



# CONEY ISLAND OF THE MIND

Images of Coney Island in Art and Popular Culture 1890–1960

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Front cover: *Demonic Face* (Steeplechase Park),  
after design by Jahn Millard

Right: Eugene Wemlinger, *Luna Park*, 1909



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## In Praise of Folly

The History and Hysteria of Coney Island

For most of this century, Coney Island has been a place where millions of New Yorkers have enjoyed themselves on hot summer days and a potent symbol for the odd mixture of cheap thrills and spectacular entertainment that has come to define American popular culture. This exhibition links these two Coney Islands, the one of flesh and the other of fantasy, and fuses them with the history of American art. "Coney Island of the Mind" is designed to be a gateway to the past and an opportunity to meditate on how myths begin, become part of the fiber of popular culture, and then persist even after their physical embodiment fades.<sup>1</sup>

**C**oney Island beach was where Henry Hudson first landed his ships in 1609.<sup>2</sup> The name is said to have come from the Dutch *Kanijn Eiland* ("Rabbit Island"). Despite its name, Coney Island has not been an island since the mid-1800s.

The first road and beach hotel were built in 1829. By the 1840s, Coney Island House was a famous vacation spot whose guests included P.T. Barnum, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Daniel Webster. Walt Whitman was the most eloquent visitor from that era:

*I went regularly every week in the mild seasons down to Coney Island, at that time a large, bare unfrequented shore, which I had all to myself, and where I laved, after bathing, to race up and down the hard sand, and declaim Hamer or Shakespeare to the surf and seagulls by the hour.<sup>3</sup>*

But the peace and solitude that Whitman enjoyed did not last long. By 1860, the huge Iron Pier stretched 1,000 feet into the Atlantic Ocean. It offered games, dancing, and food and contained 1,200 bathing lockers. After the first railroad linking Coney Island and Manhattan was built in the 1870s, the number of daily visitors on a typical summer day was in excess of 50,000, and Coney Island quickly changed from a leisurely resort for the wealthy to a hell-bent weekend vacation spot for the masses. The proliferation of gambling, prostitution, and bars, primarily in an alley called the Bowery, gave rise to the nickname "Sadam by the Sea."

In the 1890s, two other innovations helped Coney Island become a vernacular icon for the age of electricity, speed, and machines. The first came about as



the result of a discovery by a baker named Charles Feltman, who put sausages on rolls with a little mustard and called the combination "red hots." The name "hot dog" arose from the speculation about what sort of meat these sausages contained.

The success of the hot dog made Feltman wealthy. He built the Ocean Pavilion, an enormous restaurant able to serve hot dogs and five-cent lobster dinners to 8,000 people a day. The Ocean Pavilion, in turn, helped stimulate a frantic period of building popular hotels along the beach. The most remarkable was James V. Cafferty's The Elephant, one of the first great works of Pop architecture. It was a 122-foot-tall elephant-shaped building, which housed rooms and a mall for its guests (who entered through a spiral staircase in the hind legs). "Visiting the Elephant" became a popular expression in that period for having an illicit affair.

The second great innovation that helped put Coney Island on the map in the late nineteenth century was the development of the now commonplace amusement park ride. The first important mechanical ride at Coney Island was the Switchback Railway, built in 1884, a forerunner of the roller coaster, the first of which was built in 1886 at Atlantic City. The

other important ride during Coney Island's early years was the Ferris wheel, originally designed as a military device and introduced in 1893 at Chicago's Columbian Exposition. The Ferris wheel was named for its inventor, George W. Ferris, a mechanical engineer. The Coney Island Ferris wheel was 250 feet in diameter and held up to 2,160 people at a time.

Originally these rides and others, such as the Human Toboggan and Helter Skelter, were independently owned and operated. It was not until 1895, with Captain Paul Boyton's Sea Lion Park, that the concept of a single, enclosed amusement park emerged. During the next decade, the three amusement parks most associated with Coney Island—Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland—began to flourish.

George Tillyou's Steeplechase Park opened first, in 1897, and lasted the longest, until 1965. Among its spectacular amusements, such as the Bowl and the Funhouse, was an imaginary voyage through space called "A Trip to the Moon," one of the first multimedia extravaganzas of the modern age. Leo McKay's painting Steeplechase Park (1896), commissioned by Tillyou, clearly shows the park's elaborate layout, including the steeplechase ride along the perimeter, which gave

the park its name, and the demonic "funny face" that became the universal symbol of Coney Island.

In 1902, Frederick Thompson's Luna Park opened with the horrific spectacle of the planned burning of a four-story building and public electrocution of a live elephant. In 1903, at the cost of \$3.5 million, the last and most elaborate of the great Coney Island amusement parks, Dreamland, opened. It employed a staff of 4,000 people and boasted that it lit more than 1 million light bulbs every night, compared to Luna Park's mere 250,000. The entrance to Dreamland was through a gaping, mouthlike archway presided over by a statue of a naked woman well over 100 feet tall. For spectacular entertainment, Dreamland offered a re-creation of the fall of Pompeii constructed at an estimated cost of \$200,000.

In 1911, after only seven years of operation, Dreamland outdid its planned spectacles and completely burned to the ground, leaving only the grotesque residue of the Dreamland Freakshow, which helped such figures as Zip the Pinhead and Little Egypt become mainstays of American popular culture. Dreamland was never rebuilt, but Tillyou reopened Steeplechase Park after it burned to the ground in 1907. A savvy



Leo McKay, Steeplechase Park, 1896

businessman, he turned disaster into profit by charging eager crowds ten cents a head to view the ruins.

By 1900, there were 100,000 visitors to Coney Island on a typical Sunday afternoon. By 1925, when the nickel subway was extended to Coney Island, the number grew to a million visitors a day. These crowded conditions, combined with the overall carnival atmosphere, gave Coney Island its most famous images, well-known through the paintings of Reginald Marsh and numerous photographs, newsreels, and films from the period, among them *Fatty and Buster at Coney Island* (1917), which marked Buster Keaton's first film appearance. (In the 1977 film *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen remembers his childhood home nestled under the Cyclone, Coney Island's most famous roller coaster.) *The WPA Guide to New York City* (1939) offers a typical description:

*Enormous paintings in primitive colors advertise the freak shows, shooting galleries, and waxworks "Chamber of Horrors." Riders are whirled, jolted, battered, tassed upside down by the Cyclone, the Thunderbolt, the Mile Sky Chaser, the Loop-a-Plane, the Whip, the Flying Turns, the Dodgem Speedway, the Chute-the-Chutes, and the Camet. Above the cacophony of spielers, cries, and the shrieks and*

*laughter, carousel organs pound out last year's tunes, and roller coasters slam down their terrific inclines. In dance halls and honkey-tonks, dancers romp and shuffle to the endless blare of jazz bands.*<sup>4</sup>

