

## KEEP ON PROWLING

Emily Yan

In his photo series *Subway*, Bruce Davidson captures city dwellers in a quintessential New York City setting during the 1980s, when the deteriorating subway system seemed to have reached its lowest point. Shot in color, *Subway* is a major departure from Davidson's earlier black-and-white film, yet the series reflects Davidson's trademark commitment to capturing life as it is seen. In fact, the bright colors in *Subway* highlight the individuality of the photographs' subjects and clarify our view of them. They render details incapable of being hidden, leading to the view of the subway as a vulnerable place. The colors in the photos seem to say, 'This is reality. There is no hiding from it.' Furthermore, Davidson photographs his subjects up close and at eye level, capturing humans in their most natural element. As a result, we get a glimpse into the rawest, and often most intimate, parts of the human experience. In many ways, Davidson's work is about humanizing an otherwise lifeless backdrop. After all, New York City without its people is merely an assemblage of concrete slabs and metallic framework. By photographing his subjects in the context of their environment, Davidson not only gives vitality and personality to the dark, decaying depths of the New York subway system, but also allows us to acknowledge that our physical place in the world influences all aspects of life—most of all our opportunities and limitations.

The 1980s was a turbulent time in New York's history. The sex trade and drug market thrived in Times Square, while a flourishing crack epidemic and the lingering effects of the 1975 financial crisis further contributed to the atmosphere of disorder that permeated New York City (Chakraborty; Sterbenz). With an expensive camera hanging around his neck, even Davidson fell victim to attacks and muggings ("Train of Thought"). Amidst the violence of the 1980s, people were largely forced to give up personal control of their safety. In photo 12 (out of twenty-three photos from *Subway*), a man holds a gun to another man's head. Their bodies are partially cut out of the frame rather than wholly contained within it, evoking a sense that

whatever is happening between these two men is not just contained between themselves. We, along with the other subway riders, become caught in the midst of two strangers' affairs, emotionally connected by our collective fear. This photo suggests that the interactions happening around us—specifically in this type of space—influence our emotions. We are forced to give up our personal boundaries, as well as control of our emotions and our destinies, to those around us.

The view of the city as a patchwork of shared spaces like subways, where individuals must sacrifice privacy, agency, and ownership, is echoed in James P. Zappen's essay, "New York City as Dwelling Place," an examination of what constitutes the American dream in the present day. Zappen observes that the city—in its crowdedness—forces people to relinquish their "personal space" and, by extension, their "personal life" (157). In photo 1, a close-up shot of a shirtless man wearing a cross necklace, shadows hide the man's eyes as well as the details of the subway car that he is standing in, creating a feeling of uncertainty and intimidation. The anxiety that the image arouses suggests that our reliance on the city forces us to hand over our fates to the unknown. Sunny Stalter-Pace, author of *Underground Movements*, calls it "a submission to unseen forces . . . ; passengers cannot see where they are going, yet they trust that they will arrive at their intended stop" (43). We tend to think of city dwellers as particularly independent and self-driven. Yet according to Stalter-Pace, by riding public transit, individuals give up a fraction of their independence by trusting in the city and its infrastructure, although this does not fully deny New Yorkers their autonomy (33).

However, if we look deeper into Davidson's work, it seems that Stalter-Pace's analysis of the subway-riding New Yorker's loss of independence may be understated. The individuals in Davidson's *Subway* photos, as well as many other riders he did not photograph, relinquish complete control of their journey when they descend into the station. These individuals thus become trapped within the confines of the metropolitan area, unable to attain dreams beyond what is familiar or immediately accessible to them—a theme that Davidson explores through the contrast of inside versus outside. For example, photo 22 was taken from outside the subway car looking in. A girl stares at the camera from behind a woman's extended arm and from

behind the car's closed doors. As viewers on the outside, we feel a sense of freedom that the subjects in the photos don't. The girl's eyes seem to beg, 'Get me out of here,' yet the subway's closed doors deny the opportunity for such liberation, trapping her and the other passengers within its cold, mechanical body.

With its energy and movement, the subway is a microcosm of the metropolis above, yet this vitality seems to suggest a double-sided personality: the city is a place of false hope. Its fast pace belies its suppressive nature; once you make the city your home, you can't escape. To most outsiders, New York City is the ultimate symbol of success, but for locals, the city locks you in and blinds you to the rest of the world. After all, when you can get from home to work to school and back just by hopping on the subway, why would you ever want to leave? The expansive skies peeking through the windows and the advertisements on the wall in some of Davidson's photos appear to mock the subway riders' unfortunate entrapment. In photo 2, a woman with large, fearful eyes stands in front of an advertisement beckoning, "Come home to Carolina," which suggests that while it is worldly and diverse, New York City fails to provide the comforts of home. On the other side of the window, subway tracks converge toward a point in the distant horizon, revealing that there is a whole world outside of the metropolitan area into which few have ventured.

