

New York, Eternal City?

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Evelyn Hofer: New York

by Evelyn Hofer,
ed. Andreas Pauly, Sabine Schmid,
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Few photographers have more serenely outstared the momentary than Evelyn Hofer, a 20th century German émigré who spoke plainly of trying to capture eternity. If she thought the key to successful portraiture lay in observing her subjects “much before you start to take the picture, and then leading them back to something you saw,” this was a leading back that found its object not in the past, exactly, not in time, but in those triumphs of vision lying a little outside it. History, mere history, she had seen enough of; it had had its way. She was eleven when her

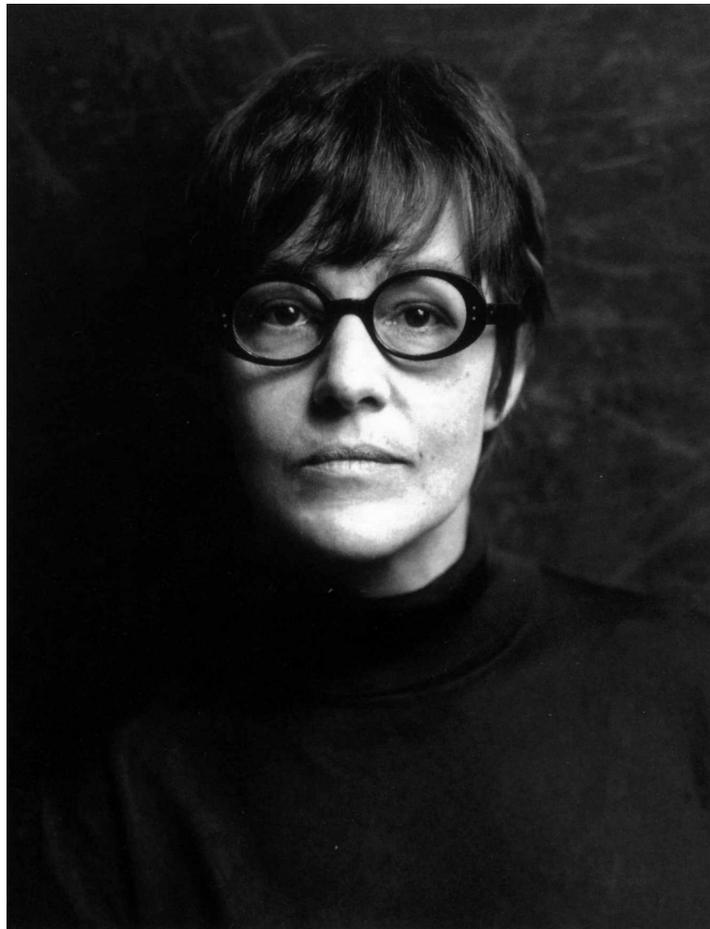
family fled Nazi Germany in 1933, trading Marburg for Geneva. Then to Madrid, where her father, a businessman with something of a penchant for adventure, joined the Republican fighters in the Spanish Civil War. When Franco came to power, the family fled to Mexico City. There was to be another step on this harried journey, but it was made for other reasons altogether, reasons that were Evelyn's alone. She came to New York by herself in 1946, 24 years old, in her new surroundings very much at sea. A datebook she kept bears the following note: "New York—awful."

Though photography had brought her, she was slow to turn the camera on her adopted city in a sustained way; she was never quite at home in the bombast and hurry, which seemed poised to make a mock of her painterly attention, her steadfast effort to see through to "an inside value, some interior respect" in the people and places she looked on. The three working poor who look up from a bar on the Bowery are taking in some entirely new element—there is something quietly incredulous in their expressions—and still this "archetypal exile," as she was called once, must be an intimate of sorts, for why else would they afford her the rare currency of a held glance, the city being what it is? She needs more than a moment, and something persuades them to give it. A lovely patience, a sure feel for the still center of things—where architectural and human presences are seen to inhabit a monumentally intimate space of silence—animate Hofer's New York photographs, recently reissued in revised form by Steidl, more than a half century after first appearing alongside text by V.S. Pritchett in *New York Proclaimed*. (The original pictures date from the mid-sixties, with additions from the next decade now mixed in.) That verb in the earlier title never quite did justice to the ungrasping eloquence and the unsimple mission of Hofer's images, which we can more fully appreciate now that they come to us without accompaniment.



