

# The Overlooked Brilliance of Alvin Baltrop, the West Side Piers' Voyeur-in-Chief

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*Untitled*, from the series "Pier Photographs" (1975–86)

Manhattan's Hudson River piers were a hub of industry. Built throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, the grand terminals were the primary port of call for the city's shipping businesses, commercial cruise lines, and the Navy. In the 1950s, new commercial ports across New York Bay began drawing business away from the piers. What economics started, the era's grandiose urban renewal projects hastened: In a swipe of Robert Moses's "great scythe of progress," the northward construction of the West Side Highway severed the piers from the rest of Manhattan Island, leaving them quite literally abandoned on the side of the road.

By the 1970s, the piers had become so dilapidated that even the NYPD mostly stayed away. Under that cover of neglect, a new social ecosystem took shape — queers, the homeless, and artists made use of the empty space left behind by merchants and dockworkers: tricking, cruising, working, surviving. Like the grimy, unwanted things that retreat under rocks, they learned to flourish in the dark.

By then Alvin Baltrop had returned from war. He'd been a photographer before the draft; after Vietnam, Baltrop drove a taxi and sold jewelry during the day so he could shoot New York City streetscapes at night. One day, his then-girlfriend told him about the piers. Baltrop sold his cab, bought a truck, packed in food, booze, marijuana, a gun, and a camera, and in 1975 began chronicling the lives of the terminals' new residents, a project that would consume the next eleven years of his life.

Black, queer, and unwilling to play the games necessary for success in the art world, Baltrop and his work — explicit but unabashedly romantic depictions of New York's gay and trans underground — never left the margins during his lifetime. According to Randal Wilcox, a friend of Baltrop's who inherited all of the photographer's work after he died, Baltrop was more interested in the social realities of the people he photographed than in photographing queer sex itself. Though critics and viewers have focused on the voyeuristic nature of Baltrop's pier photos, really the images are snapshots of figures navigating a culture of rampant homophobia and of the dissolution of mental health care that took place in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. "He wanted to photograph underdogs," Wilcox says. "Which is kind of what he felt like."

This year, for the first time, Baltrop's pier photos have been collected into a book, *The Piers*, published by TF Editores. (The series was also exhibited at MoMA P.S.1, as part of "Greater New York.") Last month, dozens of the photos — many previously unseen — were on view at the Participant Inc. Gallery to celebrate the release of the book. Baltrop's work is now part of the Bronx Museum's permanent collection, and Frankfurt-to-Upper West Side Galerie Buchholz recently acquired its own share of his oeuvre.

“The first time I saw Alvin Baltrop’s work was on the cover of *Artforum*, with an article by Douglas Crimp in 2008,” Lia Gangitano, director of Participant Inc., told the *Voice*. “It was a revelation. I had never seen Baltrop’s work exhibited. I soon made contact with Randal Wilcox, who told me about Baltrop’s efforts to show his work in galleries and the difficulties he faced.”

“It took almost forty years for this all to happen,” Wilcox confirmed. “I showed the work to so many people you’d think would want it. They all said no.”

Baltrop purchased his first camera in 1961, when he was thirteen years old. As a young man he would sneak out of his mother’s house in the Bronx to practice taking pictures at Black Power rallies and gay bars, including the inside of the Stonewall Inn years before the 1969 riot. His mother, a devout Jehovah’s Witness, burned all of his early work when she discovered it in his bedroom. When Alvin left home and joined the Navy, he began taking pictures of his fellow seamen, often posed nude on ships and at port.

At the piers, Baltrop went deeper into the photographic style he had begun to develop overseas. If the Navy photos had simply alluded to the homoerotic, the pier photos looked directly at the mechanics of queer intimacy. Baltrop’s photos from his decade at the piers range in tone from romantic to sadistic: Some images offer a bird’s-eye view of two bodies intertwined, barely visible in the wreckage of a terminal or on a small ledge over the river; others show men in the midst of sensational sex acts, hung upside down from a rafter or hog-tied on the floor of a hangar-sized room. Whatever their erotic tone, Baltrop’s pier photos all include a range of bodies across a marked array of races, ages, and even classes (a grungy teenager embracing someone who appears to be a businessman, for example).

