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New York in Color, 1953

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“We have to shoot far more color . . . This again should not be indiscriminate but on subjects which demand color.”¹ Soon after Magnum’s report to stockholders described the growing importance of the editorial uses of color in magazines, *LIFE* published an unprecedented twenty-four page full-color feature by one of the agency’s rising talents, the Austrian émigré photographer Ernst Haas, across two issues as “Images of a Magic City.”² As the news began to go from black and white to color in magazines over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, in Haas’ hands, color became the very subject of news pictures.

“Images of a Magic City” presented an essay made of photos rather than one that used photos to illustrate a print story. Haas used color to render the city both beautiful and unfamiliar. In the full-page image on the left side of the spread’s first page, the white lights seen through the windows of the United Nations building look like flickering candles, while the surface simultaneously reflects what could be seen across the street. This image suggests we look beyond the subject represented in order to see more deeply. Cropping and close-ups emphasized a “sharp geometry of lines and shadows” as one caption reads, but the “Magic City” images used color to foreground depth. The balustrade shown inside the United Nations stands out in a brighter yellow than the object behind it while also hosting the shadows cast by the exterior windows. In the top right-hand corner, an unclear abstraction appears. Only upon more careful observation can the meaningful juxtaposition of the Atlas sculpture at Rockefeller Center, mirrored through a shop window onto Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, clarify the proximity of celestial and earthly powers in New York. Other images in the essays contrasted objects in ironic or playful ways while defamiliarizing a much-pictured city. Color and its striking contrast and unusual juxtaposition in the real world transformed mundane street signs, parked cars, painted billboards, and a rainbow made by a pool of oil resting on water, into magical space of subjective vision where readers grasped the experience of a world in motion.

Haas suggested that color, which led him to consider what lies between moments rather than within a moment, changed even the most fundamental of photojournalistic notions: “The decisive moment in black and white and color are not identical.”³ Color offered the occasion to “see as the eye sees, not in fixed images but in a blended flow of color.”⁴ In many of his subsequent photo essays, he experimented with blurred images of bullfights and football games, among other subjects. In these color photos, he



Figure 1.17 Ernst Haas, “Images of a Magic City, Part II” *LIFE*, 21 September 1953, 116–117. Photography: Ernst Haas/Getty Images; Text: 1953 Text@Time Inc; Image reproduction: The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2575–989). 1. Ernst Haas/Getty Images 2. 1953 Text@Time Inc. 3. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2575–989).

interrogated motion in a way that was simultaneously true to life without relying on the realism of photography or the objectivity of journalism to do so.

More than twenty years before the consecration of color photography as fine art, color news pictures challenged firm and naïve distinctions between reporting and pictorialism, news and art.⁵ The success of “Magic City” led to many new color assignments. Within a few years, Haas was named one of the ten most important photographers in the world (nine of whom were press photographers), became President of Magnum from 1959 to 1962, wrote and hosted a PBS Television Program, “The Art of Seeing,” and MoMA dedicated an exhibition to his color work in 1962.⁶ Haas’ color photographs may have garnered both critical and popular attention in their day, but they were also subsequently dismissed. In his 1975 declaration of a new era in color, one with less sensationalizing, Max Kozloff derisively labeled Haas the “Paganini of Kodachrome.”⁷

Although news magazines had published color photos beginning with the arrival of the autochrome in 1907, by the late 1960s, most magazine news photos transitioned to color for a host of technological reasons, including cheaper and faster means to develop color film and to print in color, as well as the advent of color television and widescreen movies to draw the public’s visual attention.⁸ Color photography has been called everything from glamorous to garish, realistic to fantastic, but the power of its post-war

context in Europe and America cannot be underestimated. As Haas put it, “I will remember all the war years and the last five bitter post-war years—as black and white years . . . I wanted to express that the world and life had changed . . . As at the beginning of a new spring, I wanted to celebrate in color . . .”⁹ Photographers understood color’s difference as both technological, formal, and contextual. The equipment was heavier, the film speed slower, making it difficult to capture instantaneous images, and the control of composition offered a major challenge. As Haas noted, “Color is really basically much more difficult because it is an addition . . . If you would have to photograph the President of the United States and next to him there would be a man in a red pullover, everybody would look at the man in the red pullover.”¹⁰ The photographer could not choose the interrelation of colors in the world.

Haas therefore defined color photography as a photo whose subject is color. He sought to make photos rather than take photos, but did not question his identity as a press photographer wedded to representing the world outside his viewfinder. As news pictures transitioned from black and white to color, Haas sought to create a “color consciousness” in press photography. He called for photos that were “less descriptive—more imaginative; less information—more suggestion; less prose—more poetry.”¹¹ Color press photographers used color to ask viewers to look more deeply, through the photographer’s eye, rather than the camera’s lens.

Notes

- 1 Magnum Stockholders Report, 15 February 1952, 17 pages, Center for Creative Photography.
- 2 “Images of a Magic City,” *LIFE*, 14 and 21 September 1953.
- 3 Bryan Campbell, *Ernst Haas* (London: William Collins, 1983): 4.
- 4 “The Magic of Color in Motion,” *LIFE*, 18 August 1958: 66–74.
- 5 Fine art color photography begins with William Eggleston’s 1976 MoMA Show and was codified by Sally Euaclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981) and has been somewhat revised first by Kevin Moore, James Crump, and Leo Rubinfien, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970 to 1980* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010). More recently by Catherine Bussard and Lisa Hostettler, *Color Rush. American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (New York: Aperture Foundation Inc., 2013) and John Rohrbach and Sylvie Pénichon, *Color: American Photography Transformed* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).
- 6 “World’s Ten Greatest Photographers,” *Popular Photography* (May 1958): 63–84.
- 7 Max Kozloff, “Photography: The Coming to Age of Color,” *Artforum* (January 1975): 30–5.
- 8 See Kim Timby, this volume.
- 9 Bryan Campbell, *Ernst Haas* (London: William Collins, 1983): 4 and Phillip Prodger, *Ernst Haas: Color Correction*, William A. Ewing, ed., 1st edn (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011).
- 10 Bryan Campbell, *Ernst Haas* (London: William Collins, 1983): 4 and Phillip Prodger, *Ernst Haas: Color Correction*, William A. Ewing, ed., 1st edn (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011).
- 11 “Haas on Color Photography,” *Popular Photography*, *Color Annual*, 1957: 30.