



June 27: New York Paradise Lost

Your lens to the internet's most powerful photographs.



 For Your  Only:



Meryl Meisler

Meryl Meisler is a photographer and artist who spent 31 years teaching in New York City's public school system. Her work looks back at students at Intermediate School 291, as well as the streets of Bushwick, New York, and the dance scene where she spent her free time.

Her new book, *New York Paradise Lost*, helped her stay grounded during the last year and the difficult time the world was going through. "I hope it's uplifting to everyone else as well. The 1970s was a bad period in New York. People were running away from the city, and look what happened — artists moved into all these empty spaces, new music arose. A neighborhood like Bushwick that went through such hard times, so much history, it has transformed as well. There's a lot to be said about transformation and gentrification, but 40 years later, people want to live there."



Meryl Meisler

How did you start photographing?

I didn't go out to photograph; I photographed where I was going. In 1981 I started teaching full-time in Bushwick. At that time the neighborhood was a bit dicey. I couldn't bring my medium format camera with me. I was worried about it, and I had had one stolen the year before. So I bought my first point-and-shoot camera and would bring it with me from my car to the school, the subway to the school, and all my walks around there. I accepted the job at Intermediate School 291 in 1981 because I wanted health insurance and all that good stuff.

What was it like photographing at the school where you worked?

The school was opened prematurely. It never had a certificate of completion, or so I was told. So while they were finishing the building, it was very frenetic — like it would be in any and all middle schools no matter the circumstances. There were a lot of classrooms that didn't have windows, which was strange. And the neighborhood was in turmoil, which of course was absorbed by the students. I liken it to the series *MASH*. There is chaos and turmoil all around them, and yet they are still here doing their job. We went to work every day, the principal wore a suit and tie every day, and we all set out to create a positive working environment. I really ended up liking it.



Meryl Meisler

In the book, you have the photos of Bushwick and your students interspersed with disco photos from going out at night. How did the two fit together?

In 2007 I got an email from a teacher named Adam Schwartz who was teaching in Bushwick. He was an ESL teacher, but history was his passion.

He was applying to do an exhibit at the Brooklyn Historical Society, about how Bushwick had changed from 1977 to 2007. All he could find was pictures of the looting, the fires, the police presence. He wanted to show people what life was like, and a mutual colleague, John Napolillo, told him to contact me. He came over and looked through boxes of photos at my house. There were so many I had never looked through properly. Even though they were dusty, blurry, shot on a point-and-shoot, there were beautiful images in the boxes. I contacted the curator of the Museum of the City of New York cold turkey, and he wanted to see them, too. In 2010 I retired from teaching full-time, and I was obsessed with the work I'd created photographing in Bushwick.