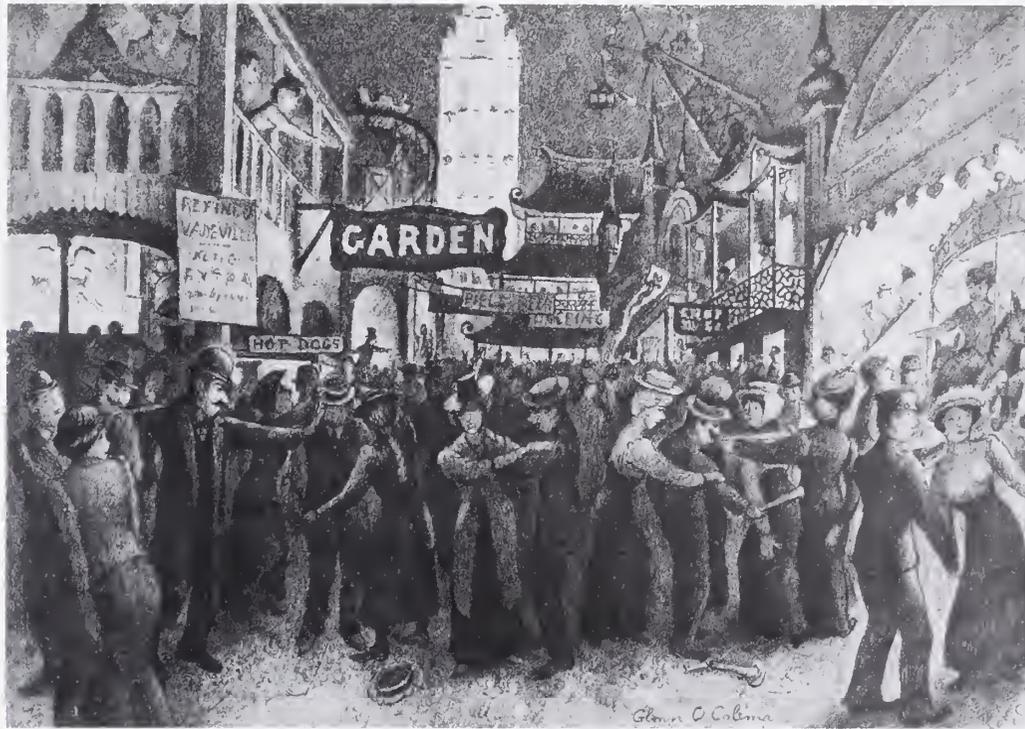
In addition to its obvious power as a symbol or icon for the changing values that were transforming American society in the early part of this century, there is also something universal and timeless about Coney Island. It was an American version of the carnivals, such as Mardi Gras, and other forms of ritualized transgression that have existed in virtually every human society throughout history. Carnivals are gross celebrations of foolishness in which proper, hard-working people participate in ritual transformations that call into question the certainty of their conscious perceptions and prove the reversibility of the social codes (legal, religious, and financial) upon which their lives are based. The transgression of these codes, coupled with a basic human nostalgia for childlike symbolism and play, act as a sort of release valve, or social vaccine. A taste of irrationality is introduced so that society can shore up its defenses and then continue its normal life undisturbed. The transgressions of the carnival or the amusement park are not immoral. On the



Caroline Speare Rohland, *Coney Island*, 1928

contrary, they serve to reconcile social decorum with the primal human urges that threaten disruption on a more dangerous level. In other words, transgression becomes a ritualized game rather than true rebellion. It is enlightening to compare how Disneyland, the great American amusement park of the late twentieth century, replaced Coney Island's earthy symbolism with sterile, technological perfection and presexual infantile obsessions. Disneyland is a monument to sublimation and control. Coney Island was a monument to bodies and the potential for abandonment into pure libidinous pleasure.

This deeper, psychosocial dimension of amusement is revealing in terms of understanding the relation between artistic images of Coney Island and the reality of the place. Most of the artists included in this exhibition strove not just to copy the fascinating scenes but to penetrate the depths of these surface phenomena in order to understand how cultural transgression is somehow allied with artistic freedom. This creates a complex alignment of interests among Coney Island, its customers, and the artists whose pictures are all that remain.



Glenn O. Coleman, *Coney Island* from the series *Lithographs New York*, 1928



Benton Spruonce, *The People Ploy—Spring*, 1941

# STEEPLECHASE

# T

he first artists to depict Coney Island did so before it developed into a crowded amusement park and public beach. They saw a quiet bucolic seascape much like the one Walt Whitman must have walked along, declaiming Shakespeare to the waves. By the turn of the century, the work of artists

such as George Bellows and William Glackens illustrates the increasingly crowded beaches and boardwalks that rapidly became synonymous with the public's image of Coney Island.

The first and most important artist to depict the modern mechanical wonders of Coney Island

was Joseph Stella. The Italian-born American Futurist first went to Coney Island on assignment for *Vanity Fair*. The work he produced for the magazine was never published, but it kindled his interest in the great rides and illuminated spectacles that came to define Coney Island in the mid-teens. Between 1912 and 1914 he made at least five oil paintings and several more studies in which he translated the energy of the place into vibrant abstractions, much as he did later for the Brooklyn Bridge, the borough's other famous icon.

Stella's greatest Coney Island painting, *Battle of Lights, Mardi Gras, Coney Island* (1913–14) at the Yale University Art Gallery, is in too precarious a condition to travel for exhibition. It is an enormous work that sums up the spectacle of Luna Park in a futuristic frenzy of fractured lines and exploding color forms. This painting and the other Stella works of Coney Island exhibited here, do not so much represent the place as recreate its energy and anarchic turmoil in a visual style that remains evocative to this day.

These works were among the earliest abstract paintings done in America. In fact, one remarkable work, *Abstraction: Mardi Gras*

