Leif Speier (LAW ’52) was one of the last young men to be called to serve in World War II. The bombs had already dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the emperor had surrendered by the time he was assigned to Aikau, Japan. Speier was quickly promoted to corporal and worked as a clerk in the division’s adjutant general’s office there. In his free time, he explored, always with his camera, snapping images of everyday Japanese citizens. In one such photograph, boys play sandlot baseball in a ruined Tokyo street. Though the brutality of war was still fresh, Speier says that he came to develop a “compassion [for the Japanese] that never left me.”

That sensibility followed him back to New York, where he finished college, and then NYU Law School. Speier started a private practice as a commercial trial lawyer but couldn’t shake his love of being behind the lens. So after shifting his specialty to intellectual property, and continuing to take photos all the while, he began to teach a class at the New School: What Every Photographer Should Know About the Law. As his portfolio grew, he went on to teach photographic legal procedures at the Fashion Institute of Technology, as well as courses on black-and-white photography, the darkroom, and printing. By the 1970s, Speier had vastly reduced his legal practice and was immersed in street photography, where his goal was always the same: “Confronting the ordinary person, doing their ordinary thing, in a, hopefully, magical way.”

Speier found plenty of images on the streets of New York. He was particularly drawn to what he calls “the blending of architecture, design, and social consciousness.” For example, Haunting Image he shot from his 85-year-old Speier has captured spontaneous and award-winning scenes of city life. 

By riding the bus through Manhattan with his camera, 85-year-old Speier has captured spontaneous and award-winning scenes of city life. 

Speier, “architecture” is not about physical structures; rather, it’s the emotional environment he sees his subjects occupying. “People are unaware they place themselves in an architecture, a situation,” Speier says. “I like to find those, see that, and create for them what they don’t even realize they’re a part of.” His pictures can now be found in the permanent collections of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, the Museum of the City of New York, the International Center of Photography, and the photo archives of the New York Public Library. He has also been widely exhibited — after a recent retrospective at NYU’s Kimmel Center, Speier is preparing for a solo show of his work at Calumet Photography this spring. And his commercial work for Random House, Forbes magazine, and Eyewitness News has taken him as far as China, France, and England.

Born in 1927 to a working-class Jewish family in the Bronx, Speier developed an early awareness of social issues, calling out family members who expressed racism, which he considered as insidious as the anti-Semitism he had experienced.

Speier rarely informs the subject until after he’s taken their photo — a method that has helped him capture New Yorkers at their most candid moments for decades. “I try not to disturb the elements I see,” he says. “I try to become an agent of design, art, truth, things like that. When it happens, I’m very happy.”

His activist inclinations later led to working with the NAACP’s ACT-So cultural program, where he was photography coach to minority high school students. It also installed in Speier, who got his first camera at age 13, an urge to “make a comment about the human condition.” One of his favorite photos depicts an elderly, homeless African-American woman sitting against a graffiti-ridden building in lower Manhattan with the words “Fight Racism” most prominent. “Hooded Figure in Snow,” a lone, haunting image he shot from his Upper West Side apartment, shows a dark silhouette of a person walking atop a wintry hill in Central Park. The photo was used on the cover of an Australian novel, The Book Thief. Another classic New York photo depicts five elderly women perched on a subway station bench, using a small digital camera, a scene that. When it happens, I’m very happy.”

Speier’s decades of New York City photos include Clockwise from Bird with Red Scarf, Belushi Masks (1988), “Up from Subway:” Bus Series (2011), and “Hooded Figure in Snow” (1972).
A TEMPORARY SPACE FOR THE HIGH ART, YOUNG DUDES

by Alyson Krueger / GSA S '12

Walking into TEMP, a new art space in Tribeca that promotes young art talent, one can’t help but think: This is different. For whereas the art—all made or curated by up-and-comers under the age of 30—which is somehow to distinguish inside the cavernous two-story, 4,500-square-foot space for use for a year (hence the name, TEMP), Paying no rent and using personal savings, they quit their jobs and taught themselves the basics of installing artwork and drafting legal contracts. The NYU art scene network then helped them find plenty of options for their first exhibition, “Working On Us,” which opened last fall and showcased 12 artists chosen “because their art reflected the new culture of today,” Ahn says. The show’s inventory made it clear that no one style or subject defines the new generation. One wall featured Dean Levin’s “So Series,” which offered pastel-colored word bubbles with phrases such as So Chill!, So Down!, and So Cool! The opposite wall featured Sandy Kim’s expressive photos of, among others, a naked woman with Xt taped across her nipples. TEMP’s next show consisted of mini exhibitions set up by influential contemporary arts collectives across the world, including Videotage (Hong Kong), Marat/Da Fonseca, and the Raw Material Company (Dakar). Not surprisingly, young artists and curators have rushed in as word has spread about the experiment, so finding new talent isn’t an issue. The better question is what happens in August when TEMP is scheduled to shut its doors. Ahn is hopeful that the rule isn’t over, “maybe the landlord will be a TEMP 2,” he suggests. “Or maybe the landlord will be generous and let us extend our lease.”

What is really great about the art world is that it is very much a community,” TEMP co-founder Alex Ahn says.

Julia Robinson, who teaches art history at NYU, is invested in helping TEMP grow their network. “What is really great about the art world is that it is very much a community,” Ahn says. TEMP was born out of Lipkis and Ahn’s post-graduate frustration. They both majored in art history at NYU and co-founded the Fine Arts Society, which organized behind-the-scenes looks at the city’s most prestigious art spaces. But once they finished school and got jobs—Lipkis as an aide to an independent art collector and Ahn as a member of a tech start-up in Dumbo—they found themselves, like many of their friends, too insignificant in the industry to have any impact. So over a drink, the duo decided to stop “bemoaning the difficulty of being young in the art world,” and to do something bold.

Fortune struck when a family friend introduced Ahn to the space to use for a year (hence the name, TEMP). Paying no rent and using personal savings, they quit their jobs and taught themselves the basics of installing artwork and drafting legal contracts. The NYU art scene network then helped them find plenty of options for their first exhibition, “Working On Us,” which opened last fall and showcased 12 artists chosen “because their art reflected the new culture of today,” Ahn says. The show’s inventory made it clear that no one style or subject defines the new generation. One wall featured Dean Levin’s “So Series,” which offered pastel-colored word bubbles with phrases such as So Chill!, So Down!, and So Cool! The opposite wall featured Sandy Kim’s expressive photos of, among others, a naked woman with Xt taped across her nipples. TEMP’s next show consisted of mini exhibitions set up by influential contemporary arts collectives across the world, including Videotage (Hong Kong), Marat/Da Fonseca, and the Raw Material Company (Dakar). Not surprisingly, young artists and curators have rushed in as word has spread about the experiment, so finding new talent isn’t an issue. The better question is what happens in August when TEMP is scheduled to shut its doors. Ahn is hopeful that the rule isn’t over, “maybe the landlord will be a TEMP 2,” he suggests. “Or maybe the landlord will be generous and let us extend our lease.”

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