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A Tabloid's Photographs That
Don't Tell the Whole Story

By John Leland January 15, 2016



The images here look trustworthy, don't they? After all, what captures the world more objectively, with less bias and distortion, than a photograph? Ralph Steiner, the great photographer and documentary filmmaker, warned anyone who looked at the images not to trust them.

“‘The camera cannot lie’ is true only in the sense that it is a little harder to tell a complete falsehood with a camera than with words,” Mr. Steiner wrote. “The thing to bear in mind in ‘reading’ photographs is that none of them can tell the full truth.”

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A remarkable thing about these sentences is that Steiner wrote them in his capacity as a picture editor at PM, the groundbreaking, photo-rich New York tabloid that was published from 1940 to 1948, where these images first ran. Among the remarkable things about PM, aside from the talent showcased there — Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, Drs. Seuss and Spock, Weegee and Helen Levitt, for starters — was that it called upon readers to view photographs differently.

“The editors there recognized the photographer as an interpreter, which was very different for the time,” said Jason E. Hill, an assistant professor of art history at the University of Delaware and author of a forthcoming book about PM. “If you look at Life magazine, the photographs function as statements of fact. PM presented



press photography as an interpretation. It cast doubts on photography’s claims as a truthful account of the world. That’s unique now, and certainly in the ‘40s.”

The 1941 Weegee photograph “Their First Murder” (Slide 11) illustrated the PM method, Mr. Hill said. The image covered half a page, with just a little text and a much smaller image of a dead body. “Another paper would lead with the corpse,” Mr. Hill said. “But at PM, it was much more interesting to think about how people consume the sights around them.”

In eight years, the tabloid was gone. But more than 75 of its images can be seen at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea through Feb. 20.