## The Amusement Muse

The Iconography of Coney Island

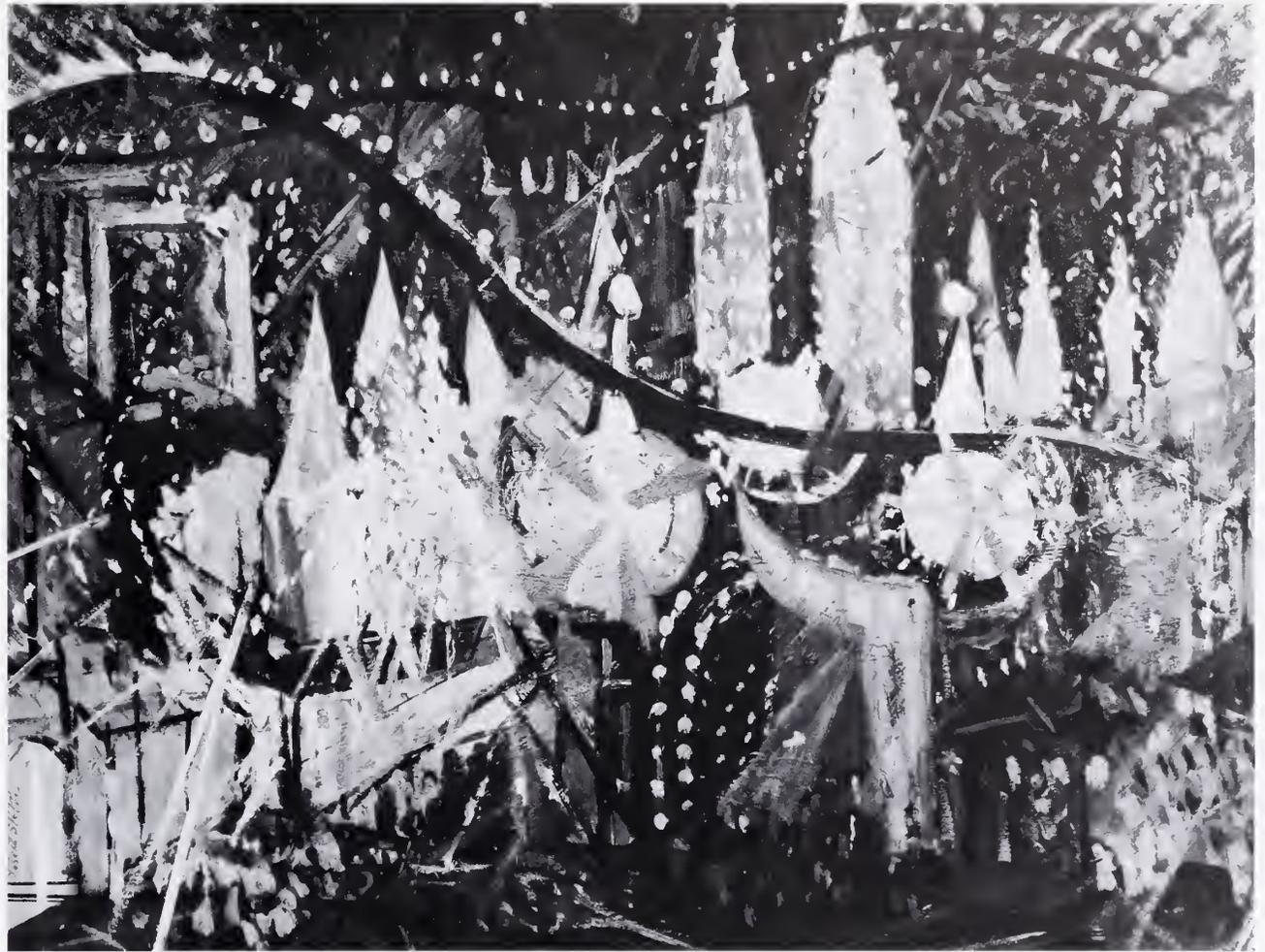
FUNNY PLACE



Louis Lozowick, *Coney Island (Luna Park)*, 1929

(1914–16), is entirely nonrepresentational, depicting the energy and radiating power of light solely by juxtaposing linear and circular bands of color. Yet at the same time, Stella's major paintings of Coney Island are clearly based on recognizable imagery, particularly Luna Park's famous central tower of lights, around which most of the paintings are composed. Rather than being purely abstract, Stella's work was an attempt to create a new, representational style appropriate for a new, modern age.

But Stella's strategy was not so much to re-present Coney Island as a succession of visually provocative objects and figures as to re-create the effect these images had on him aesthetically and psychologically. The most obvious way he did so was in the cubistic breakdown of the picture surface so that it mimics the confusion of light and architecture produced by the nighttime spectacle of Coney Island. But there is another, deeper, dimension that takes Stella's work beyond formal innovation. His major paintings of Coney Island (as well as his two paintings of the Brooklyn Bridge) all share the same conceptual structure—a dialectic between dark, earthbound forms at the

