

## Faces of the City: Q+A with Neil Goldberg

by [brienne walsh](#) 07/11/12

Neil Goldberg conveyed the elegiac beauty of New York in "Stories The City Tells Itself," a recent exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. The show featured photographs and videos from the past 20 years, beginning at the time Goldberg graduated from Brown and moved to the East Village.

There, he found himself amidst the AIDS crisis, an undercurrent theme in one of the earliest videos in the exhibition, *She's a Talker* (1993), which features a series of takes of gay men speaking the title while they stroke their cats. The humorous work is haunted by the fact that the vibrant community he depicts has disappeared. A similar feeling permeates *Hallelujah Anyway Nos. 2 and 4* (1995–1996), a two-channel video installation that depicts, on one screen, shopkeepers opening the gates to their stores on a strip of 1st Avenue in the East Village that has since been gentrified beyond recognition. On the other screen, elderly passengers laboriously board an M15 bus. Less a documentary than a choreographed dance of strained exuberance, the work shows a city always moving forward, offering up quotidian wonders for those who take the time to slow down and see them.



**VIEW SLIDESHOW** Still from the video *Wind Tunnel*. Single channel video installation. 2012. 40 min. Silent.; Still from the video *Wind Tunnel*. Single channel video installation. 2012. 40 min. Silent.;

Subsequent works focus on intensely stressful moments that New Yorkers recognize—missing the train, emerging from a subway tunnel completely disoriented, braving the salad bar at a midtown deli. Through Goldberg's gaze, these ordinary frustrations become meditations. In *Surfacing* (2010–2011), faces twisted in confusion as they emerge from a subway tunnel on the Upper East Side are mesmerizing. In *Missing The Train* (2002–2006), faces contorted with irritation recall portraits by Rembrandt in the perfect chiaroscuro of the subway as captured by Goldberg's lens.

Goldberg hovers voyeuristically, sometimes dictating the way his camera brushes up against the city, and sometimes letting the city take over. The photographs in *Truck Drivers' Elbows* (2005) depict the view that Goldberg has from the back of his bike, when he's riding through traffic. But in *19 Rainstorms* (1998–2003), a 19-channel video installation of various durations, the camera is placed in a plastic bag on whatever hook is made available by the landscape—traffic signals, light poles, trees—and left hanging during a storm. Each resulting vignette is the result of the work of the wind, and rain, and traffic; Goldberg merely serves as the medium through which the city channels itself during a rainstorm.

*A.i.A.* first spoke to Goldberg about his exhibition on the subway itself, where the artist remained placid and eloquent amidst the furious onslaught of rush hour commuters, even as passengers pushed and shoved to make room for more people to board. Our conversation continued later via email.

**BRIENNE WALSH** How much of the work is dictated by the city? And how much is it a reflection of the way that you personally see the world?

**NEIL GOLDBERG** That's hard to tease out. I never have gotten over a certain basic fascination with the condition of simply being alive, in a body. What Pasolini calls, "The stupendous monotony of the mystery." And in New York you get to see lots of people being alive, each in their own way. I suppose that's true of most urban settings, but I'm interested in the specific, flavorful ways New York shapes and conditions that experience.

**WALSH** I love the title, "Stories The City Tells Itself." It implies that the works are almost fables, the people characters constructed by the city, rather than existing in it. When I saw them, they almost seemed like lullabies the city recites to comfort itself into sleeping.

**GOLDBERG** It's really interesting to think of these works as fables. The characters in fables are stand-ins or placeholders, aren't they? We are supposed to project ourselves into their places, and that's how the moral is delivered. None of my projects have a moral but I think they do have a projective quality. The people you see basically could be any of us: deciding what to get from a salad bar, emerging disoriented from a subway station. They document an instant when the faces we prepare for the world drop away.

**WALSH** You mentioned that dance inspired many of the pieces. I wonder if there were any works in the exhibition that were inspired by dance specifically, and if so, what were they?

**GOLDBERG** I've been hugely influenced by the choreographers that emerged out of the Judson Dance Theatre in the '60s, especially Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer. Rainer's dance *Trio A* is a series of ordinary movements designed to be performed by dancers and non-dancers alike. In a similar way, my *Hallelujah Anyway* videos document a wide range of people performing the same movement—opening up shop gates, pulling themselves up the stairs of the bus. I love watching how those gestures express themselves on different bodies.

**WALSH** Does dance play into the way that you decide to install works in a space?

**GOLDBERG** I think my approach was shaped by Merce Cunningham, who famously created his dances independently of the music that would accompany them. In a similar way I almost never synchronize the different video pieces that are playing together in a space. Presenting the videos this way generates surprising, chance interactions between the works.

**WALSH** We talked about how you often fall in love with the faces you use. Are there specific types of faces you fall in love with?

**GOLDBERG** I always have my favorites and it's hard to know what draws me to them. It's a very peculiar relationship I have with the people in my videos—a person passes in front of my camera for a couple of seconds and then I spend hundreds of hours with them, editing them and then living with them in the finished work. I definitely have a soft spot for old faces—I think there's just a lot more to look at in them. And I can't resist a good New York type. In *She's A Talker*, a guy that says, "She's a talker" with the most deliciously thick Queens accent. I want him to read me bedtime stories.

**WALSH** Why are you drawn to the subway?

**GOLDBERG** I'm drawn to places where the demarcation between internal and external experience—public and private—gets blurry. I think that happens a lot in New York, but especially so in the subway. You're thrown in close quarters with a group of strangers for an extended period of time, and you're both with them and not with them. And the time you spend down there is considered "wasted" (though I think that it's kind of tragic to think of it that way). All of this produces a kind of heightened liminal zone that feels very rich to me.

**WALSH** Despite living through so many tragedies in New York—the AIDS crisis, September 11, the suburbification of the East Village—you still see it with wonder. How do you hold onto that gaze?

**GOLDBERG** There's plenty I don't like about how the city has changed over the past 25 years, but, yes, I still love it. For me it's not so much about discovering new things as it is about an ongoing relationship to the old things—the people I know, the grid, the subway, the architecture. Or maybe it has something to do with the role New York played in my Long Island childhood. It was dangerous and old and dirty and the scale was just out of control. All qualities that make for a nice fetish in a child's mind!

**WALSH** Your work involves interpreting public spaces in New York. If you were given such a space to show your work, what would you do with it?

**GOLDBERG** I'd love to do a project on the Highline. I love the way its design codifies people watching—actually extending the watching to streets, traffic, buildings, sky. I hope my work does something similar. I also would like to do more projects that work directly, in a performative way, with audiences. Through *Elastic City*, which organizes artist's walks, I took groups of people on a tour of my favorite interstitial spaces in the subway system—transfer points and such—places that are merely instrumental, meant for us simply to pass through. And instead we spent time there, treated them as a destination.