

# Sizing It Up

Vicki Goldberg

Around 1998, sex grew larger and more demanding than ever in New York. Outsized billboards sprang up all over the place proferring chic underwear and smoky glances. Wouter Deruytter, a Belgian with 12 books and catalogues to his credit, took note. Now transplanted to New York (but really a world traveler in pursuit of photographic subjects), Deruytter had previously mulled over the roles people are slotted into or the roles they play: drag queens, the artists McDermott and McGough, Arab princes in a modern world, circus performers, cowboys. The models on New York's billboards play directed roles for an instant or two; these turn out to have long lives on paper. Deruytter claims that he began photographing them because it was his only chance to photograph such gorgeous models. But after 9/11, which made him realize how intensely he loved the city, he took to the streets with a passion for the newest New York. He almost got arrested once for photographing too near a bridge, though he was only in search of the terrors and pleasures of ads.

Some of Deruytter's straight-on images of billboards parallel to the picture plane are very clean, classically geometric compositions that remind us that modern cities are essentially composed of flat and rectangular patterns. And a huge ad for an Asprey watch, an enormous and gleaming metal wristwatch against a white ground, at street level, is a hallucinatory vision of time in black and white. The tiny figures walking by in both directions make it look like a set for some latter-day film version of "Modern Times" where humans are dominated not just by machines but by mechanical time.

Most of these images are mindful of the bustle and clutter of people, the jumbled traffic that outweighs the regularity of the urban plan, or in other instances the lone figures that seem doubly isolated in such a busy place. Strollers are a minor addendum to the main feature on the billboards. It's not just the city that rose on the back of

commerce that dwarfs the city dwellers but commerce itself that overpowers them in its attempt to rival the architecture. Most of the pedestrians are faceless or too small to count as individuals, reduced as often as not to silhouettes in the dark beneath the incandescent ads, as if to say that only models and celebrities have faces today. It's a new race that has moved in and taken over the city, a race that evolved in a wink of cyber time to inhabit a city that measures itself against the Empire State building. They hold their own among skyscrapers -- one woman is 12 stories tall -- and are evidently immortal, as most are young, beautiful, and hot, year after year.

Pedestrians are lost in darkness beneath the luminous ads because the billboards have the sunlight (and the limelight) in a city that parcels out sunshine sparingly between buildings. Occasional shadows do not explain themselves and are obtrusive. Deruytter likes to photograph around noon when the light-dark contrast is especially strong, and he prints to emphasize it. He says he's been powerfully influenced by a painting of Judas kissing Jesus by Caravaggio that boldly plunges half the composition into a well of blackness.

The belittled humans in Deruytter's reconfigured New York have less solidity and reality than their photographed counterparts. Of course these are photographs of photographs, which complicates the equation -- portraits of portraits, representations of representations, another salute to the postmodern city.

His lovingly exaggerated play with light has its own significance: a street in shadow up to about the fifth floor puts an ad for Calvin Klein scanty male briefs into pale gray shadow as well, but a stream of brilliant sunlight obliterates the model's head save for a single eye -- so he is only a body, a gaze, and a very pronounced set of genitals in a limited cotton container. Calvin's message, which needed no explanation, is given one by the sun.

A few messages do not explain themselves in the camera's cryptic frame. A woman lies on her back on a man, one of his hands over one of her bare breasts, her own

hand over the other – well, it's perfectly clear what's going on, but what it's advertising is hard to find. It is – you could guess -- Calvin Klein jeans. In another, a man screams on a bare hillside behind a fanciful scrim of trees. Most mysterious: an isolated sign, apparently (though not actually) complete in itself, that says YOUR MONEY in huge block letters above a gaggle of people on the sidewalk. What about my money? Or is this just half of an image by Barbara Kruger?

The stark opposition of lights and darks in Deruytter's images sets the stage for a drama of continuous contrasts: big and small, important and insignificant, light and dark, in focus and out, young and old, slim and fat, sleek and dumpy, chic and workaday, throbbing with passion or sunk in daily preoccupations, richly pampered vs. poor and tattered – one image of a young woman in jeans towers above what looks like a homeless man with a shopping cart.

The biggest drama is between the perfect/perfected (by gyms, make-up and computer programs) and the rest of us poor shlumps with wrinkled clothes and skin and libidos that admit to moments when sex is not uppermost in our minds though the constant siren call of billboards implores us to surrender. The billboards might give the impersonal city a human face – if only they weren't so much larger and better than life. Perversely, such perfection minimizes the people it courts. No one whose arms you will ever fall into, no one who will rip your bodice or tear the buttons off your fly, will ever be so overpowering and so flawless. You cannot measure up.