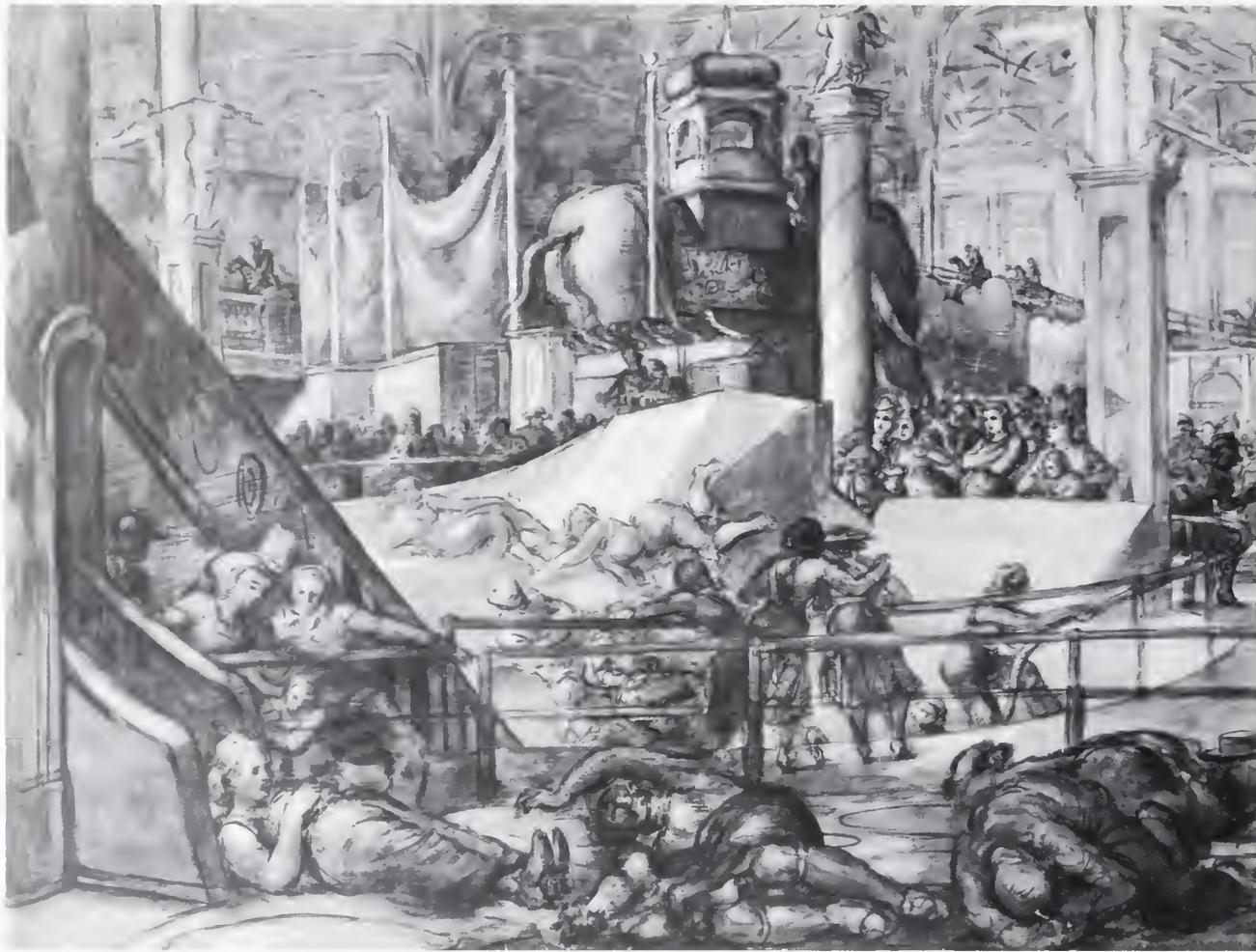


Joseph Stella, *Luna Park*, c. 1913

bottom of the picture, where the color red predominates, and light, transcendent forms at the top, where blue and green predominate. Stella used this dialectic to indicate an allegorical dimension that transforms the physical battle of lights into a struggle between

heaven and hell, or as Henry Adams put it, between the Virgin and the Dynamo, for the modern human soul. On this level Stella's work not only re-creates the novel visual spectacle of Coney Island but deliberately infuses it with an aura of timeless spirituality.

Stella's paintings set the stage for a large body of work devoted to capturing the mechanical spectacle of Coney Island through rhythmic abstraction. Artists such as Louis Lozowick and Jan Matulka refined Stella's futuristic inventions into bold graphic de-



Reginald Marsh, *Human Paal Tables*, 1938

# LOOP THE LOOP

signs that captured the speed and motion of Coney Island better than any contemporary photographic or realistic rendition.

But the most persistent attraction of Coney Island for artists, particularly after the novelty of its spectacular attractions wore off and other forms of mass entertainment such as the movies took their place, was the masses of people crammed together to spend their leisure time aggressively abandoning the narrow constraints of their everyday lives. John Sloan, in a journal entry from 1904, was one of the first to articulate this Coney Island attraction: "on the beach, the sand covered bathing suits of the women who look and 'cavart' are great—look like soft sandstone sculptures, full of real 'vulgar' human life."<sup>5</sup>

The most prolific painter who worked at Coney Island was Reginald Marsh. He spent a large portion of every summer from the thirties through the fifties sketching and photographing the scene. He described his visits in much the same terms as Sloan had thirty years earlier:

*... a million near-naked bodies could be seen at once, a phenomenon unparalleled in history. ... Crowds of people in all directions, in all posi-*



Reginald Marsh, *Study for Coney Island Beach*, 1942



Reginald Marsh, *Crowd on a Street at Coney Island*, c. 1928

tions, without clothing, moving—like the great compositions of Michelangelo and Rubens.<sup>6</sup>

Marsh's friend and fellow artist Edward Laning offered this evocative description of Marsh on the beach: he "went into the crowded surf. . . dog-paddled, his head held high above the water, while he ogled the churning arms and legs, bellies and bottoms."<sup>7</sup>

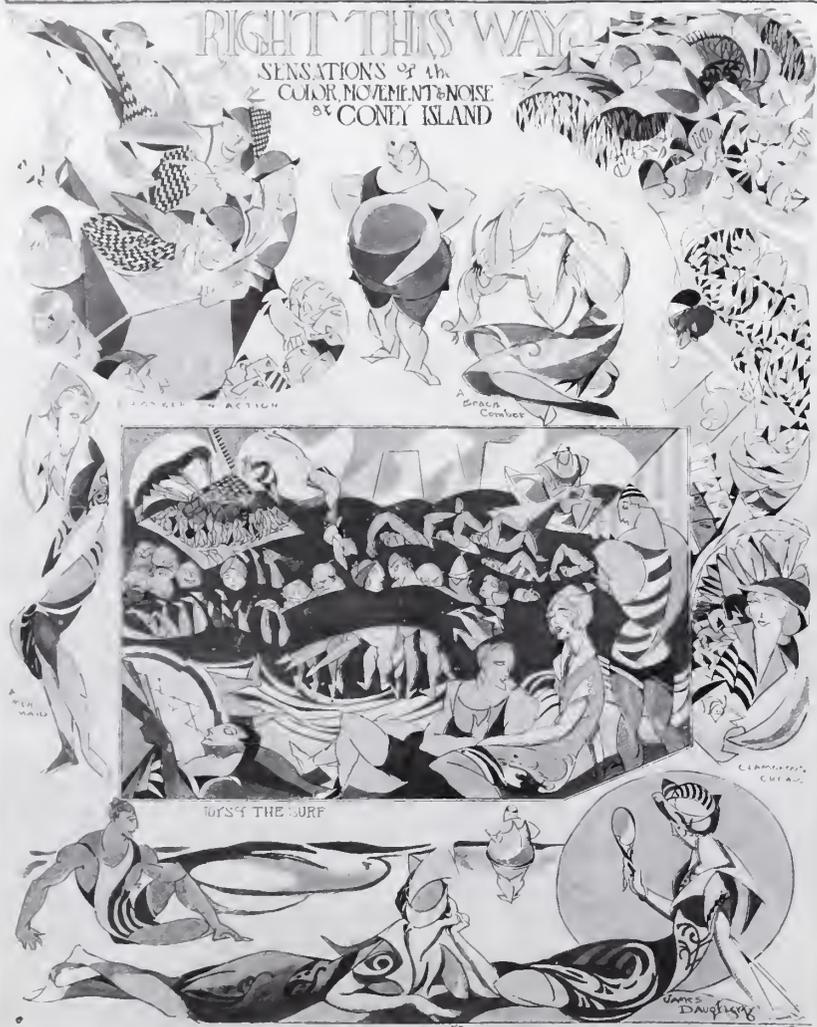
Marsh's realism, combined with his use of mannerist techniques culled from the Old Masters, place him outside the modernist mainstream. This is particularly true of Marsh's relation to the Abstract Expressionists, who came to dominate American art at the end of his career. But in the context of Pop Art, Marsh's work appears quite contemporary in its use of both the substance and the form of popular culture. On close analysis, moreover, it becomes evident that Marsh was among the first artists to represent the language and the imagery of mass media. Much as the Pop artists later raided the supermarket and tabloids for their imagery and technique, Marsh drew upon the communicative powers of amusement parks, movie posters, and magazine ads.

Take, for example, Marsh's *Crowd on a Street at Coney Island*

(c. 1928). The painting focuses on a group of three women in the center foreground as they walk down the street licking ice-cream cones. Behind them two men stand holding each other, leering at the women's backsides. A man behind these men looks at them looking at the women. All around, people are staring intently at various things off in the distance, except for a mother in the foreground whose clutching children and downward glance suggest the consequences of the scenes of sexual freedom around her.