These elements illustrate an escape that was unattainable for many people at the time, and is, to this day, very difficult to attain. In photo 20, a young man wears a souvenir-style t-shirt bearing the iconic New York skyline, yet the real skyline appears distant in the background, suggesting a vision of the city as a place where dreams are unattainable and delusional—a concept propagated by tourists and souvenir shirt designers who have no idea what city life is really like. In photo 7, three children stare with their backs to the camera at a sprawling cityscape complete with a Ferris wheel and an American flag, a token of liberty. The flag, which appears far away and out of focus, seems but a shadow of the American dream. Still, the children in the photo seem to long for a freer place, one that is more welcoming than the one they're trapped inside of. The word "fuck" emblazoned on the window right above their heads is yet another reminder of how harsh and merciless the city can be. By photographing from

inside the subway, Davidson brings us along on his journey and allows us to experience the entrapment that these subway riders feel. As outsiders, we have difficulty empathizing with the locals. But this is precisely what drives Davidson's work—he wants to expose outsiders to what is unknown. Samuel Merrill in "New York's Subterranean Paradoxes," his review of *Subway*, comments that we, as viewers of the subjects in the photos, long to be in their place (4). This is certainly true for outsiders. To them, the city is vibrant, colorful, and dynamic, but most outsiders don't see the side marked by confinement, monotony, and despair.

Zappen explains that the "voyeur" views the city as a *place*, "an orderly disposition and distribution of elements, each in its proper and distinct location," while the "walker" views it as a *space*, "a place to live, to dwell" (155). To view the city as a space is to retain the idea that the city itself offers mobility and opportunities for personal progress. Yet Davidson's portrayal of the city as a stifling, confining place leads me to believe otherwise. In fact, it seems to be outsiders, or "voyeurs," who hold the more optimistic view of the city as a vehicle for success. Regardless, the American dream as we know it today is no longer a heroic quest for success measured by economic and social status. Zappen argues that it has been replaced by a desire for something much simpler: the opportunity "to live and to work in peace and freedom" (163). But when our safety is put in the hands of a gunman and our children's innocence is prematurely destroyed by profanities scribbled on subway windows, it becomes difficult to find peace or freedom. Yet perhaps there are other forms of escape or of attaining ownership, which historically has been an integral part of the American dream and which is still critical to our ability to live (and move) freely. Zappen's discussion of personal space leads me to wonder whether the subway riders' tendency to lose themselves in reveries and newspapers is not a product of antisocial behaviors or even a manifestation of New Yorkers' apathy, but rather an attempt to "carve out personal spaces within the complex configurations and codes and constraints that constitute the totality of a city" (154). In other words, perhaps they are attempts to reclaim ownership and agency in a setting that tends to strip these things away.

In the crowdedness of the underground, we often find ourselves lost and prone to getting swept up in the current around us, unable to forge our own paths or claim a unique identity. Davidson aims to restore humanity to the individuals for whom the subway has become a critical part of daily life, focusing on the human subjects and their relationships with their environment rather than solely on the infrastructure itself. The resulting effect, according to Merrill, is that the individuals in Davidson's work "blend [] seamlessly with their surroundings" (2). Merrill's view offers a new perspective of New York subway riders; rather than rely on their environment, as Stalter-Pace claims, the individuals who ride the subway actually *make up* the landscape. In other words, the people aren't dependent on the city. Rather, the city is dependent on its people. In an era racked with murders, drug deals, and theft, this recognition would allow individuals to claim ownership and control of a shared space that otherwise discourages personal agency. Perhaps the graffiti painted all over the subway walls are simply indications of individuals wanting to leave their personal mark on the city. As Zappen reminds us, the books that subway riders bury themselves in are means of creating personal spaces within a larger, public one. Taken into context, Davidson's work is a way of restoring individuality and agency to a space that encourages conformity and dependency. His close examinations of individuals' lives and their unique stories remind us that the city was created and is defined by the people who inhabit it, and that we are the owners of the spaces we live in. By including distant horizons and dark, encasing shadows in his works, Davidson acknowledges that yes, there are endless opportunities beyond the reach of many urban inhabitants, but instead of fixating on what is out of reach, we ought to refocus our attention on what is right in front of us. Davidson shows us that the old American dream of travelling to far-away places and pursuing idealistic dreams is being corroded. A new dream of finding "peace and freedom"—creating opportunities within our limitations—is slowly taking its place.

