looking or someone or something else. The act of viewing is therefore compounded and overlapping.

In 1969, Baltrop entered the US Navy, where he continued photographing at sea. He later recalled:

“I was just being sent to boot camp when they had the riots at Stonewall. My friends were sending clippings about it. We all used to hang out there, and now I was seeing my friends in the newspaper. I couldn’t tell anyone else about it, but after my first year in the Navy I learned that I could be a whole person... I was a medic. They called me W.D. - witch doctor. I built my developing trays out of medic trays in the sick bay; I built my own enlarger. I took notes about exposures, practiced techniques, and just kept going. I think I perfected my lighting skills there.”

In 1972, Baltrop received an honorable discharge from the Navy and returned to the Bronx. Following his brother’s example, he enrolled in the School of Visual Arts the following year on the *G.I. Bill*. In 1975, he began working as a taxi driver. As Weegee had done decades earlier, Baltrop used a police radio, which he hid in the vehicle, to locate crimes throughout the City that he could photograph during his breaks. It was during this time that he began to visit and take photographs at the *West Side Piers*.

In 1975, New York City was bankrupt. President Gerald Ford’s rejection of loan guarantees to the city was immortalized in the frontpage headline of the *Daily News* on October 30, 1975: “FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD.” New York now had a vast supply of abandoned properties that it couldn’t even afford to tear down. The piers and their adjacent warehouses were adopted by New Yorkers for a variety of purposes. Some went there to sunbathe. Others went to engage in sexual activity. Teenage runaways, the homeless, and mentally ill went there because they had nowhere else to go. Thieves and murderers also went there looking for prey. An increasing number of artists also ventured there to make art.

Eventually, Baltrop quit his job as a taxi driver and purchased a van that he used in his new profession as a mover. Loading his van with cameras, film, food, wine, joints, and a handgun, Baltrop would stay at the piers for days on end, using his vehicle as a place to change clothes, eat, and sleep. In 1975, he dropped out of SVA because he could no longer juggle school, work, and his art. It was at this point that Baltrop fully committed to capturing the piers.

In 1986, the *West Side Piers* were finally demolished by the city, citing public health and safety concerns.

In the 1990s, Alvin Baltrop conducted interviews with people he knew from the piers to capture their memories of that time on tape. Two of these interviews are featured in the exhibition, with Rick and Mark, whose portraits by Baltrop are both in the show.

On the occasion of this exhibition, the renowned American science fiction author Samuel R. Delany, currently living in Philadelphia, wrote a new text, entitled “Looking Through Two Books of Alvin Baltrop’s with My Computer to Help”, reflecting on his time in New York and his memories of this specific area of the city. Delany has also written about this in his autobiographical books “The Motion of Light in Water” and “Dark Reflections”, as well as in “The Real Joe Dicostanzo”.