On this level, the painting seems like a caricature. But that is just a ploy to draw us into what becomes a web of uncomfortable realities. Marsh's realism is not a passive spectacle to be admired from a safe distance in the museum or gallery. His pictures implicate the viewer in the action. We gape at the girls, hunger over the hot dogs and ice cream, and marvel at the sights just like the figures in the frame. In fact, appetite (for food, sex, and other physical thrills) is the constant theme in Marsh's Coney Island iconography. The conceptual strength of this theme is that it perfectly mirrors and mocks our appetite for pictures.

MAGAZINE THE NEW YORK HERALD SECTION



James H. Daugherty, *Right This Way! Sensation of the Color, Movement, and Noise at Coney Island*, 1914

It is enlightening to compare the conceptual dimension of Marsh's realism with the reality of the scenes depicted. It is clear from descriptions of the time that one of the most important aspects of Coney Island was the way its entrepreneurs commodified sex as mass entertainment. Marsh simply made this process evident and cast cruel, misogynistic activities, such as the Insanitarium from Steeplechase Park, partly described below, into a critical context.

*Three girls scromble out of the doghouse on honds and knees and stand up, looking nervously at the cowboy, the former and the dworf clown, the only other persons on stage. . . . The former is peering through o telescope at the legs of o girl standing irresolutely with her escort on a descending alleyway. The clown is jumping up and down near the footlights, shoping with his honds . . . the double-barreled curves of Mae Westian figures. . . . Suddenly o great blost of worm oir pours up through the grating on which they stand and whisks their skirts up around their eors.<sup>8</sup>*

In addition to Marsh, a wide variety of artists used Coney Island as a springboard on which to launch their individual talents and aspirations. Paul Cadmus, for instance, depicted the same crowded beach scenes as did Marsh. But where Marsh's imag-

ery shows a genuine empathy for the masses and a legitimate affection for the popular-culture debris that surrounded them, Cadmus' work was purely grotesque. He exaggerated the elements of realism to the degree that the bodies seem like raw flesh engorging itself without concern for social decorum or propriety. Milton Avery, by contrast, isolated a few generic beach figures and meshed them into the seascape to give a sense of pattern rather than precise physical place.

Other artists, such as Glenn O. Coleman, Caroline Speare Rohland, and Mabel Dwight, chose to depict the rides and sights of the amusement parks. In general, their focus concentrated on the interaction of the people and the place more than on the rides or amusements themselves. But their depiction of people tended to be somewhat idealized and caricatured compared to Marsh's evocative realism. An excellent contrast in this regard can be made between Marsh's *Crowd on a Street* and Coleman's lithograph of the same subject, *Coney Island* (1928). Where Coleman depicts the images in detail but then softens them by using a distanced middle-ground perspective, Marsh plunges the viewer into the action, drawing us directly into the picture.

## Only Pictures Remain

A Study of Photography of Coney Island



Andrew Herman  
*Distorting Mirrors at Steeplechase, 1939*

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hroughout this century, Coney Island has been an important source of imagery for all kinds of photography, from amateur snapshots to professional photojournalism to the most expressive and idiosyncratic art. In general, the history of serious photography of Coney Island can be divided into three main phases. From 1890 to 1920, professional documentary photographers such as those at the Byran, Gattscha, or Wemlinger studios dominated the scene, creating well-known pictures of Coney Island that have become part of our cultural vocabulary. In mid-century, independent photographers such as Leon Levinstein and Marris Engel, liberated by cheaper, light-weight equipment, began exploring the people who frequented Coney Island as much as the architecture and rides which drew them to the place. Finally, beginning in the fifties, a new generation of photographers—among them Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, Robert Frank, and Garry Winogrand—began to focus on the sense of fragmentation and decay that accompanied the physical decline of Coney Island.

Because almost every photographer who lived in or visited New York City spent time at Coney Island, the contrast of styles in relation to a single theme

offers a unique opportunity to perceive what separates photography from literal copying. Of course, all photographs create a supplementary message along with an overt one. This is typically labeled "art" when the manipulation of the image identifies and celebrates the individual vision of the photographers and separates their work from the mere act of recording a pre-existing image.

A crude but effective way to distinguish artistic from journalistic photography is to measure the degree to which the manipulation either reinforces or challenges existing stereotypes. For instance, a journalistic photograph of Coney Island typically represents the universal icons associated with the place: roller coasters, parachute jump, absurdly large crowds. Artistic photographs typically question these stereotypes and explore their effect upon the human subjects for whom they were ostensibly created. Compare Margaret Bourke-White's untitled 1952 photograph, taken on assignment for *Life*, of a crowded beach with Steeplechase Park and the parachute jump in the background, with Robert Frank's *Coney Island, 4th of July* (1958), depicting huddled bodies sleeping on the beach in front of these same scenes. Both pictures signify "Coney Island," but they



Eugene Wemlinger, *Entrance to Dreamland, 1908*



Reginald Marsh, *Alzoria, The Turtle Girl, 1940*

do so with distinctly different intentions. The *Life* photograph, on the one hand, presents (and to some degree helped create) the stereotypical view of Coney Island. Like much of Burke-White's work done on assignment, the success of the picture lies in its novel perspective: it was taken from a plane flying low over the beach. This point of view perfectly integrates the sea with the sand, covered by antlike bodies, and the steel girder structure lifting gracefully into the sky. At the same time, it puts a distance between the viewer and the scene that depersonalizes the experience and makes it proper for mass consumption.

Frank, on the other hand, confronts us directly with the physical presence of the bodies on the beach. Rather than presenting a communal celebration of erect bodies plunging into the waves, he depicts a few shrouded figures lying on the beach like the litter and debris that surround them. This photograph inserts us into the crowd and forces us an unidealized reality of Coney Island.

Frank's approach is typical of that used by most artists in photographing Coney Island. *Luna Park (Couple at Coney Island)* (1929) by Walker Evans (one of many he made of Coney Island in the thir-

ties), conjures up an earlier era by contrasting the backs of a well-dressed couple with the object of their gaze: Luna Park's famous tower of lights. The structure of both Frank's and Evans' photographs is built upon a contrast between people and well-known Coney Island scenes. But Evans' picture is based on harmony and the integration of the viewer into the picture. We literally are caught looking along with the people in the picture at the Luna Tower. Frank's picture is more confrontational. The blanketed bodies on the beach separate us from the scene. They are not integrated into the place but serve as a contrast to the fun and games advertised along the boardwalk behind them.

