



Avenue du Président Wilson. 1987

# Paris, nothing new

An exhibition of b&w argentic photographs by Olivier Meyer

**Location**

Gonville & Caius College, Trinity Street, Cambridge

**Exhibition**

29 & 30 September 2018

10 am—5 pm

**Contact**

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# Olivier Meyer, photographer

Olivier Meyer is a contemporary French photographer born in 1957. He lives and works in Paris, France. His photo-journalism was first published in *France-Soir Magazine* and subsequently in the daily *France-Soir* in 1981. Starting from 1989, a selection of his black and white photographs of Paris were produced as postcards by Éditions Marion Valentine.

He often met the photographer Édouard Boubat on the île Saint-Louis in Paris and at the Publimod laboratory in the rue du Roi de Sicile. Having seen his photographs, Boubat told him: “*at the end of the day, we are all doing the same thing...*” When featured in the magazine *Le Monde 2* in 2007 his work was noticed by gallery owner Charles Zalber who exhibited his photographs at the gallery Photo4 managed by Victor Mendès.

## Work

His work is in the tradition of humanist photography and Street photography, using the same material as many of the forerunners of this style: Kodak Tri-X black and white film, silver bromide prints on baryta paper, Leica M3 or Leica M4 with a 50 or 90 mm lens. The thin black line surrounding the prints shows that the picture has not been cropped.

His inspiration came from Henri Cartier-Bresson, Édouard Boubat, Saul Leiter. His portrait of Aguigui Mouna sticking his tongue out like Albert Einstein, published in postcard form in 1988, and subsequently as an illustration in a book by Anne Gallois served as a blueprint for a stencil work by the artist Jef Aérosol in 2006 subsequently reproduced in the book *VIP*. His photographs were exhibited at the Photo4 gallery in Paris together with photographs by Ralph Gibson and at The Rangefinder Gallery in Chicago, Illinois.

## Collections

- Musée de la photographie, Charleroi, Belgium
- Musée juif de Belgique, Bruxelles, Belgium

## Bibliography

- *Paris Nothing new*, 2012.
- *Kotel Beyond the wall*, 2012.
- *London Nothing new*, 2015.



Quai de l'Hôtel de Ville. 1986

# Argentive prints by Toros Aladjajian

Toros Aladjajian was born in Haifa in 1945. He lived with his parents and family in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem where he learned the art of printing argentic films with Elia Kahvedjian of Elia Photo Service.

In 1965 he moved to Europe and worked in Paris from 1967 for Pictorial Service.

He did printing for Henri Cartier-Bresson, Willy Ronis, Robert Doisneau, Josef Koudelka, amongst other famous photographers.

For Toros Aladjajian the photographer is a *composer*, the printer an *interpreter*.

The works exhibited at Caius & Gonville College are gelatin silver prints on Ilford Warmtone baryta paper, printed by Toros Aladjajian from the original negatives.

The prints are numbered and signed on the back.



Notre-Dame de Paris. 1991

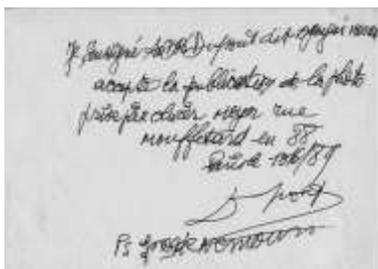
# The story behind a photograph



1. Rue Mouffetard, 1988



4. Postcards in 1989,  
Editions Marion Valentine



5. « PS : pas de Nemours... »

1988

Olivier Meyer took a photograph of Mouna Aguigui sticking his tongue out like Albert Einstein (fig. 1), the famous photograph of Albert Einstein on his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday taken by Arthur Sasse reproduced on the front page of the newspaper *Le Mouna Frères* (fig. 2) and he gave Mouna a print of this photograph. Mouna was a sort of anarcho-ecolo-nonconformist who used to harangue crowds of students in the Latin Quarter; he was regularly standing for election in the 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, although never elected. The same year, the photograph was published without the photographer's consent in a book called *Aguigui Mouna* written by Anne Gallois (fig. 3), he was not informed, his name was not mentioned and the photograph had been cropped.

1989

The photograph was edited by Editions Marion Valentine as a postcard (fig. 4) with the appropriate copyright; Mouna gave his consent for the publication, specifying in a post scriptum that his real name was Dupont, but not DuPont de Nemours (fig. 5). He told Olivier Meyer at the time that Albert Einstein had sent him the photograph by Arthur Sasse, and that Albert Einstein had also agreed to be a member of his "Club des Aguiguistes".

