



Queer New York

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13, 2011

Photo by Baad Lamb,
Audubon Terrace, Washington Heights

Perry Brass: Lost Gay New York: Alvin Baltrop at Third Streaming on Green Street



Alvin Baltrop: Men at the Piers, courtesy Third Streaming Gallery

I remember Alvin Baltrop well; I met him several times at the old Hudson River piers down in the Village that are no more. The piers had been part and property of the great, venerable steamship lines that crossed the Atlantic to Europe and back, back when Cole Porter went with his millionaire wife and an entourage of servants, Louis Vuitton luggage, and clandestine boyfriends. Cole Porter went with the Vanderbilts and their cousins the Whitneys, and all the other rich people who knew each other and had fun together. For about a decade or so, during the 70s and into the 80s, gay men in New York were having fun at the hulking remains of the same piers, after the lower Village part of the West Side Highway that had fed the piers into the city was closed for safety reasons. The piers were immense queer playgrounds and the canvas for many artists and the material for writers like myself. I started going to them in the fall of 1974, after I had spent a summer in Provincetown and one of my NY friends told me that he'd never been to anything like them.

He was right: for a sheer expanse of nakedness in the city, there were nothing like them, nor would there be again.

On a generally nice Sunday summer afternoon, you could go out to the very end of the lead pier (there were 3 of them used for various purposes) and find maybe 300 guys lying out naked in the sun, or going back into the covered parts of the piers to cruise, have sex, or just stretch their legs. It was a very friendly scene. There were no cell phones to keep you away and pre-occupied, and no one was interested in his Twitter account. What you were interested in was the good-looking gent next to you and what kind of dope he was smoking, and whether it would be a good idea to share a beer with him. Some galoots made a neat living off selling beer for a dollar a can from out of coolers that they schlepped with them off the streets; they also sold poppers and weed. Who could ask for anything more?

(Actually, I always wanted a few chocolate chip cookies, but why quibble?)



THE QNY TEAM

- Darling!
- Tony Adams
- West Village Bill
- Dr. Jeff
- Hungry Rabbit
- Perry Brass
- baad lamb
- Mondschein
- Mo Mo
- Justin
- Knucklecrack
- Donnie
- HabanaSky
- swtcurran
- Beau RN
- David
- Ivan Vargas
- Miguel Dominguez
- riot
- CSCFON
- Patrick
- Charlie Vázquez

FOLLOWERS

I soon became fairly much a regular at them. I was living in Hell's Kitchen at the time, so it was an easy bus ride down to 12th Street, where the piers started and often I'd go with friends. Alvin Baltrop was easy to spot. He was a tall, well-built black man with a short beard, who often wore army fatigues. I'm not exactly sure now, but I remember somehow in my role as a writer getting to see a slew of his photographs. He told me that he was not interested in the piers as a setting for his own sex life; in fact, I am pretty sure that the first time I met him he told me that he wasn't gay: "I'm not stuff," he said, "stuff" being black slang for men who have sex with other men, or go as far as to have a romantic interest in them. This was in the era before the "down low" phenomenon, that is, when you might push one toe out of the closet and still consider yourself straight. Later, he did come out, more or less (OK, somewhat), but what fascinated Baltrop about the piers was that they were such a fantastic backdrop for any kind of exhibitionism: he told me, "You can't imagine what goes on in there."

Boy, was he wrong. I could imagine. Very well, because I had been to the piers at various hours of the day or night, and had seen my own share of things—few of which actually shocked me since few of them were overtly cruel or inhuman. One of the things was seeing a very drug-fucked man who'd decided he was through with his dog, so he threw it off the pier into the water. The dog tried to swim, then drowned. It was a toy poodle. I could barely stand it. Cruelty to animals and children destroys me. That was disgusting, but mostly nothing else about this environment bothered me. I knew there were girls of various genders who made a living at the piers, often at night, and sometimes they would set up shop in one of the "offices" left over from the previous owners (there were lots and lots of rooms on various levels), and entertain truck drivers who parked their rigs nearby while they had a good time inside. Some street people lived in the piers, and I thought this was good; certainly better than living on the sidewalk which was the main alternative at the time. One of them was Marcia P. Johnson, the saintly black drag queen from the old Gay Liberation Front, who ended up being murdered at the piers; her body was later found in the Hudson.