You can of course ignore their call, and most people do, as they ignore the atmosphere, which the billboards become part and parcel of. Monks and nuns blithely cross a street where, above their heads, young men and women recline in their undies or try to convince us that it's their watches that make them look so steamy. Mostly, as Deruytter's pictures prove, despite the almost unavoidable grandeur of these ads, people pass them by without a nod, having long ago accepted them as part of the city's furniture that is not essential to the day's errands. I suspect that passers-by end up, when they do

pause for a good look, struggling between fascinated attraction and distrust: does she have implants? is his fly stuffed? why can't I look like that and anyway, does she really?

In general, between the homeless, the garbage, panhandlers and assorted distractions, New Yorkers have made ignoring their surroundings a way of life. Deruytter once photographed a man stooping to photograph the words "Naked cowboy" on the briefs of a fellow with waist-length blond hair who can often be seen around Broadway in nothing but those briefs and cowboy boots and hat. The man with the camera is clearly a tourist. Above him, a black woman on a billboard shows off most of her breasts, navel and legs. People do not gawk -- embarrassing behavior for a native -- at the tourist, the cowboy or the ad — but walk on past. TV is so full of sensations it's hard to raise the temperature anyway. Still, billboards try.

I confess to having been stopped in my tracks once by an enormous poster that hadn't been there the last time I'd gone past, but after seeing it several times, though I'm still the least little bit thrown now and then, my attention usually migrates to my private thoughts. Almost anything seen too often loses its initial radiance and only regains it fitfully if at all. One can be dazzled many times by Times Square and the city's skyline, but dazzlement is an impermanent state. Did Louis XIV marvel at the Hall of Mirrors after he passed through it the fifteenth time? Does the guard in the Louvre still swoon at the Mona Lisa? The billboards, by now integral to the city, are background music, even if played fortissimo.

Deruytter reminds us how arresting they can be. His sense of humor is intact and his sense of irony as sharp as a carving knife. He registers the moments and calculates the angles where chance creates imaginative theater out of the interplay between street traffic and ads. A group of models, a mere one quarter larger than ordinary human beings, strolls toward us just above rather frumpier pedestrians, some of them walking in the same direction, as if they'd just come down out of the picture, while others go back in. In other photographs, people also appear to walk with or counter to the pictures they

walk past, an unplanned choreography that makes it hard to say whether life imitates art or art life. In a more pointed image, a black couple is about to enter the darkness under an elevated train, while behind them looms a very white, very blond model with her bare legs spread and a fence pole apparently jamming its way up between them.

Street fixtures also play games. One huge young man reclines on his side in jeans, seemingly cramped in the confines of a five or six story building. He raises his upper leg, the better to display his crotch, which in the picture is covered by a sign saying "PARK open 24 hrs." Beneath him runs a row of signs that read "New Gentle Touch" – for a car wash. Elsewhere a couple kiss not far from another Calvin ad, this one of a man in undershorts making a point of his crotch.

All these advertisements fill the air – or at least the upper stories – with seductions. Mostly sex, but also the seduction of luxury goods and good times, mammoth, omnipresent, larger even than our desires. Photographs of sexy women only edged into advertising at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries and then only on cigarette cards, when cigarettes were sold almost exclusively to men. They made their way into more general advertising in 1922 in Japan, when a photograph of a woman who was obviously bare breasted, though her breasts were concealed by a colored vignette, advertised Akadama Port wine. The model proffered a glass of wine with a come-hither glance.<sup>i</sup> Her progeny have been beyond numbering, so that their presence at odd moments seems like an assault, and I for one would like to think of something else occasionally, thank you very much, or at least design the fantasies in my own mind.

The movies long ago inflated seduction with their close-ups on the big screen. But the cities had been taken over by signs even before that; think of Toulouse-Lautrec's posters plastered across Paris. Photographic signs waited only a few years, and outsized signs even less. Photographers made special note of the phenomenon early on. Ralph Steiner was photographing billboards in the 1920s, and in the 1930s, as

signage (including propaganda) burgeoned, photographers made ample records of its impress on city life. Walker Evans photographed a nation decked in movie posters and store signs. Kertesz wrote a story about Paris in "Dubo, Dubon, Dubonnet," a series of ads on a wall behind two isolated Parisians. Brassai made the issue even clearer in "Marlene," a photograph of a young man with a bike staring, obviously with yearning, at a huge close-up of Dietrich's face. Cartier-Bresson's famous picture of a man leaping over a puddle while ballet dancers leaped on posters behind him set the standard for interactions between street signs and pedestrians. Later photographers like William Klein now and then recorded cities as galleries of insistent signs that served as backdrops for transient flows of people and automobiles.