2006

Olivier Meyer discovered that a well-known street-art artist, Jef Aérosol, had used in 2006 his photograph as a blueprint, to make a painting on canvas (fig. 6) subsequently reproduced in his book *VIP* (he did not know who was the author of the photograph). Olivier Meyer gave him a retroactive authorization to use his photograph, in return he was authorized to use the visual of his painting... and tell the story of this photograph, from street-photography to street-art.

2012

The photograph appeared again in its original form in the book *Paris Nothing new* together with 28 photographs of Paris.

2014

The photograph was made available on Wikimedia Commons and used on Wikipedia.



2. Albert Einstein by Arthur Sasse



3. In a book called *Aguigui Mouna* in 1988



6. Painting on canvas  
© Jef Aérosol, 2006

# Interview by Patricia Frischer, Founder and Coordinator of the San Diego Visual Arts Network, California



Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard. 1990

OM: Édouard Boubat was a very nice man. The poet Jacques Prévert gave him the nickname *peace correspondent*, as opposed to *war correspondent*. I used to meet him quite often, by chance, either when we were taking photographs in the same areas of Paris or at the laboratory Publmod where we were both clients. I asked him once if I could show him some of my photographs, he accepted very kindly and told me after: “at the end of the day, we are all doing the same thing...”

**Patricia Frischer: Has your process changed over time?**

Olivier Meyer: I have always done the same thing, always taken the same sort of photographs. But I often kept some photographs without showing them, developed but not printed, assuming that nobody would be interested. Now I dare show them, especially since I heard Charles Zalber, owner of the gallery Lucie Weill & Seligmann, say that I was able to make photographs “out of nothing” and that he liked them because “they are beautiful, simply”. I value the idea that something can be beautiful *simply*, it doesn’t need to be complicated or sophisticated.

**PF: Is there anything unique about your methods and can you explain anything that the non-photographer might find interesting about the process? What is special about silver bromide printed on baryta paper?**

OM: Using the argentic films and paper is not unique, it has been used a lot. What is perhaps becoming unique is sticking to this process, which is time consuming, expensive and a lot more complicated than numeric. But the slow revelation of the image, the time elapsed between the shooting and the viewing of the print are for me essential steps in the process of artistic creation. I also find that it is easier to photograph a person holding an old Leica camera, with all the legend of photo-journalism behind it, rather than with a modern camera; it is not intrusive, almost friendly.

**PF: What time of day is the best for you to work?**

OM: I need the light of the sun because I never use a flash, but otherwise any time is good.

**PF: Can you tell me a personal story about meeting with Édouard Boubat?**

*The slow revelation of the image, the time elapsed between the shooting and the viewing of the print are for me essential steps in the process of artistic creation*

*With both influences, you have the framework which sets the limits, and within that framework you can choose not to follow the rules*

rules. I discovered Saul Leiter recently, when his work was shown for the first time in a European museum at the Fondation Cartier-Bresson (Paris) in 2008. With both influences, you have the framework which sets the limits, and within that framework you can choose not to follow the rules.

**PF: How do you title your work?**

OM: It is mainly informative: location, year, short description of the subject if needed.

**PF: Are you purposely trying to make these works come from another period ie. 1950 and does this reflect a favourite point in history?**

OM: No, definitely not. But I am deliberately avoiding what I dislike: modern cars, plastic bags, tracksuits, etc. The subtitle *nothing new* is not a principle as such, it just happens to be like that. The miracle with argentic photography, is that a photograph taken 20 or 30 years ago may suddenly appear on your contact sheet when you were looking for something else.

**PF: Where do you fit in the march of art history?**

OM: I could probably be described as a humanist photographer and a street photographer, although these currents are more related to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; perhaps it would be right to say that my work is in the same style.

**PF: What was the worst thing that anyone ever said about your work?**

OM: People are kind enough not to say anything unpleasant in front of me. One day I was at the book shop in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and I saw one American lady showing two of her friends one of my postcards (*Two Nuns, rue de Sèvres, 1985*), it was clear they were enjoying looking at it, that is a very nice memory. I am sorry, I think I didn't answer your question very well...

**PF: Henri Cartier-Bresson and Saul Leiter are influences in what way?**

OM: Henri Cartier-Bresson is the forerunner of a style involving geometry, rigorous framing (the black line witnessing that the photograph has not been cropped) and of course, what is called *The decisive moment* named after the English title of his famous book *Images à la sauvette*. He still influences many photo-reporters or street photographers. Saul Leiter is different, he has a more poetic vision of the city, I would say that I learned from Saul Leiter that a photograph can work well even without sticking to the previous



Two Nuns, rue de Sèvres. 1985

# Bodies, lenses, bokeh, etc.

**Bodies:** My first Leica camera, which I still use, is a M3 n° 783 631 made in 1955 with a double stroke lever; one of my M4 was made in 1968, another one in 1969. Why have more than one camera body? And is it appropriate to practice street photography with several bodies, round the neck, on one shoulder, in one hand?

