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1 Jacob Riis, Hester Street, early 1890s

Lynnette Widder  
**New York City**  
 Three Pictures, Three Streets

The history of Modernity comprises both heroic stories and prosaic, that is nothing new. That the story of the written word in the city is essential to that history may be proven by its appearance in heroic and prosaic versions of the Modern, from literary reverie to materialist analysis. Without pretense to exhaustive research or comprehensive scholarly method, this text will look at three moments, arrested in three photographs, as testimonies to the conscious and subconscious relationship between word, cityscape and popular imagination. Photography is considered here primarily as a cultural, not an authorial, artifact, with full consciousness of the limitations of that approach; but it is perhaps not coincidental that the photographs chosen were all taken by itinerant New Yorkers.

New York is the city, which, in its own mind and in the popular imagination, has claimed Modernity as its essence. But how do its street scenes, pulled from the prosaic by means of photography, bear that self-image out?

#### **New York City, Circa 1900**

The photographs of Jacob Riis, the Danish immigrant whose photographs are credited with marking the beginnings of social work within a reformist (if philosophically conformist) agenda in New York City, clearly moved the prosaic into the realm of an heroic agenda – in Riis' case, a moral higher ground from which to pity the urban poor and to stage their reform as an engine of landlord profit. Unwittingly perhaps, too, his photographs are witness to a fundamental shift in the role of text within the streetscape (Fig. 1).

The lower storeys of the buildings in the street of «Jewtown,» one of the areas of the Lower East Side on which Riis focused, support multiple billboards and canopies. Most, written in Hebrew lettering, likely spelling out Yiddish words, are covered with large characters, centered or justified, highly contrasted on a light or dark field. One smaller sign depicts the only image-based information, two icon-like renderings of bowler hats above a hand whose index finger points down to the store where these hats are sold. Image or icon-based communication has not yet significantly entered the streetscape depicted.

Riis' accompanying narrative makes much of the ethnic, and in two other cases racial, identities of the neighborhoods and populations he described on the Lower East Side, the ghetto community on which his reportage focused. «Jewtown» is no exception: «The tenements grow taller and the gaps in their ranks close up rapidly [...]. No need of asking here where we are. The jargon of the street, the signs of the sidewalk, the manner and dress of the people, their unmistakable physiognomy, betray their race at every step [...]. There is no mistaking it: we are in Jewtown.»<sup>1</sup>

The accompanying photograph would belie Riis' assertion, at least to a contemporary eye. There is nothing in the clothing or «physiognomy» of the figures peopling his street scene, which seems out of the ordinary. The dark coats and hats on the beardless men, the short pants, caps and boots on the boys, the simple mid-calf pinafore on the young woman connote only an historical period, not a social or ethnic identity. Text alone connotes the identity upon which Riis relies – this, despite the large lettering for «Callahan» on the firewall of a building towards the end of the street. The Irish are apparently not far off.

Hebraic lettering appears in shop windows as well as on canopies and on the signs, which obstruct the windows in the storey above street level. If one follows the sight lines of the people on the street, however, the signage seems entirely secondary to the life of the street. No one looks up; no one surveys the shop fronts. Moving along the sidewalk, littered with barrels, saw horses, displays and pushcarts, seems to hold the attention of the people in the photography. Many choose not to move at all, but rather to stand in small groups, their attention on one another. The street seems to function as an extension to the sidewalk: it, too, is full of people. There is no sign of trolleys or non-pedestrian traffic; this is a city street in which the sounds of modernity, the noises of the industrializing city, have not yet arrived.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, the street was without doubt noisy. The sounds of feet on pavement, carts pulled, hawkers, constant conversation – simply, of a concentration of people engaged in commerce – created the medium of communication in which the people pictured navigated. The city was audible, and audibly intelligible. Text was its helpmate, but as long as the sounds of words remained intelligible in the urban environment, text literally and figuratively hovered above the space of communication. The visual aspects of streetlife could assume increased importance as its audible aspects were lost in the hum of motorized infrastructure.

### **New York City, Circa 1945**

Rudy Burckhardt arrived in New York with an income from an inheritance, a vocation for photography and a fascination with slumming, as a way of escaping his upper-class Swiss lineage. His photographs of Manhattan fit well within the school of street photography, which emerged in the late 1930s with the works of Wee Gee, Bernice Abbott, or Walker Evans.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because that fascination was satisfied in his private life, his photographs seem less concerned with the need to make spectacular the activities he framed. One favored subject was the nature of text in the Depression-era and wartime city (Fig. 2).

Faded, compromised by the building's rendered brick subsurface, cropped by the photograph's top edge, an advertisement for a music publisher addresses the trajectory of Fourth Avenue to the building's north. Below it, an enormous two-building-wide Coca Cola billboard dominates the exposed party wall fronting Astor Place. Both use urban text at the service of advertising and both are cleverly positioned in one of the few Haussmannian moments in the Manhattan grid. But the two differ in tactics. The music publisher's sign, with its double border, black background, and hierarchical use of letter size relative to the importance of information, is an enlarged piece of print text. It does its best to fill the entire ground available to it; it relies upon an attention span focused long enough to read from line to line. The Coca Cola sign employs relatively little text.



2 Rudy Burckhardt, Astor Place, New York, 1947

Its configuration is customized to the proportions of the billboard; its extent is defined by the gloved elbows of the gigantic young woman who leans forward on an edge delineated by a black line, holds her soda (but does not look at it or drink it), and looks, slightly wall-eyed, onto the city. Logo, repeated at two sizes, text, image, product and suggested space are of equal importance; the need to read is reduced to a minimum. A quick glance accesses the same information as a hard stare, but the hard stare is rewarded by the woman on the billboard, looking back from her suggested space.