Whereas the heyday of painting and drawing Coney Island was during the thirties and forties, most of the important photographs of the place were made during the fifties. This probably is due to the development of affordable, light-weight, single-lens reflex cameras after World War II. Photographers of Coney Island's early years, such as Samuel H. Gottscha and Joseph Byran, were constrained by the limitations of their equipment and tended to produce somewhat stiff, posed pictures.



Bruce Davidson, *Brooklyn Gang*, 1959

Photographers employed this newfound mobility in two distinct ways. One, exemplified in the work of Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Leon Levinstein, involved isolated close-ups that resulted in richly textured abstract compositions—an approach in keeping with the overall abstract tendencies in the

art world at the time. It was evocative of the sense of alienation (described in the period by sociologist David Riesman as the loneliness of the crowd) created by immersing oneself into the masses of bodies on the sand. The other approach, illustrated in the work of Morris Engel, Sid

Grossman, and Arthur Leipzig, among others, took an opposite tack. These photographers focused on the interaction of people to show their warmth and human individuality.

Perhaps the most complete and evocative portrait of the people who frequented Coney Island in

the late 1950s is found in Bruce Davidson's photo-essay *Brooklyn Gang* (1959). Davidson followed a Coney Island gang around for months until his camera became a neutral presence. He then re-recorded the gang in and around Coney Island with a unique mixture of unaffected spontaneity and classical composition. The results are among the most potent evocations of American teenagers in the fifties. Davidson's gang photos predated a similar, yet far more sinister portrait of a Coney Island motorcycle gang in Kenneth Anger's underground film *Scorpio Rising* (1963). During the same period, Diane Arbus began photographing people at Coney Island. By emphasizing the uncomfortable looks on their faces, as in *Two Girls on the Beach, Coney Island, New York* (1958), she illustrated the increasing deterioration of the place. By the late fifties Coney Island was no longer a happy weekend playground but a decaying public amusement park whose visitors came because they could not afford to go elsewhere.

In a comparison of journalistic to artistic photography, Weegee (Arthur Fellig) stands out as the one artist who mastered both approaches. He began photographing Coney Island as a staff photographer for the *Brooklyn*

*Eagle*, for which he took *Coney Island Crowd* (1940), perhaps the single most famous image of the place. He then returned many times over the next two decades, creating a remarkable body of work ranging from evocative night portraits using infrared film, to "trick" photographs that surrealistically montage disparate parts of people's bodies. In one such shot a woman is lying comfortably on a towel, while her head has wandered a few inches away. It is perhaps the perfect visual pun to represent daydreaming on the beach. But Weegee also used such manipulations for a more profound purpose, to contradict the supposed neutrality of the camera, upon which most artistic and commercial photography of his era depended.

The purpose of bringing together this varied collection is both to reanimate the spirit of Coney Island and to demonstrate its importance as a subject in twentieth-century American art. Perhaps the most valuable lesson to be learned from this exhibition is how artists helped create the reality of Coney Island that they appeared merely to reflect.<sup>9</sup>

John Carlin, *guest curator*

## Endnotes

1. The phrase "a Coney Island of the Mind" first appeared in Henry Miller's *Into the Night* (1936) and was popularized by Lawrence Ferlingetti, who used it as the title for his well-known book of poetry published in 1958, with a picture of Luna Park at night on its cover.
2. Historical information regarding Coney Island in this essay is drawn from the following sources: John Corlin, "Only Pictures Remain: A Photographic History of Coney Island," *Coney Island*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Photofind Gallery, 1987); John F. Kosson, *Amusing the Million* (New York: Hill & Wong, 1978); Gory Kyrionzi, *The Great American Amusement Parks* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1976); R. Le Gallienne, "Humor Need of Coney Island," *Cosmopolitan*, 39 (July 1905), pp. 239-46; Edo McCullough, *Good Old Coney Island* (New York: Scribner's, 1957); Oliver Pilot and Jo Ronson, *Sodom by the Sea: An Affectionate History of Coney Island* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1941); Robert E. Snow and David E. Wright, "Coney Island: A Case Study in Popular Culture and Technical Change," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9 (Spring 1976), pp. 960-75; Theodor Walters, "New York's New Playground," *Harpers Weekly*, July 8, 1905, pp. 976-80; and various clippings and contemporary articles in the archives of the Brooklyn Public Library, the Museum of the City of New York, and The New-York Historical Society.
3. Walt Whitman, "Specimen Days," *The Portable Walt Whitman* (New York: Penguin Books/Viking Press, 1977).

4. Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in New York City, *The WPA Guide to New York City* (1939; reprint, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. 473-74.

5. Jahn Sloon, *Jahn Sloon's New York Scene: From the Diaries, Notes and Correspondence 1906-1913*, Bruce St. John and Helen Farr Sloan, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 60.

6. Quoted in *Reginald Marsh*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1955), p. 9.

7. Edward Laning, *The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 16.

8. Pilot and Ronson, *Sodom by the Sea*.

9. Although Coney Island is no longer a popular attraction, it remains an important icon in contemporary American art. Donald Boechler, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Ronnie Cutrone, John Fekner, Tony Fitzpatrick, Red Grooms, Gory Ponter, Suzon Pitt, Julian Schnabel, and Eve Sonnemon are among the artists who have used Coney Island imagery in their work over the past quarter century.



Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *Coney Island Crowd*, 1940, 1940, © Wilma Wilcox, 1940



## Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions are in inches; height precedes width. "Sight" refers to images measured within the frame or mot opening.

### Paintings, Drawings, and Prints

#### Milton Avery (1885–1965)

*Coney Island #1*, c. 1930  
Pencil on paper, 11 × 8½  
Collection of Sally M. Avery

*Coney Island #2*, c. 1930  
Pencil on paper, 8½ × 11  
Collection of Sally M. Avery

*Coney Island*, 1931  
Oil on canvas, 32 × 40  
Collection of Sally M. Avery

#### Paul Cadmus (b. 1904)

*Coney Island*, 1935  
Etching, 8⅞ × 10  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; John B. Turner Fund

#### Glenn O. Coleman (1887–1932)

*Coney Island* from the series *Lithographs New York*, 1928  
Lithograph: sheet, 15⅞ × 22; image, 12⅞ × 17⅞  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Juliana Force 31.698.6

#### James H. Daugherty (1890–1974)

*Right This Way! Sensation of the Color, Movement, and Noise at Coney Island*, 1914  
Color illustration from the *New York Sunday Herald*, May 31, 1914, 25 × 18  
Whitney Museum of American Art; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Daugherty 77.24

#### Mabel Dwight (1876–1955)

*Aquarium*, 1928  
Color lithograph: sheet, 11⅞ × 16; image, 10⅞ × 10¾  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.718

#### Chaim Gross (b. 1904)

*Coney Island*, 1939  
Watercolor on paper, 10¾ × 14⅞  
Collection of Renee and Chaim Gross; courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

