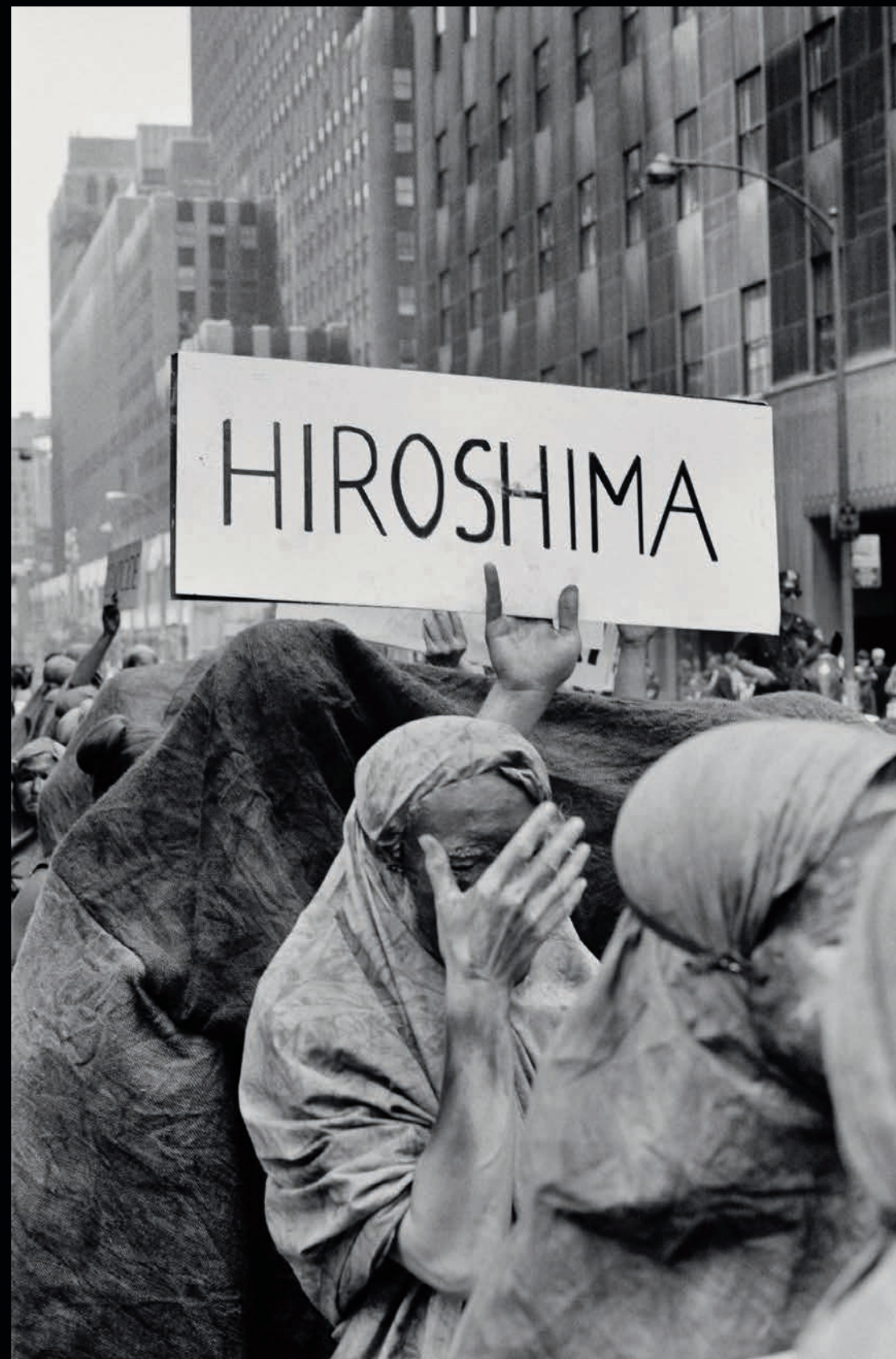


BUILDER LEVY

words HOLLY FRASER

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The veteran photojournalist still believes in the power of protest to effect social change.







Turn on the TV, open a newspaper or scroll through social media, and it's there: a barrage of almost unbelievable news that makes life in 2018 seem like it's edging towards a dystopian nightmare – and it's facts, not fake news as certain people would have us believe. That a former reality TV star and infamous businessman runs the apparent free world and Britain is building its own metaphorical wall against Europe may feel like we are living through unprecedented times, but we've been here before. And an age of anxiety is something that photographer Builder Levy is all too familiar with.

