

The New York Times

Jerome Liebling, Socially Minded Photographer, Dies at 87

By RANDY KENNEDY

JULY 28, 2011

Jerome Liebling, whose subtly powerful pictures and the lessons he drew from them influenced a generation of socially minded photographers and documentary filmmakers, died on Wednesday in Northampton, Mass. He was 87.

His death was announced by Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., where he taught for more than two decades.

Mr. Liebling was among a wave of pioneering photographers — including Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, Helen Levitt and Gordon Parks — who took to the streets of New York in the 1930s and '40s to make art by turning their cameras onto corners of urban life that had mostly been ignored by the photographers before them.

His experience as a child of the Depression growing up in Brooklyn, Mr. Liebling said, formed an impulse throughout his career to “figure out where the pain was, to show things that people wouldn’t see unless I was showing them.” Over a half-century much of his work depicted painful subjects far too directly for magazines or newspapers to show them: mental patients in state hospitals, cadavers used by New York medical students, blood-drenched workers at a Minnesota slaughterhouse.

Jerome Liebling was born in New York on April 16, 1924, the son of a waiter. After serving in the Army in North Africa and Europe during World War II, he returned to New York and studied art and design at Brooklyn College with the painter Ad Reinhardt, whose fledgling photography program provided Mr. Liebling with his first camera. He joined the Photo League, the socially minded photographers’ cooperative, and worked with Paul Strand, whose complex, hard-edged compositions exerted a strong early influence.

To support himself and also to address what he viewed as a troubling lack of attention given to photography by university art departments, Mr. Liebling accepted a professorship in 1949 at the University of Minnesota, where he established the school’s first photography and film program.



There he began to make documentary films with a longtime collaborator, Allen Downs. And with a Rolleiflex twin-lens camera that he was rarely without, he began to build a body of work that took him to state fairs, coal fields, political conventions, homes for the blind, poverty-stricken Indian reservations and a slaughterhouse in South St. Paul, where he went, he later wrote, to capture “the most heroic moments in the process: the slaughter, the symbolic relationship between workers and animals.”

The Yale historian Alan Trachtenberg, in an introduction to “Jerome Liebling Photographs,” a 1982 collection, wrote that Mr. Liebling was not exactly a social or documentary photographer but rather a “civic photographer” whose work brought about a deep awareness of the personal in the political.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

At Hampshire College, where, in 1969, he founded the film, photography and video program, he helped shape the careers of a number of documentary filmmakers, including Ken Burns, who has said that “the essential DNA” of all his films comes from still photography, a legacy of Mr. Liebling’s teaching, though his influence on Mr. Burns was more profound.

“He was so authentic, in a way that a lot of us had never experienced,” Mr. Burns said in an interview with The New York Times in 2006. “You wanted to be like him. You wanted to tell the truth. You’d go out to take pictures with him, and we all saw the same things he did, and then we’d come back, and he’d put up his prints, and you’d put up yours, and you were devastated.”

In 2009, Hampshire College opened the Jerome Liebling Center for Film, Photography and Video to house the programs Mr. Liebling founded. His photographs are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, among others.

His first marriage ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Rebecca Nordstrom, a professor of dance at Hampshire College; four daughters, Madeline Liebling of Shelburne Falls, Mass., Tina Liebling of Rochester, Minn., and Daniella Liebling and Rachel Jane Liebling of Brooklyn; a son, Adam Liebling of Cambridge, Mass.; and five grandchildren.

In a 2006 interview with The Times, Mr. Liebling said his teaching life was much less about showing how to make pictures than about imparting to his students a deep suspicion of dogma and of the compromises that can lie beneath the surface of American culture. “I wanted them to see that there are no shortcuts,” he said. “It’s too easy if everything is soft, and you can just buy your way and live well. I kept asking: ‘Where is your work coming from? Why are you doing it? What is it you see?’ And after a while they started to really look.”