The viewfinder of the M3 is best for 50 or 90mm lenses, whereas the viewfinder of the M4 is better suited to a 35mm or a 50mm lens. Being able to see what is surrounding the frame is useful when one has to decide what should be inside or outside the frame. For that reason, I tend to keep both eyes open, the right one looking through the viewfinder and the left one outside, in order to see a still or moving item which might complete the composition. Having several bodies allows you, therefore, to use almost simultaneously either wide angle, standard or telephoto. Having said that, discretion and invisibility being essential for practicing street photography, it would often be inappropriate to overplay the David Seymour or Robert Capa look.

**50mm:** I have three 50mm lenses: a Summicron made in 1957, a collapsible Elmar made in 1960 (which reminds me of the gesture of James Mason in the Mankiewicz movie *Five Fingers*), and a near focusing Summicron made in 1957. With its removable spectacle viewfinder attachment this lens focuses to 19". It is ingenious and versatile, and if I had to keep one lens only, it would be this one.



Rue des Ecoles. 1990

**90mm:** The black line surrounding the picture shows that it has not been cropped. When one is, as I am, aiming to keep the black line, one is at the same time worried about having unwanted items surrounding the subject. I dislike plastic bags, most modern cars, tracksuits and sweatpants, and I try very hard to keep them out of the frame. A 90 mm lens is a good answer to this problem, as it reduces both the frame and the depth of field. What is out of focus (also called bokeh, see below) brings a creative effect of blur. My Elmar 90 mm is collapsible and relatively small when not in use, although its weight is still noticeable. It has a removable spectacle viewfinder for macrophotography, but this is taking us out of the field of traditional street photography.

**35mm:** I don't use this lens very much, but it is light and compact and easy to keep in a pocket. It can be useful for a street photographer as it gives an important depth of field, and enables one to photograph, discretely, a subject placed at the edge of the frame, facing away from the camera. For this reason, I sometimes have used a 21mm lens which amplifies these effects, although the perspective effect caused by the extreme wide angle can distort the image if one isn't pointing the camera straight.

**Bokeh** is a Japanese word meaning out of focus. It is used to describe the effect of unsharpness where part of the picture is out of focus. This effect is more visible at wide aperture, as small aperture gives more depth of field. The bokeh technique can be used where part of the image is intended to be out of focus, as in the pictorial effects of impressionism or pointillism. Some lenses produce a good bokeh, some are better for bokeh either before or after focus, some can be used for both and some don't give a good bokeh at all. We can see examples of bokeh in a lot of movies, especially old ones; when the subject at the front gets out of focus, it means that the centre of attention will shift to the subject at the back.

# Is there an unseen world?

**Saul Leiter:** It's quite possible that my work represents a search for beauty in the most prosaic and ordinary places. One doesn't have to be in some faraway dreamland in order to find beauty.

**Georges Perec:** Many, if not most, of these things have been described, listed, photographed, counted or recorded. My purpose in these pages has been rather to describe the rest: the things we don't notice, that nobody sees, the things that don't matter: what happens when nothing takes place, but time, people, cars and clouds.



Boulevard des Invalides. 1987  
*No parking except official vehicles*

**Edouard Boubat:** I operate with what I am given; when I am not on the other side of the world I can photograph a flower in the garden, the light on my window or my cane chair.

**Edward Hopper:** It was suggested by glimpses of lighted interiors seen as I walked along city streets at night, probably near the district where I live, although it's no particular street or house, but is really a synthesis of many impressions.

**Walker Evans:** Most people would look at those things and say, "Well, that's nothing. What did you do that for? That's just a wreck of a car or a wreck of a man. That's nothing. That isn't art."

**Menachem Mendel Schneerson:** The genius of the artist is his ability to detach himself from the externality of the object he is portraying, to look deeply into the object and see its essence. He must then be able to express that essence so that whoever views the painting sees a new dimension that he, the viewer, would never have noticed in the object itself.

**Lincoln Kirstein:** Even the inanimate things, bureau drawers, pots, tires, bricks, signs, seem waiting in their own patient dignity, posing for their picture.

**Garry Winogrand:** Photography is about finding out what can happen in the frame. When you put four edges around some facts, you change those facts.



## Index

Photographs n° 2, 11 and 19 are in the collection of the Musée de la photographie, Charleroi, Belgium.

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