Deruytter's photographs acknowledge that the recent spate of colossal ads are a kind of impermanent monument. Size has always connoted power – think of the pyramids – and in recent years it has become a worldwide contest, with countries competing for the tallest building years after 9/11 and multiple contenders for the biggest box store, biggest mall, biggest plane, biggest international conglomerate. The ads speak to the power of the advertisers to commandeer so much space, but all they really want is attention, so hard to come by in a clamorous culture.

People neither believe nor trust advertising and yet wish to. It doesn't take exceptional smarts to realize that a new pair of jeans or a new handbag won't guarantee you sexy-dude status or attract Mr. Right – but there's always hope. The search for perfection will not let us rest, and desires simmer below the surface when they do not boil. We have long known better than to believe these images entirely: a 1931 study by a psychologist found that only four-to-thirty-seven percent of the public believed advertisements, the percentage depending on the product.<sup>ii</sup> It's highly unlikely that those percentages have increased, what with the public discourse on excessive advertising to children (which implies that they're more

susceptible than adults) and widespread knowledge of Photoshop's capabilities.

Perhaps consumers of ads find the packaged fantasies useful or alluring, even as the rational side of the brain signals that they're only stories -- a mindset similar to one often turned on at the movies. Some theorists speculate that advertisements manipulate consumers by creating needs that can be satisfied by buying products; others say that ads stir up feminine anxieties about social position and degree of femininity, but stir them up only so far as they can contain or allay them.<sup>iii</sup> To judge by the sultry glamour so rampant on New York's upper stories, the language of theory could be both more blunt and more inclusive. Feminine social position means not just status, though high-class brands do count, but also a woman's ranking on the allure scale: degrees of femininity are currently measured almost exclusively in sexual terms, and male needs and anxieties are getting the same treatment. And certain billboards suggest that the needs aroused could be better satisfied in bed.

Human beings generally tend to respect size and consider that it confers authority. That may be instinctive, but it may also be a mistake. Bertrand Russell thought so: "There is no need to worry about mere size. We do not necessarily respect a fat man more than a thin man. Sir Isaac Newton was very much smaller than a hippopotamus, but we do not on that account value him less."<sup>iv</sup>

New York is big to begin with and valued (and despised) for that alone. It long ago reached for the sky and now makes a bid to plant fantasies along the sky's lower reaches. Wouter Deruytter makes stark, amusing, ironic notes of how vibrant and seductive, deprecating and delusional the city's upper stories have become, how they constantly demand attention with images bigger (and thinner) than hippopotami, while the dark little silhouettes on the sidewalks get the last word by passing by without a glance.

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Incidentally, Deruytter got an unexpected present from this project. Sometime after he started, a billboard went up with one of his own images, a cowboy from his series on cowboys, now advertising the musical "Oklahoma." It stayed up for 18 months, a long time for a billboard, so, as in a series of mirrors, he got to photograph his own work inserted into the city he loves and then re-inserted, in another of his images, into his work.

<sup>i</sup> Robert A. Sobieszek, The Art of Advertising: A History of Advertising Photography (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), p. 30.

<sup>ii</sup> Patricia Johnston, Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 158.

<sup>iii</sup> Johnston, Real Fantasies, p. 159.

<sup>iv</sup> "The Expanding Mental Universe," Saturday Evening Post, July, 1959.

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VICKI GOLDBERG's most recent book, *Light Matters: Writings about Photography* (Aperture, 2005), is a selection of her essays. She is the author of *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (Abbeville, 1991); editor of *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (University of New Mexico Press, 1988). coauthor of *American Photography: A Century in Images* (Chronicle Books, 1999, accompanying publication to the PBS documentary of the same name), and author of 16 other books. *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (Harper and Row, 1986; Addison-Wesley, 1987) was named one of the Best Books of the Year by the American Library Association, which also named *The Power of Photography* one of the best academic books of the year. Goldberg is the recipient of numerous awards for her work, including the International Center of Photography's prestigious Infinity Award in 1997. She lectures widely and writes on photography and the arts for the *New York Times*, *American Photo*, *Vanity Fair*, and other publications.