Growing up amid the McCarthyism of 1950s America, Builder's earliest associations with politics were marred by unease, mistrust and lies. During this first age of anxiety, communism was the enemy of the day, when even a whiff of allegiance could – and did – land numerous people in prison for conspiring to commit treason, oftentimes with little to no evidence. "I remember that my parents sent me to a summer camp, and some of the parents of the kids there were put into jail because of their non-violent political activism and anti-Cold War activities," he says. "And that happened to other people in my neighbourhood as I grew up. They were framed for a conspiracy to overthrow the government by forcing violence, but I had an alternative understanding."

From a young age, Builder adopted an attitude of resistance. He grew up in Brooklyn in a liberal family that were anti-war and anti-prejudice and "believed that we needed to change the world to make it a better place". These principles were instilled in him from childhood and undoubtedly went on to shape his photography career, which is celebrated in his new book *Humanity in the Streets: New York City 1960s-1980s*.

"To see that we're living through so much today that relates to what was happening then is so poignant – from Black Lives Matter to the Women's March."

An art major at Brooklyn College, Builder harboured a desire to directly connect with the realities of New York City in the 60s, and so picked up his camera and took to the streets. "With the mediation of the camera I could, and did, immerse myself directly into real life," he says. "I attended rallies and marches for civil rights, peace and justice. With my camera in hand, I tried to visually capture the emotional and ideological experiences in which I too was a partisan participant."

Throughout his illustrious career, Builder attended and photographed marches against the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War and famously, the Harlem Peace March, where he took one of his most iconic photographs. "The Harlem Peace March happened two years after Muhammad Ali came out against the war in Vietnam and lost his heavyweight title," Builder says. "He was threatened with jail time and he famously said, 'No Vietnamese has ever called me n****r', and this was the slogan that was written on signs at the march that I photographed."

"I specifically went to the Harlem Peace March because the media was ignoring the fact that African-Americans made up a large part of the soldiers being killed in Vietnam. Just last year that photograph was used by Ken Burns in the series on Vietnam that's on Netflix now. I didn't really know if my photos would be seen in the future but I had a sense that they needed to be."

Builder's photography led him right into the beating heart of history, iconic moments that are now relived in films and heralded as milestones in the American timeline and fight for equality. He photographed Malcolm X giving an impassioned speech at a civil rights rally the year before he was assassinated, and was one of the photographers on the frontline of the integration of high schools in New York City, where he remembers almost "half a million students staying out of school to support that struggle". And perhaps one of his most poignant shots is one that nearly didn't make the cut – a blurred close-up of Martin Luther King.

"Martin Luther King was a hero of mine and I never expected to even get that close to him," he says. "A lot of my work was used by *Freedomways* magazine, a cultural publication for the freedom movement that was published for 25 years, and they had asked me if I could photograph Martin Luther King, who was their featured speaker at Carnegie Hall for the W.E.B. DuBois centennial celebration in 1968," he remembers.

"The truth of the matter is that it was a bit overwhelming for me and I had no idea if it was going to work or if the photos would come out well. I kept the negatives for years, not thinking that they were that good. Then I got an email about an exhibition of Martin Luther King in New York and I took out the images, sent a few to the curator and that's how it started. At the time I didn't think my images were that important because other people had taken better photographs of Martin Luther King during his life. But there are two close-ups that are in the book and only later did I realise the significance of an image of Martin Luther King meeting DuBois' only granddaughter a month and a half before he was assassinated."

Being an integral documenter of such seminal moments in history has given Builder a front row seat to protest and has only strengthened his belief in people's right to non-violent protest to enforce change. "You don't always realise the significance though," he says. "I think I was more conscious about certain times than others. Looking back at the photographs to make this book I just thought, 'Wow, this is amazing.' Then to see that we're living through so much today that relates to what was happening then is so poignant – from Black Lives Matter to the Women's March."

Builder is better equipped than most to find parallels between the decades, but where others might be jaded or dejected, he, inspiringly, sees progress. Hearing him recount his work as a protest photographer and the injustice that he has witnessed, spanning more than 50 years, and then still be able to draw positives from negatives is reason enough for us all to have hope.

"The spirit of these marches back in the 60s, and again today, is positive," he says. "I photographed the Pride parade earlier in the year, and this year in particular I noticed that the signs at the march were not just about liberation, equality and protection for gay rights alone, but people were wearing t-shirts for Black Lives Matter and holding signs for immigration issues – there was such an intersectionality. People are coming together more and they care about each other's issues. There is a broad spectrum of unity, which I think the internet has really helped. Back in the 60s I was inspired to be part of these protests in order to make a contribution."

"To be able to use photography to create something meaningful, whether that's a social statement or art that moves people, is incredibly inspiring. In a way, I feel blessed to have been a part of it." ■

Humanity on the Streets: New York 1960s-1980s, published by Damiani, will be released October 2018.

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