*Under the Boardwalk, Coney Island*, 1939  
Watercolor on paper, 10⅞ × 15  
Collection of Renee and Chaim Gross; courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

#### Henry Koerner (b. 1915)

*Mirror of Life (Vanity Fair)*, 1946  
Oil on composition board, 36 × 42  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 48.2

#### Karol Kozlowski (1885–1969)

*Bathers at Coney Island*, c. 1940  
Oil on plywood panel, 14¼ × 24¼  
The Abril Lamarque Collection; courtesy Dr. Martha Sorno

*Steeplechase Park*, c. 1940  
Oil on plywood panel, 14¼ × 24¼  
The Abril Lamarque Collection; courtesy Lita M. Elvers



**Louis Lozowick** (1892–1973)*Luna Park*, 1925

Casein on canvas, 13½ × 9¾

Private collection

*Coney Island (Luna Park)*, 1929

Lithograph: sheet, 15⅞ × 11⅞; image, 12¾ × 8½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Lily Auchincloss 77.18

**Reginald Marsh** (1898–1954)*Crowd on a Street at Coney Island*, c. 1928

Oil on canvas, 24 × 36

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.5

*Merry-Ga-Round*, 1930

Etching: sheet, 8⅞ × 12¾; plate, 6¾ × 9¾

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael H. Irving 78.90

*The Barker*, 1931

Etching: sheet, 11⅞ × 8⅞; plate, 9⅞ × 7⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael H. Irving 78.89

*Study for Pip and Flip*, c. 1932

Pencil on paper, 16¾ × 13⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 86.37

*Study for Coney Island Beach*, 1934

Ink on paper, 9⅞ × 14

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.105

*Study for Coney Island Beach*, c. 1934

Ink on paper, 13¾ × 15¾

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.104

*Steeplechase Swings*, 1935

Etching: sheet, 10¾ × 14⅞; plate, 8⅞ × 12⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, by exchange 55.54

*Human Paal Tables*, 1938

Tempera on composition board, 29¾ × 40

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. Reginald Marsh and William Benton 55.34

*Study for Caney Island Beach*, 1939

Ink and watercolor on paper, 11 × 13¼

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.90

*Study for Three Girls on a Chicken*, c. 1941

Pencil on paper, 8⅞ × 10⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.98

*Sketch for Coney Island Beach*, 1942

Ink on paper, 9 × 12

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.93

*Study for Coney Island Beach*, 1942

Ink on paper, 10⅞ × 12½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.106

*Study for Spooks*, 1943

Pencil on paper, 13¾ × 17

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.87

*Study for Swinging Chairs*, 1943

Ink on paper, 11 × 8½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.71

*Coney Island Beach, Number 1*, 1943

Ink and watercolor on paper, 21½ × 29½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 43.15

*Sketches for Swinging Chairs* and three other compositions, c.1951

Pencil and ink on paper, 10 × 14

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.36

*Beach Scene*, 1952

Ink on paper, 21⅞ × 30½ (sight)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.12

*Coney Island Beach*, n.d.

Ink on paper, 21⅞ × 30 (sight)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.11

**Jan Matulka** (1890–1972)*Coney Island*, 1925

Ink and pencil on paper, 13½ × 17

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. Lida Matulka 80.12

**Leo McKay***Steeplechase Park*, 1896

Oil on canvas, 51 × 80

Museum of the City of New York

*Demonic Face (Steeplechase Park)*,

c. 1950, after design by John Millard (d. 1932)

Baked enamel on metal, 23¼ diameter  
Frederick Fried Coney Island Archive & Collection**Caroline Speare Rohland**

(1885–1965)

*Caney Island*, 1928

Lithograph: sheet, 17⅞ × 14; image, 16¼ × 12⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 32.116

**Benton Spruance** (1904–1967)*The People Play—Spring*, 1941

Lithograph: sheet, 18⅞ × 24⅞; image, 13⅞ × 17⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Print Purchase Fund and the Print Committee 87.40

*The People Play—Summer*, 1941

Lithograph: sheet, 16 × 21⅞; image, 13⅞ × 17⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Print Purchase Fund and the Print Committee 87.41

**Joseph Stella** (1877–1946)*Luna Park*, c. 1913

Oil on board, 17½ × 23⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. Charles A. Goldberg 72.147

**Miklos Suba** (1882–1944)*Coney Island*, 1929

Sanguine on paper, 11⅞ × 15½

Robert Schaelkopf Gallery, New York

**Abraham Walkowitz** (1880–1965)*Coney Island, Cityscape*, 1914

Crayon and pencil on paper, 13 × 18¼

Weil, Gotshal &amp; Manges Collection

**Art Young***Looney Island*, illustration from *Art**Young's Inferna* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1934), 11 × 8½

Private collection



Art Young, *Laaney Island*, illustration  
from Art Young's *Inferna*, 1934

## Photographs

### Diane Arbus (1923–1971)

*Wax Museum Strangler, Caney Island,*  
New York, 1957

Gelatin silver print, 14 × 11  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

*Wax Museum, Tarsa Slayer, Caney  
Island, New York, 1957*

Gelatin silver print, 14 × 11  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

*Twa Girls on the Beach, Caney Island,*  
New York, 1958

Gelatin silver print, 14 × 11  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

### Margaret Bourke-White

(1904–1971)

*Beach Accident, Caney Island, 1952*  
(printed 1989)

Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20  
© Time Inc.; courtesy Life Gallery of  
Photography, New York

*Untitled, 1952* (printed 1987)

Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20  
© Time Inc.; courtesy Life Gallery of  
Photography, New York

### Joseph Byron, Percy Byron

(studia active 1888–1942)

*Boardwalk in Front of "Childs,"* c. 1897

Gelatin silver print, 7¼ × 9½  
Museum of the City of New York

### Alfred Cohn (1897–1972)

*Luna Park at Night,* c. 1920

Gelatin silver print, 6¾ × 4½  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Bruce Davidson (b.1933)

*Braaklyn Gang, 1959*

Gelatin silver print, 6¼ × 9¾  
Collection of the artist

*Braaklyn Gang, 1959*

Gelatin silver print, 12 × 8  
Collection of the artist

*Braaklyn Gang, 1959*

Gelatin silver print, 8 × 12  
Collection of the artist

*Braaklyn Gang, 1959*

Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 11¾  
Collection of the artist

### Morris Engel (b. 1918)

*Under the Boardwalk, Caney Island,*  
1953 (printed 1980)

Gelatin silver print, 13¾ × 13  
Harold Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Walker Evans (1903–1975)

*Luna Park (Couple at Caney Island),*  
1929

Gelatin silver print, 12½ × 8½  
Collection of Howard Greenberg

### Andreas Feininger (b. 1906)

*Caney Island, July 4, 1949, 1949*  
(printed 1984)