The unifying, if unspoken, fact of every one of these encounters is that Alvin Baltrop was there to photograph it. If his practice began as voyeuristic exploration, it quickly grew into a familiar facet of life at the piers. Alvin was the nice guy with the camera who liked to photograph you, up close or from far away, while you fucked. (He generally asked for permission and was otherwise unobtrusive.) Baltrop became a student of the piers’ architecture, constructing a rope-and-harness system so that he could dangle from the beams to document the cruising-ground below.

Unlike his artistic contemporaries — Robert Mapplethorpe, most famously — Baltrop did not simply photograph his subjects; he spent much of his life at the piers, participating in the community. Baltrop had romantic relationships with people across a range of genders, many of whom he met at the piers. When he went there looking for sex, he left his camera at home.

Science fiction author and critic Samuel R. Delany wrote in his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* that all those who have tried to depict the West Side piers, in film or fiction, have “failed because what they were trying to show was wild, abandoned, beyond the edge of control, whereas the actuality of such situations...is hugely ordered, highly social...and grounded in a certain care.” The richness of life at the piers was not just lawlessness — a pornified fantasy of a queer urban Neverland — but, in fact, a micro-society rooted in communality.

One of Baltrop’s pier photos shows three young people talking to one another, two of them standing in front of the river and the third lying in a tent. The young man in the tent was known throughout the piers for helping newcomers to get acquainted with the environment and to learn its social politics. Another image, unearthed by Wilcox, shows a huge block of text spray-painted onto a wall: “Pick up a free pier Newsletter; tell your friends the truth about the pier.”

The piers were by no means a utopia — violence was commonplace — but the community fostered a boundless social imagination in its residents, which eventually erupted into the revolutionary fervor that marked the Seventies and Eighties: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, who led the revolt at Stonewall, lived and worked there; David Wojnarowicz painted extensively there, as did the graffiti artist Tava, whose large-scale murals of interspecies sex went up in locations where people had either died or made love. Baltrop’s many portraits of Johnson have yet to be printed, and his work is some of the only existing documentation of Tava’s murals, which were destroyed when the city finally demolished the piers in 1986.

This trove of imagery would likely be unknown without the encyclopedic knowledge of Wilcox, who met Baltrop in the Nineties through a mutual friend, Paul, at the fifth-floor East Village walk-up Baltrop had rented since the Seventies. Dying of cancer, Baltrop had limited mobility and was no longer able to take five flights of stairs; he threw his keys down to Wilcox and Paul in a white sock. Unit 13 (Alvin’s favorite number) had a red door, and when Wilcox first entered, passing by a shrunken head hanging above the peephole, he was struck by the ten black-and-white photos hung on the wall — grainy images of naked bodies standing inside of or climbing around on monumental ruins. Wilcox asked about the work; Baltrop casually said it was his and proceeded to share dozens of boxes of hand-developed prints, slides, and film. Soon, Wilcox was helping to organize the piles that had accumulated over three decades.

By that point Baltrop was not just aware of, but outspoken about, the way his blackness, sexuality, and general disposition disqualified him from New York’s artistic canon — even while artists like Mapplethorpe and Gordon Matta-Clark, and to a lesser degree Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar, achieved renown for their own work at the piers.

(“Mapplethorpe was a bigoted, racist asshole,” Baltrop said in a video Wilcox took of him toward the end of his life. “He walked up to me and said, ‘If you pose for me I’ll give you fifty bucks and a gram of coke.’” Baltrop refused.)

Nostalgia is at work in the reconsideration of Baltrop’s work by those institutions that formerly dismissed it, Wilcox believes. “Sometimes it feels like there is an overwhelming sameness to everything now,” he said, “whether that’s in art or just walking around in New York, where neighborhoods seem more and more alike. People want something different.”

Perhaps Wilcox is right; if so, the past is an obvious place to look. In the highly policed New York of today, amid the increasing normalization of gay life, nostalgia begets longing for a time when queerness was anything but quotidian. At the margins of society, the piers allowed for a radical reconsideration of sex and sociality. But Alvin Baltrop’s emergence from obscurity should inspire more than nostalgia; rather, it reminds us that resistance — the insistence on the right to life — often remains unseen. Tens of thousands of New Yorkers continue to deal with the conditions that pushed people to the piers: a conservative society, lack of housing or employment, and, above all, a desire for a different way of living. Baltrop did more than document the world envisioned at the piers; he helped build it.