It was Hofer's peculiar fate, for all her self-possession, to become known principally for collaborating with writers on a series of city portraits, from the time Mary McCarthy sought her out for *The Stones of Florence*. There followed projects with Pritchett on Dublin and London as well as New York, and with Jan Morris on Spain, among others. In this way, a singular artist came to be misjudged as a gifted accompanist (her lot, otherwise, was relative obscurity: Hofer's work never made it into a museum in the US in her lifetime; the *New York Times* critic Hilton

Kramer called her, in a gesture that elicited a laugh of acknowledgment from the artist, “the most famous unknown photographer” of her day). To be sure, Hofer, who died in 2009, never called attention to herself. She tended to deflect personal questions and pointedly eschewed the self-portrait, with one striking exception: the unaffectedly elegant woman—sharp glasses, lightly tousled hair—who looks into the camera seems an emblem of that “quality of pure observation” that Kramer saw across her work; in her near-expressionlessness, her refusal to put on or reveal any merely passing emotion, we nonetheless sense the presence of a sympathetic intelligence. Emerson, whose own journey through Italy she sought to capture in a final collaboration with the scholar Evelyn Barish—ingeniously effacing traces of modernity along the way, for instance by covering parked cars in black cloth—would have approved.



Yet if Hofer's was an unsentimental eye, it was at the same time a searchingly human one, and the paradoxical impress of her portraits lies in the way, by keeping a certain distance, by stepping back perceptibly from the twin immediacies of time and contingency, they come that much closer to capturing the elusive quality of an individual's presence (explaining her admiration for Rembrandt to an interviewer once, she landed on this terrific aside: "Because he paints the soul of people, no?"). It was in Dublin that Hofer felt she had taken some of her most revelatory pictures, in spite of finding many people "shy and reluctant to be photographed"—kindred spirits, that is. She wrote to Pritchett:

"You and so many others say that Dublin is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe—this, from the very beginning, I never felt. However, I found the people much more fascinating—and have taken a great deal of portraits and have perhaps come closer to them than in any of the other books."

Dublin: A Portrait comes replete with pictures of eminences, especially of the literary variety. Joyce seems to be working away at some sorrowing thought, eyes closed in contemplation, but it is only his death mask we've come across (Hofer had an extraordinary gift for still lives, of which this could be a sort of slant example). We find the poet Patrick Kavanagh, meanwhile, at his living ease, turning toward us with a gently penetrating expression, a paunch englobing his wool sweater, a glass of Scotch at his side. Yet Hofer's Dublin does not lean too heavily on cameos from good and great names, instead drawing its indelible character from those anonymous Dubliners, the shy and reluctant ones, who stand out in all their individual distinctness—a young girl with her bicycle, a ballad singer, a group of footballers, a somehow mirthful trio of gravediggers. They are drawn very finely and still possess something of the archetypal resonance Hofer took, in part, from August Sander.



With her picture of two orphans being watched over by a father who seems, in his unfussed solicitude, for once to deserve the name, we are in the presence of a master; the picture crystallizes something essential about Hofer's attitude to her subjects, her plane of regard. If the straightforward title ("Orphans and Priest") grounds the image in the tradition of socially oriented photography, as one entry in the shifting catalog of human conditions, it goes deeper than the standard fare, not least because there are no token signs of privation (and her typical compositional elegance instead), though there is certainly pain, deep pain at that—an emergent weight of the self and its troubles, which one of the children guards, looking in and on, and which the other tries uncertainly to share with Hofer, something hurt but forgiving entering his

gaze. What resonates is that Hofer has given each individual in the triptych the chance to be and to express more than his place in a determined social relation. Though only one of the three is looking toward her, you sense that each has come to trust her in the long moment of exposure, has some further faith in her presence there; each has, against whatever reluctance, taken up the invitation to reveal something of himself—up to and including his soul, it may be, and then for eternity.



The picture calls to mind a remark in which Hofer expressed her whole ambition as a portraitist, this with an enigmatic phrase (*italicized below*) that makes us pause over its meaning:

“What I try to achieve is a certain *communication of contact* between the person and me. I always prefer to take rather long exposures. Like a second. I feel that I get the attention of the person more with long exposures. The person being photographed has to concentrate too. We get our concentration together, and then something happens.”

Paul Celan, who once defined the poem as a handshake—no more, no less—would have appreciated Hofer’s formulation, bringing together as it does the senses of speech and touch. Like her great satisfaction at having “come closer” to her subjects in Dublin, the phrase brings into focus the determined intimacy of her work, the primary weight it accords the reciprocating gaze (on either side of the lens), for all its dispassionate clarity. Hofer was at pains to emphasize that she didn’t like “to spy” on people; in an age distinguished by its rapt discovery of the freewheeling liberties of street photography, Hofer’s pictures continued to find themselves on something a touch foreign: an ethic of slow and open collaboration, an unhurried effort to make lasting contact. Her instrument of choice, it bears mentioning, was a 4x5 Linhof: an unhideable, tripod-bound brick of a camera.

