

PHOTOGRAPHY

Show combines art and politics

"Photographic Crossroads"—the retrospective show of the Photo League—is a welcome contrast to much modern photography. A collection of some 200 photographs by amateur and professionals who believed in putting cameras "back into the hands of honest photographers who will use it to photograph America," the prints are a form of social history. They bring to life the nameless, faceless people who lived in

monthly photo competitions and taught inexpensive classes in photo skills and techniques.

In 1946 the League's membership had risen to 178. Then it was blacklisted. People rose to its defense and initially membership continued to grow. In December of that year the League sponsored its first retrospective exhibit of over 300 photographs by some 96 members. But as support for the Cold War grew, the League



New York during the Depression, WWII and the early '50s.

Organized by the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester (N.Y.) and curator Anne Tucker, the exhibit premiered at the National Gallery in Canada last April, then traveled to the International Center of Photography in New York in June and to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in July. It will be at the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts from October to the end of December. Plans for 1979, not yet fully defined, include showings in London, California and Chicago.

The Photo League grew out of the New York Film and Photo League, one of many such groups set up by the Workers International Relief, to cover the political situation in the 1930s as well as to publicize the WIR's activities. The League produced silent, black and white 35mm newsreels and short films on such themes as hunger and unemployment.

In 1934 the League split over disagreements on the relative priorities of art and politics. The minority, which was considered elitist by the rest, formed a group that was later called Frontier Films and set out "to make the documentary film dramatic."

For the next 15 years, the Photo League organized local exhibits, discussions and lectures by photographers like Ansel Adams, Lewis Hine and Margaret Bourke-White. It screened films, published a bi-monthly newsletter (*Photo News*), sponsored

faced greater and greater financial difficulties. It was finally disbanded in 1951.

The Photo League's work reflects its belief in the synthesis of art and politics: not "art as weapon," but art as a way to "illuminate and record the world they lived in." League members were vocal critics of other approaches to photography:

Photography has long suffered—on the one hand—from the stultifying influence of the pictorialists, who photographically have never entered the 20th century, and on the other from the so-called "modernists" who retired into a cult of red filters and confusing angles much beloved by the manufacturers of photographic materials.

Photographs by nearly every student, teacher and member of the League are represented in this show. Technically, the pictures themselves are superb. The negatives have produced good clean prints, with varying textures and compositions that make the most of natural lighting and shadows.

There are some shots of events: political demonstrations, workers on strike, and a Harlem parade. But mostly the pictures show poor, working and unemployed people. We see them in their homes, at work and at play: people peering from windows out into the street, folks sitting on tops and in bars, religious one-cone vendors, kids on roof tops, immigrants on Ellis Island.

There are effective contrasts

and juxtapositions of rich and poor sections in New York: an old woman walking by a glamorous billboard ad, shiny new cars next to street kids playing hop scotch, fur-clad champagne drinking opera-goers, bread lines, a sign proclaiming "America is Free Enterprise" above old men warming their hands over a garbage can fire in a dirt lot. That these pictures are over 30 years old seems to increase their magnetism.

Most interesting were shots from some of the Photo League's documentary production groups. The Feature Group, organized by Aaron Siskind worked for four years on various projects: Portrait of a Tenement (1936), Park Avenue: North and South (to 1937), the Bowery (1937-38), the Catholic Worker Movement: St. Joseph's Home (1939-40). The largest of these studies, Harlem Document, culminated in an unpublished book. These projects show people in the social context, helping give the viewer a real sense of their lives.

What makes these pictures distinctive and exemplary isn't just their subjects nor the good technical quality. Rather their impact is in documenting the humanity of the everyday lives of ordinary people. In these photos we see poverty, but there is also art on the clothes lines, fire escapes and window sills of Harlem, the lower East Side and the Bowery. We see both the inhumanity of the city and the ingenuity of inner city kids etching humanity on the

streets, sidewalks, walls, parking lots, and roof tops.

Photography as social document is a risky business. It can help redefine existence, events, beauty, worth. But it can also be elitist and paternalistic and run dangerously close to helping us get used to what we see.

Photographic documentation can also be intrusive in the lives of its subjects. Some deeply moving pictures are huge invasions of privacy. One can't help but wonder how the families and individuals felt about the camera-laden tourist. Were they asked if their picture could be taken? Did they have the opportunity to say no?