Davidson's approach to photographing the subway is indicative of his desire to capture a world that is constantly moving and changing (Cotton 97, 105). Amidst all this change, it's easy to imagine that Davidson's work will no longer be relatable. In some ways this loss of

familiarity is possible—contemporary and future artists could choose to portray the subway completely differently than Davidson. Even Davidson’s underground experience differed immensely from that of his predecessor, Walker Evans, who descended into the subway in 1938 (Lesy). With a camera hidden under his coat, Evans managed to capture mostly candid images of people immersed in conversation, reading the news, or lost in thought. Many of Evans’s photos are tilted, and the people in them appear off-center—a consequence of letting chance and the rocking of the subway dictate his photography. In giving up creative control over his own photography, Evans produced portraits that he himself described as “anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind” (Rosenheim 198). But rather than stay seated and thus forced to rely on his camera and his environment as Evans did, Davidson prowled the subway cars, actively searching for riders to photograph (“Train of Thought”). As a result, the people in Davidson’s photos seem to take command of the camera. They look directly into the lens, and their bodies dominate each frame—a stark contrast to the anonymity of the faces in Evans’s photos. The respective works of Evans and Davidson tell us a lot about how people move through space and shape the world around them. For Evans, who stayed seated and relinquished a good deal of creative control, the people around him were passive and anonymous. Just as Evans hid his camera and tried to blend in, his subjects made no attempt to distinguish themselves from the crowd. For Davidson, who approached each one of his subjects, the people around him were assertive and their personalities were palpable through the photograph.

The subway looks completely different today than it did when Davidson photographed it. Most of the graffiti, as well as the crime associated with it, have been cleared up. But as the graffiti subculture dwindles, the MTA has found new ways to showcase the diversity and individuality of New York City’s inhabitants by installing commissioned artworks in stations and rail cars. It seems that even though our surroundings constantly evolve, we are always searching for novel ways to leave our mark and make the city our own. Although the city has become safer and tamer—some may even say blander—in the past three decades, Davidson’s world is nevertheless a colorful, dynamic,

and chaotic one. It's a city of bright red and orange, at once energizing and overwhelming, as much defined by its vivacity as it is by its chaos. In a way, the dark, gritty, degrading quality of the subway is the city showing its true colors. After all, for most people, urban life is as the subway looks: disordered, unruly, and unsympathetic. Although Davidson's subway looks different than ours, he still manages to capture the unchanging emotions inherent in all of us: fear, longing, and an irrepressible desire to keep searching for ways to leave our mark and to find spaces to call our own. Ultimately, whether our world is bland or vibrant is up to us; we can accept that where we are is where we always will be, or we can keep on prowling.

---

#### WORKS CITED

- Chakraborty, Deblina. "When Times Square Was Sleazy." *CNN*, 18 Apr. 2016, [www.cnn.com/2016/04/18/us/80s-times-square-then-and-now/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/18/us/80s-times-square-then-and-now/index.html).
- Cotton, Charlotte. "Bruce Davidson." *Aperture*, no. 220, Fall 2015, pp. 94-107. *EBSCOhost*, eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=98303da3-fdf7-45d0-83bf-06d8308113a0%40sessionmgr4006&dbdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=109073038&db=asu.
- Davidson, Bruce. *Subway. Magnum Photos*, New York City, 9 Apr. 2017, [www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/bruce-davidson-subway](http://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/bruce-davidson-subway).
- . "Train of Thought: On the 'Subway' Photographs." *The New York Review of Books*, 1 Dec. 2011, [www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/12/01/train-thought-subway-photographs](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/12/01/train-thought-subway-photographs).
- Lesy, Michael. "Faces in the Crowd; To Capture the Vastness of the City, Walker Evans and Bruce Davidson Went Underground." *Boston Globe*, 9 Jan. 2005, pp. 2-3. *ProQuest Central*, [proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/404943801?accountid=12768](http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/404943801?accountid=12768).

- Merrill, Samuel. "New York's Subterranean Paradoxes: A Review of *Subway*." *Opticon* 1826, no. 16, 2014, pp. 1-4. DiVA, doi: [dx.doi.org/10.5334/opt.bp](https://dx.doi.org/10.5334/opt.bp).
- Rosenheim, Jeff L. Afterword. *Many Are Called*, by Walker Evans, Yale University Press, 2004.
- Stalter-Pace, Sunny. *Underground Movements: Modern Culture on the New York City Subway*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. *Project Muse*, [muse.jhu.edu/books/9781613762875](https://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781613762875).
- Sterbenz, Christina. "New York City Used To Be A Terrifying Place." *Business Insider*, 12 July 2013, [www.businessinsider.com/new-york-city-used-to-be-a-terrifying-place-photos-2013-7](http://www.businessinsider.com/new-york-city-used-to-be-a-terrifying-place-photos-2013-7).
- Zappen, James P. "New York City as Dwelling Place: Reinventing the American Dream in Steven Millhauser's *Martin Dressler*, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*." *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2016, pp. 151-164. *ProQuest Central*, p2048-  
[ezproxy.library.nyu.edu.proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/docview/1852705193?accountid=12768](https://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu.proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/docview/1852705193?accountid=12768).