The revelations of the new volume are many. In New York, where she built a somewhat ambivalent career in magazine work and, more sustainingly, formed friendships with two fellow emigres, the painter Richard Lindner and illustrator Saul Steinberg, Hofer got her concentration together with a striking array of unlikenesses and—something happens in these pictures, yes—found a way to stand them before us in a trick of perfect stillness. The young African-American man she photographs atop his bike, the Queensboro Bridge looming in the background—with the boy presented in near-profile, the bridge and the bike’s handlebars running parallel—becomes an equally commanding presence, for all his lanky adolescence; his sure stare holds the foreground. A stout Italian-American meets us by his hot dog stand with all the pride of place, planting

himself there firmly, a kind of amusement just perceptible on his face. From within the stand's semidarkness, a woman and boy—his mother and son, we guess—look out on the picture-taking as if on the unfolding of some minor mystery, the boy somberly curious, the woman too exhausted to be. Three men sharing a bench in Central Park seem like local statuary, keeping a good neighborly distance from one another; two are reading the paper; the other, busy grimacing at the air. A woman in Chinatown fixes Hofer with a skeptical look, eyebrows raised, but she doesn't shy away from the lens (no one with a flower affixed brightly to her sweater could shrink from the occasion). Hofer would not have minded her ambivalence—and this woman, anyway, claims the new volume's cover.





As faithfully as she attended to the human subject, in all of her city portraits—in Dublin or Florence or New York—Hofer drew as much from the implied dramas of uninhabited space, whether these were minute interiors or grand edifices, forgotten corners or wide sweeps, deserted as a matter of the hour or as a matter of course: again and again, she was drawn to the formal complexities and, beyond this, the enigmatic stillness of such sites, so rich with human suggestion. In the cities through which she moved, waiting for people to leave the frame could be as active an effort as fixing them within it, what with her preference for long exposures. It was a difficulty that enshrined a mood: “I needed much patience to wait until my shutter was clear of people,” she said of her efforts in Italy—and how much truer must this have been in New York. Hofer’s picture of “Pine Street on Sunday” somehow conjures a contemplative—and, yes, an

almost religious—state from an all but deserted street, a car parked in the distance, and a couple of manhole covers in the foreground, these last banishing the specter of preciousness. Her black-and-white, slant take on a row of brownstones makes out of so much mundaneness an entrancing riot of form. Andreas Pauly, who served for many years as Hofer’s assistant and collaborated with Sabine Schmid on selecting the images for the new book, stresses that Hofer found New York to be, to the end, among her most vexing subjects—an extension, it seems, of the fact that she never entirely made peace with the city’s harrying immediacies, never surrendered her own “inside value” to the same. Whatever the difficulties, to look out with Hofer over a constellation of roads and highways a little south of Midtown West (we are far from rush hour) is to feel that she did come to know a kind of peace in the city, found much that invited contact and sustained contemplation. A lucky thing—her pictures now perform this work for us in turn.



I hope that these photographs will draw a new audience to the rest of Hofer's remarkable and overlooked oeuvre, which is strikingly various for all its singleness of purpose. (Later this year, Steidl plans to publish an expansive collection of her portraits of people and place, under the title *Encounters*.) To get the full measure of her genius requires a bit of border-crossing; it's no use staying within city lines. To see how richly Hofer can conjure the gravity and dimensionality of an interior, you might turn to her pictures of the Villa Medici in Rome. Her human portraits may reach their most intimately affecting register in the Swiss village of Soglio, where she made a home for part of the year. Later on, when illness got in the way of travel, she turned to what was close at hand, focusing from the confines of her apartment on a series of still lives in which she seems—to take after her remark on Rembrandt—to paint the soul of objects.



There is also a portrait of her New York friend Saul Steinberg, at once whimsical and probing, that I looked for in this collection—it may have been kept from consideration because it was taken a little ways off on Long Island. Steinberg asked Hofer to take a dual portrait: of himself and—as the caption has it—himself as a little boy. The younger Steinberg is a photograph within the photograph, with the qualifier that he is life-sized and well enough on his feet, a cut out; the elder, 64 at the time, grasps the child's hand. The resemblance between the two figures, the young Jewish émigré and the man he became, is striking. In the calm of the room, historical time is sounded, contained, and serenely—almost casually—transcended. “Taking him by the hand like that was completely natural” for her friend, Hofer commented: “The expression came about all by itself.” The gesture is made, and then captured, with neither winking irony nor forced solemnity. We know it can only be a fiction, the contact this picture communicates. And still the image, like any other by Hofer, invites depths of concentration, asks the same patience it instantiates. One last remark of Hofer's seems apt:

“I have found that so-called simple people...have a much easier time being photographed, or, I should say, having their portrait taken. They seem to be more grounded. They have never asked me, ‘What shall I do?’ They say instead, ‘Here I am: that's me.’”

Those are five ordinary words whose profundity—all unsuspected—it takes a great photographer to uncover. Stay with this portrait a while and what stands revealed, between the two figures, is that most singular of things, human character. *There he is: that's him*: in this way Hofer's work, while turning decisively away from the momentary, achieves its air of epiphany.