Even with these reservations, the photographs in this exhibit seem honest views of people who have been misrepresented or ignored by traditional photography. They aren't heavily pessimistic visions, like Robert Frank's studies of America in the 1950s, nor grotesque, like much of Diane Arbus' work. Neither are they patronizing or sentimental in their humanism.

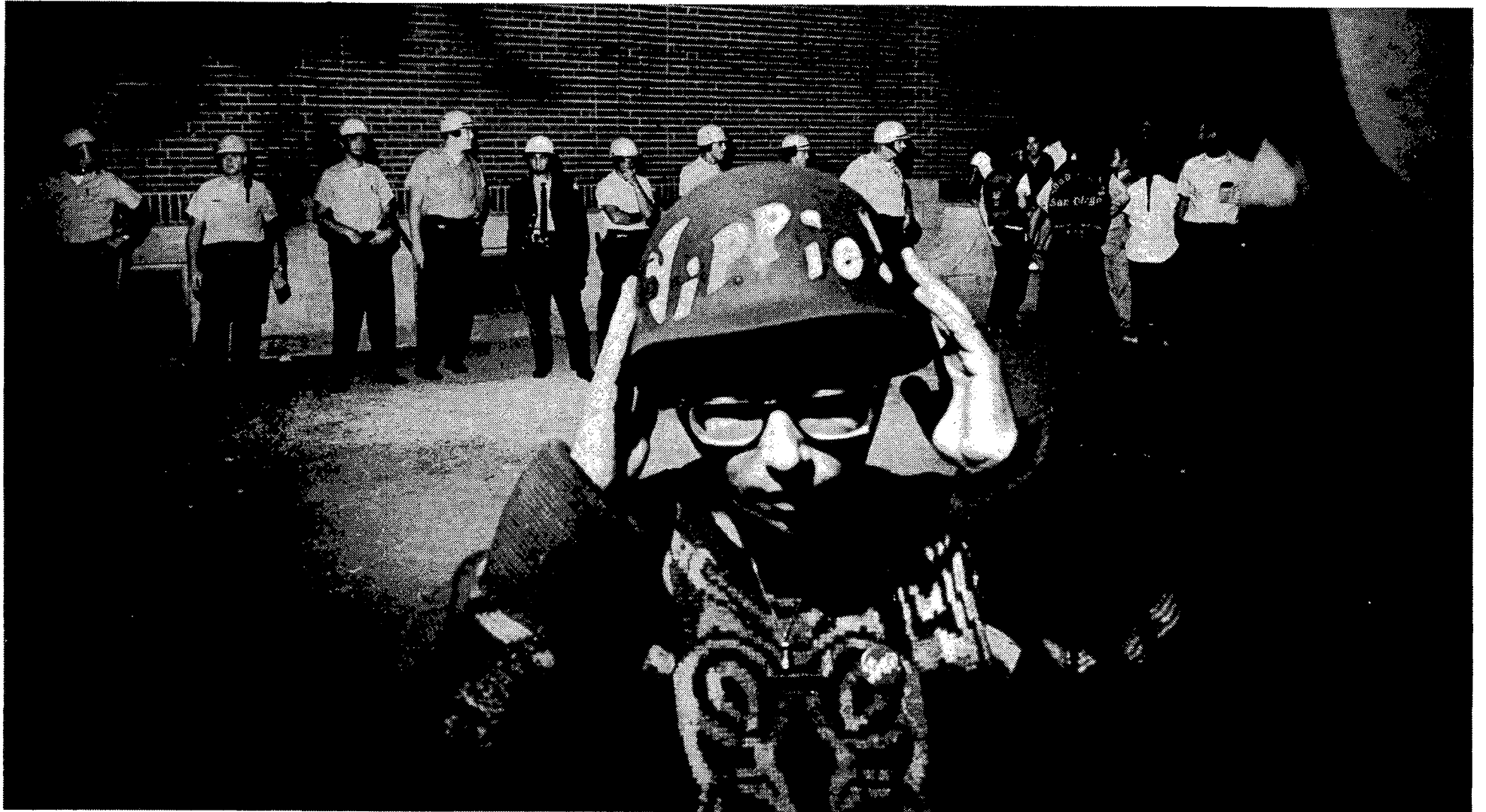
"Photographic Crossroad" is a fitting tribute both to the Photo League and to its subjects.

—Libby Brydolf

Libby Brydolf is a free-lance writer in Jamaica Plains, Mass. For information about booking the show at a local museum, contact Charles Stainback, Visual Studies Workshop, 4 Elton St., Rochester, NY 14607.