One of the things Baltrop's photos show at Third Streaming in Soho is a corpse fished out of the Hudson, on view for cops and bystanders. It's a sight to make anyone flinch. Or throw up. Baltrop's work is like that: on one hand it's very matter of fact, very photojournalist, but on the other, humane and warm. Unlike Dianne Arbus, who felt superior to her freaky subjects, Baltrop feels closer to them—inevitably. He became obsessed with the piers and their denizens, even sleeping next to the piers in a van so he could have round-the-clock access to them. There was always something to see. He was a Viet Nam vet, who'd been in the Navy, and in a way this was his own navy, by the water, with all kinds of swabs, water rats, officers and gentlemen in tow.

If you had never experienced the great ocean-liner piers of New York, it's hard to imagine how big they were, with indoor spaces big as football fields, several of them at a time. They captured the eyes of artists before they became queer fuck grounds, and people like gay artist/photographers David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujars took shots in them, as did my own favorite queer-pier artist, Tava. Tava was tall and blond, and there is a great shot of him in Baltrop's show. Tava was incredibly delicious to look at: he looked like Jimmy Morrison, only on a better day, and he had already discovered the intense 69-position mingling between gay sexuality and the depth of spirituality under it, way before the academics doing "Queer Theory" got on the scene. Tava and I used to talk about Wagner, Norse mythology, the Greeks, the New Yorkers, drugs, art, and everything else. The piers were a huge canvas for him, and he loved the way their corrugated metal supported his painted images of big, big men cavorting with dolphins and each other. (For more information on Taval, please go to <http://www.vinnys.net> .)

Baltrop's life, like that of many other unsung photographers, was in no way money-soaked and glamorous. He did not shoot commercials for J. Walter Thompson and go off to 3-martini lunches. He could barely afford to get his work printed, and at the end of his life, as he was dying of cancer in a V.A. hospital, he had rolls and rolls of film that were unprinted. He died in 2004, at the age of 56, with very few shows behind him. His most remarkable show was at the Glines, the wonderful gay cultural space directed by John Glines who went on to produce *Torch Song Trilogy* on Broadway, in 1977. Even though the 1980s in New York was a period of great interest in openly gay photography and images, with commercial gallery shows devoted to the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, George Dureau, Arthur Tress, Gilbert & George, and Robert Giard, among others, Baltrop's work was too informal and journalistic to become a part of this scene. He did not do formal refined images, like Mapplethorpe or Giard, or "interestingly" queer images like Tress or Dureau. His work was more flat out, in your face, and objective. It was not staged, and sometimes it was bleak. So, it's commercial "potential" for that period was limited, and there is a more than real possibility that as a street-savvy black man he was simply not on the same page as white gallery people. In other words, neither was talking in the same language.

We are now certainly living in another era, when actual human contact of any sort has been rationed to the starvation level (God only knows what it will be like in the next decade; I'm not making any predictions, at least not today), and Baltrop's pictures have a different feeling to the viewer now, one that reaches that person on a much deeper level than, say, Mapplethorpe's images that are used on greeting cards and shower curtains.

So there has been a genuine surfacing of interest in him, led by Randal Wilcox, who knew Baltrop during his last years and is now his artistic executor. Wilcox and Yona Becker have curated a show of Baltrop's photos, some in color, but most in b & w, at Third Streaming, a genuine old-fashioned (real art as opposed to money-dreck) Soho gallery, at 10 Green

Street on the second floor. The show will continue until May 14. For more information, please call 646-370-3877, or go to www.thirdstreaming.com . Hours are Wednesday through Friday noon to 6 pm, and Saturday, 1 pm to 6 pm. I hope a lot of fans of Lost Gay New York will check out this show, and find themselves thrust back into that time when, as I like to say, gay men cruised more and networked less, and were certainly more open to the life-changing powers of seduction.

You can learn more about 3-time IPPY Award winner and gay activist Perry Brass at his website, www.perrybrass.com. You can order his new book **The Manly Art of Seduction** from Amazon in regular paper format or on Kindle . You can also learn more about his books at SmashWords , the complete Internet marketplace for all things EBooks and otherwise, and on his Author Page at Amazon. **The Manly Art of Seduction** was recently named a gold-medal winner of an IPPY Award for 2010, from Independent Publisher. You can reach him at belhuepress@earthlink.net if you have questions or comments you want to personally direct to him.

POSTED BY PERRY BRASS AT WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13, 2011



LABELS: 1970S GAY MEN IN NEW YORK, ALVIN BALTROP, COLE PORTER, DISABLED GAY MEN, GAY PIERS, GAY SEX, LOST GAY NEW YORK, PERRY BRASS, RANDAL WILCOX, THIRD STREAMING GALLERY, YONA BECKER