Gelatin silver print, 11 × 14  
Banni Benrubi Fine Arts, New York

### Robert Frank (b. 1924)

*Caney Island, 4th of July, 1958*  
(printed later)

Gelatin silver print, 12¼ × 16¾  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Samuel H. Gottscho (1874–1971)

*Kaleidascopic Tower, Luna Park, 1904*

Gelatin silver print, 14 × 11  
Museum of the City of New York

*Luna Park at Night, 1906*

Gelatin silver print, 14 × 11  
Museum of the City of New York

### Samuel Grierson

*Luna Park at Night, n.d.*

Gelatin silver print, 9¾ × 7  
Museum of the City of New York

### Sid Grossman (1914–1955)

*Untitled, c. 1947*

Gelatin silver print, 7¾ × 7¾  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Andrew Herman (active 1937–1939)

*Distorting Mirrors at Steeplechase, 1939*  
(printed 1989)

Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 7½  
Museum of the City of New York

*Wax Museum, 1939* (printed 1989)

Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 7½  
Museum of the City of New York

### Bruce Hopkins

*Parachute Jump, Steeplechase Park,*  
Caney Island, 1949 (printed 1989)

Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 9½  
Braaklyn Public Library, New York;  
Braaklyn Collection-Braaklyn Eagle  
Collection

### Sy Kattelson (b. 1923)

*Untitled, 1947*

Gelatin silver print, 5¾ × 9½  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889–1953)

*Untitled, 1936*

Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 9½  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

*Black Man on the Beach, 1938*

Gelatin silver print, 7¾ × 9¾  
Gilman Paper Company Collection

*Untitled, 1938*

Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 9½  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

*Untitled, c. 1938*

Gelatin silver print, 7¼ × 9¼  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Harry Lapow (1909–1983)

*Untitled, 1955*

Gelatin silver print, 13½ × 9½  
Howard Greenberg/Phatafind Gallery  
Inc., New York

### Sophie L. Lauffer (active 20th century)

*Luna Park, c. 1938*

Gelatin silver print, 12¼ × 10½  
Lieberman & Saul Gallery, New York



**Arthur Leipzig** (b. 1918)

*Steeplechase*, 1949  
Gelatin silver print, 11½ × 9¼  
Howard Greenberg/Photofind Gallery  
Inc., New York

**Leon Levinstein** (1913–1989)

*Untitled*, c. 1952  
Gelatin silver print, 10¼ × 13  
Howard Greenberg/Photofind Gallery  
Inc., New York

**Reginald Marsh** (1898–1954)

*Alzoria, The Turtle Girl*, 1940  
(printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10  
Museum of the City of New York  
*Chief Woo-Foo's*, 1940 (printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10  
Museum of the City of New York  
*Crowd Under Boardwalk*, 1940  
Gelatin silver print, 6 × 9½  
Museum of the City of New York  
*Milo, The Mule-Face Bay*, 1940  
(printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10  
Museum of the City of New York

**Lisette Model** (1906–1983)

*Untitled (Coney Island)*, 1942  
Gelatin silver print, 15¾ × 19¾  
Howard Greenberg/Photofind Gallery  
Inc., New York

**Thurman Rotan** (b. 1903)

*Coney Island*, 1926  
Gelatin silver print, 2 × 3⅙  
Banni Benrubi Fine Arts, New York

**Edward Roth**

*Coney Island Girlie Shaw*, 1951  
Gelatin silver print, 7¾ × 6⅞  
Museum of the City of New York

**Seneca Ray Stoddard** (1843–1917)

*Coney Island, Surf Bathing*, c. 1890  
Gelatin silver print, 4¼ × 7½  
Howard Greenberg/Photofind Gallery  
Inc., New York

**Max Ulrich**

*Coney Island, West 10th Street Looking  
Northeast*, 1940  
Gelatin silver print, 11 × 14  
Max Ulrich/Parks Photo Archive  
*Under the Boardwalk, Coney Island*,  
1940 (printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 11 × 14  
Max Ulrich/Parks Photo Archive

**Breeding G. Way**

*Beach and Bathers, Coney Island (Man  
with a Camera)*, c. 1888 (printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 7¼ × 9⅓  
Brooklyn Public Library, New York;  
Brooklyn Collection

**Weegee (Arthur Fellig)**

(c. 1898–1968)  
*Coney Island Crowd*, 1940, 1940  
Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20  
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.  
*Girl Watching Lovers at Night*, 1940  
(printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10  
The Weegee Collection, New York;  
courtesy Wilma Wilcox  
*Trick Shot, Caney Island*, 1955 (printed  
1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10  
The Weegee Collection, New York;  
courtesy Wilma Wilcox

**Eugene Wemlinger**

*Entrance to Dreamland*, 1908 (printed  
1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 6 × 9⅞  
Brooklyn Public Library, New York;  
Brooklyn Collection  
*Luna Park*, 1908 (printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 6¼ × 9⅓  
Brooklyn Public Library, New York;  
Brooklyn Collection  
*Luna Park*, 1909 (printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 9⅞ × 6⅞  
Brooklyn Public Library, New York;  
Brooklyn Collection

**Adolph Wittman**

*Luna Park, Coney Island*, 1905  
Gelatin silver print, 6¼ × 8⅞  
Museum of the City of New York

**Mrs. William Zeckendorf, Sr.**

*Coney Island Beach*, c. 1955  
(printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10  
Museum of the City of New York

**Unidentified photographers**

*Steeplechase Park at Night*, 1912  
(printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 7⅞ × 9⅞  
Brooklyn Public Library, New York;  
Brooklyn Collection-Brooklyn Eagle  
Collection  
*Coney Island, View West, West 8th Street  
to Half Moon*, 1939 (printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 11 × 14  
Fairchild Aerial Survey/Parks Photo  
Archive  
*Entrance to Luna Park at Night*, n.d.  
(printed 1989)  
Gelatin silver print, 6⅞ × 9⅞  
Brooklyn Public Library, New York;  
Brooklyn Collection-Brooklyn Eagle  
Collection  
  
Photographs by Sally Apfelbaum  
(Herman and Marsh [*Azaria, The Turtle  
Girl*]); Geoffrey Clements (Coleman,  
Daugherty, Lozawick, all works by  
Marsh unless otherwise specified,  
Matulka, Rohland, Spruance, and  
Stella); Brooklyn Public Library  
(Wemlinger and unidentified photogra-  
phers); Peter A. July & Son (Marsh  
[*Human Pool Tables*]); Magnum Photos,  
Inc. (Davidson); Museum of the City of  
New York (McKay).

The 1989 prints of photographs by Her-  
man and Marsh included in the exhibi-  
tion were made by Sally Apfelbaum.



Whitney Museum of American Art  
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza  
33 Maiden Lane at Nassau Street  
New York, New York 10038  
(212) 943-5657

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Left: Bruce Davidson, *Brooklyn Gang*, 1959



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