Text in New York City circa 1950 seems to have taken into account a variety of ways of looking, not all of which are reading. The storefronts below the billboard are in equal measure glass and lettering, a view to space beyond and foreground information. Straight words alternate with image – three pipes in the case of the pipe store, two Coca Cola medallions at the lunch counter. Neon light, although not neon signage, appears in the shops, although the photograph is day-lit. A variety of visual offerings is meant to pull foot traffic off the street.

That there is plenty to catch the eye of the passerby seems particularly appropriate in a photograph peopled by figures in motion. These are stores, which do not cater to the home economy or the purposeful shopper. They serve the needs of a daytime population – haircuts, smokes, watch repair, neckwear, the 15-minute lunch – which, as the photograph bears out, is almost exclusively male. Some walk in pairs, most alone. The positions of their heads, caught in slightly blurry stop-action, describes their lines of sight, and their ways of looking, not at each other but at the passing streetscape. Text provides variety.

Only two cars, one parked and one turning a corner, appear in the photograph. The evidence of the automobile, however, is indicated by the flock of cir-



3 Zoe Leonard, Brooklyn, 2001

cular traffic signs ballasted by concrete bases. «No Left Turn» is printed in block letters, with «left» written largest, at the circle's diameter. The sign's geometry, stand and base, placement in the street all support its communicative value. «Left» is the salient information, «turn» the secondary information and «no» already understood by the driver: there is no reason to post a sign allowing left turns. In that sense, the words function not purely as legible text, but also not purely as icon; it is no wonder that words have almost entirely disappeared from road signs since. Still incipient on the street of 1950, the regulatory function of urban text is lodged somewhere between word and connoted object, located just above the heads of pedestrians but in the habitual sightline of city drivers.

### New York City, Circa 2000

Zoe Leonard was born in New York State and grew up in New York City; her series *Analogue* is the evidence of ten years of travelling within a secondary world-wide economy of used clothes, second-quality appliances, repaired goods and makeshift or ephemeral places of business. The subjects she chose to document in her home city are, in many cases, lodged within new immigrant populations; others

reflect a shrinking commercial niche for repairing, rather than replacing, possessions. In both cases, these New York stores are the heirs to the small-scale street commerce, which characterize the cities of Riis and Burckhardt.

The city still is awash in text, that is obvious, but it is only in the company of a child learning how to read that many city dwellers may recognize that text as intelligible and meaningful. The process of learning to read creates a consciousness by which repetitive but arbitrary signs transform into meaning. Every snippet of text is a challenge to a new reader testing his or her capacity to decode it. But that moment passes quickly, as the act of decoding loses its magic and the meanings decoded reveal their general banality. Urban text becomes again subsumed, although on the city street circa 2000, it now adheres not only to signage and advertising, but to almost everything worn or carried by the people who move through the cityscape (Fig. 3).

The Brooklyn bodega in the photograph, not unlike the storefronts of New York streets a hundred years before, has composed its window in an alternation, albeit haphazard, of text and product. Bottles of cough syrup, disinfectant and milk of magnesia line the wood shelves behind the glass, the tiny writing on their labels almost irrelevant. It is impossible to know whether they are on display or simply stored, whether their purpose in the window is to represent to the world what the store sells or to frustrate shoplifting by occupying a location presumably behind the register. Text, so logically used to convey each store's selling point in earlier streetscapes, obscures at least half of the shelved product. Promotional stickers, almost in penitence at the base of the storefront, make up most of the text. It is text that has been completely branded. Shape, typography, color, diction have all coalesced to produce brand identity. Newport sells pleasure, Kool is the house of menthol. Not unlike the word clusters in Shakespeare's plays, these text snippets have formed a kind of chemical bond. Use one in this context and the others will follow, trailing with them their own visual language of image and graphics.

Any pretense to critical theory aside, something significant has happened to language in the city since 1950. It has become part of an alloy of visual communication. All official street signs now use the same font and the same colors. All traffic signs follow the same nation-wide icon-based code. All brands go to great lengths to create the alloy, which will define their market shares, and expand upon them. That the need to read text *per se* has been eliminated is expedient in a city of cultivated hyperactivity. More than that, however, reading now seems to occur at a supratextual, visceral level, which allows decoding to occur without the needs for words to carry meaning. The last refuge of text as meaning is the quaintly printed sign «We accept WIC checks». Its localized meaning, relevant only to a particular socioeconomic group receiving food stamps, and its position outside the forces of a market economy mean that no shortcuts are needed. The people who need this information will take the time to read it, regardless of the form it takes them to do so.

There is not much sense in making pronouncements about the future of text in a city such as New York. In essence, the motivations for placing text in the cityscape have not changed much: commerce and regulation. The initial importance of vision-based communication and later, of recognition rather than reading-based cognition can be identified, at historical remove, as having changed

the way text was dealt with first in 1900, then in 1950. The current textual streetscape seems qualified by a tug of war between immediate, branded recognizability, and localized, highly specific message. It seems little different from the discourse of the global and the regional played out elsewhere.

#### Notes

**1** Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, New York, 1971, p. 85.

**2** See Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933*, Cambridge, Mass. 2004 for a thorough historical account of the acoustic transformation of urban America in this period.

**3** See Phillip Lopate with Vincent Katz, *Rudy Burckhardt*, New York 2004, pp. 7–14.