



Surfacing

## “Stories the City Tells Itself: The Video Art and Photography of Neil Goldberg”

The artist transforms everyday life into a state of grace. By **Joseph R. Wolin**



**Museum of the City of New York,** through May 28 (see Museums)

When one of the city’s most below-the-radar museums devotes its first ever show of video art to a vastly underrated hometown artist, it’s an event worthy of New York’s attention. Gotham itself is the backdrop of Neil Goldberg’s work in the Museum of the City of New York’s tight midcareer survey, admirably curated by Sean Corcoran, which constitutes a love letter to our metropolis. The exhibition confirms the museum as a destination for serious contemporary art, while at the same time making it clear that Goldberg has produced some of the most quietly intense and affecting art of his generation.

Goldberg’s first videos established a structure he has employed ever since. *She’s a Talker* (1993) comprises a series of short takes, one after another, of various gay men brushing their cats, which they describe with the words of the title. We get glimpses of eccentricities of home decor, as well as slightly questionable fashion choices, now two decades old. Yet, however wry its send-up of gay pet ownership and manners, *She’s a Talker* also stands as an affectionate group portrait of a community

recently decimated by AIDS.

One of the two projections of *Hallelujah Anyway Nos. 2 and 4* (1995–96) features a string of scenes of East Village shopkeepers opening the metal security gates of their stores in the morning. The other depicts old folks pulling themselves up the steps of a crosstown bus. Both turn quotidian activities into a succession of repetitive gestures, transforming ordinary people going about their business into dancers performing found choreography as beautifully random and specific as Merce Cunningham’s. The passage of time has also tinged the work with poignancy: Many of those downtown storefronts have vanished; many of the senior citizens have probably passed on too.

If *Hallelujah Anyway* evokes Cunningham, *19 Rainstorms* (1998–2003) channels John Cage. A row of 19 small projections creates a nocturne in blue and gold, overcast skies and drizzly dusks punctuated by glowing streetlights, headlights and neon signs. The gorgeous, darkling city in each image seems to sway back and forth or turn around at variable speeds, creating a rhythm like that of

the ocean swelling. In fact, Goldberg had sealed his video camera in a plastic bag and attached it to trees, lampposts and traffic lights when weather interrupted other plans, but this stopgap measure of chance operations generated one of his most soulful works.

As these examples suggest, Goldberg’s New York isn’t the one of the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and the Rockettes. Rather, his focus on quiet interludes, everyday gestures and overlooked phenomena articulates the noniconic, touching—often private—experience that textures life in the Big Apple, or anywhere else, for that matter. For the artist, such moments have encompassed people soberly considering their lunchtime options (*Salad Bar* from 2006); stopping to smell the

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lilacs in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (*Ten Minutes with X02180-A*, also from 2006); having their hair blown by an onrushing L train (*Wind Tunnel* from 2012); or, in the magnificent *Surfacing* (2010–11), stepping aboveground from the subway. Here, Goldberg captures shot after shot of commuters adjusting to daylight, getting their

bearings and setting off, but their sustained looking and a slo-mo pace impart a sense of gravitas. Moving from the dark bowels of the earth to the sunlit world—from initial confusion to hesitant searching and then determined action to reach a goal—becomes symbolic, as if navigating the urban grid represents an archetypal voyage of life. And maybe it does.

Goldberg’s photographs often follow the same structure as his videos, with multiple shots of a repeated subject. He actually printed the soft-focus close-ups of resigned or apprehensive straphangers in *Missing the Train* (2002–06) from video stills that surprisingly resemble faces in Old Master paintings. The four large images of *Subway Trapezoids* (2011–12) form a companion piece to *Surfacing*, showing the view from below, up the dank stairs of subway entrances to bright sections of trees and sky. In the artist’s hands, this commonplace sight invokes both mythical and psychological rebirth, and our sense of identification with Orpheus ascending from the underworld couples with a nearly visceral yearning for release, for the light and air of nature over our heads. In both still and moving images, Goldberg imbues familiar visions with unexpected associations and unforeseen grace.