Chicago '68

Painting the town red



By David Moberg

Ten years ago I arrived in Chicago, one week before the Democratic convention would open. Fresh from the heady experience of near-revolution in Paris during the "events of May," I was anxious to return to my own natural turf and the issue that had become for me and many thousands a personal mission: stopping the war in Vietnam.

The intimations of police violence made me a little edgy. But I was heading to Chicago for graduate school anyway. Besides, I'd survived police, tear gas and pitched battles in Paris, hadn't I? Yet the warnings seemed more ominous when I discovered that instead of the predicted 50,000 to 500,000 demonstrators, there were only a few thousand dedicated, very diverse characters in the city parks.

The city had made it clear that it didn't want *any* demonstration. Mayor Richard Daley feared for his own reputation as convention host. He feared for the fate of his party, a party tied to a highly controversial war that had prematurely ended Lyndon Johnson's career. He also feared the possibility that violence could trigger a recurrence of the black uprisings of April 1968, after Martin Luther King was killed.

Although the city's refusal of permits and general delaying tactics made its intentions clear, more direct sabotage was also used, as a recently released memorandum from the city's Department of Investigation revealed. Freed by the long-standing citizen's suit against political surveillance in Chicago, the memo claimed that agents had widely infiltrated the organizing groups and "continually sabotaged their plans for chartering buses, raising money and giving life to the invasion of Chicago." Throughout the country undercover agents from varied police and intelligence agencies "worked up until August in an attempt to sabotage the movement with great success," the memo declared. "Some of them came to Chicago for the convention to continue in the same activity." How many acted as agents provocateurs?

But despite the disruptions and sabotage of organizations and the threat of

violence against demonstrators, the political tide that swept people to Chicago was too great to stop. It was based in the deep convulsions of the international political order that made 1968 a remarkable year—Tet uprising, black rebellions, May in Paris, the Prague resistance to Soviet invasion, college student building seizures and more.

My first taste of the week's violence came Sunday night before the convention opened, when hundreds of us gathered in Lincoln Park on the near north side. At 11 p.m. police drove us out, using clubs freely. Although a couple of hasty street barricades were erected, I was struck at first not by the seriousness of the confrontation but rather by how tame it was compared to May in Paris. Careful seminarians, lecturing about the virtue of private property, dismantled the barricades. We walked down the street, quietly dispersing. Suddenly a car with its headlights out sped after us. We began to run. My friend, Noel, not wanting to be shot in the back, faced the police with his hands out in front to show he meant no harm. Four cops immediately beat him to the ground with clubs and flashlights. Similar scenes would be repeated hundreds of times.

The climax came on Wednesday night with the "battle of Michigan Avenue," just outside the Haymarket restaurant at the Conrad Hilton Hotel. There the TV

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On Sunday night, before the Democratic convention began, police had removed their nameplates and badges in preparation for the upcoming confrontation.

cameras could send a record of the carnage throughout the country as police waded into the crowd, beating heads and shouting "kill, kill, kill."

There were many other events that seemed equally tense, dramatic and meaningful to me. However, the importance of Wednesday night, apart from coinciding with the nomination of Hubert Humphrey, showed how dependent we were on the news organizations, especially on TV, to show our victimization. It was a very strange way to acquire influence—getting beaten, showing it on the tube. The method distorted perceptions of political strategy for years to come. It proved increasingly unreliable as authorities tightened their reins on the news media.

The week was not all fear, tension and violence by any means. It was also filled with enthusiasm, sentimentality, histrionics, good theater and high humor: Dick Gregory, trying to lead us into the *cordon sanitaire* around the convention, by inviting us to a party at his south side house (only to be stopped by National Guardsmen with barbed wire barricades and tear gas)...Phil Ochs singing that the war was over so many times we almost believed it...gleeful Yippie tricks promising outrageous assaults on conventional sensibilities, the mildest of which was nominating a pig for President....raising the NLF flag on the statue of Civil War Gen. John A. Logan....an anti-birthday party for LBJ that ended with a spine-tingling show of burning draft cards and included such literary delights as William Burroughs' depiction of the police as "the hated mandrill."

Reporting at the time and reminiscences now, however, have been so dominated by the issue of police brutality (or demonstrator provocation) that the real point of the demonstration—opposition to the war in Vietnam—was lost to most people, I fear. Because the Democrats were so vulnerable on the issue, they could not tolerate dissent. That brought on the police violence.

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Photo by
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