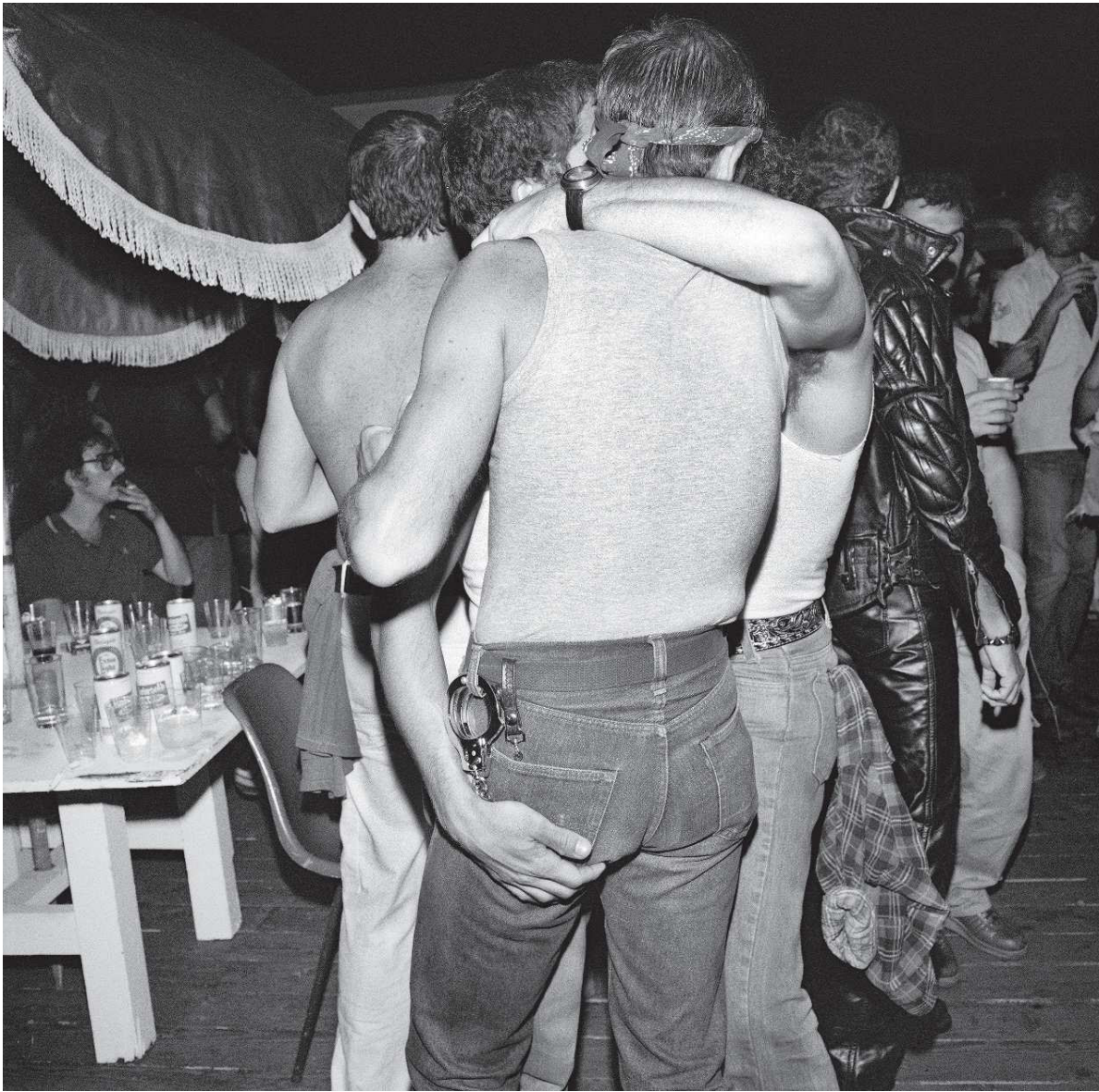


Meryl Meisler

I wanted to show the work in Bushwick, and there was a new gallery opening up, the Living Gallery. Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire, a French filmmaker who moved to Bushwick found out about my work and came to see it at the Living Gallery, and he wanted to learn more about his new neighborhood. He owned Bizarre, a drag and burlesque nightclub, and he wanted to open up the basement to create an art space to show work like

mine. He said that the only thing was that it was under a bar, and sometimes people got drunk and stole things off the walls. I had had my work in museums and galleries. I thought, *No way*, but my friend told me not to be such a snob. I went to an opening reception at Bizarre. The crowd was dancing under a disco ball that night. I felt like my worlds came together. The place where I had taught art, which at the time had felt like it was out in the desert somewhere, was now a hub for art and the cool place to be. I knew I had all these disco photos, and realized this would be the perfect place to show the Bushwick streets and nightlife work together. Bizarre exhibited and published my first two books.

My life partner, Patricia O'Brien, designs all my graphics and books. To produce *New York Paradise Lost: Bushwick Era Disco*," Patricia and I decided to team up and become [Parallel Pictures Press](#). Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire helped me edit the photos. It's great to have someone who knows your work really well to help sequence it. It's a lot of work and a major project to do a book all by yourself. This book is edgier; I'm showing nightlife things that make me blush. But I wanted to make sure it wasn't just shocking, that it was art and photography all in one. I had to be very straight — is this pornography or photography, because I want photography not pornography. I wanted it to be history through art. Like Brassai taking pictures of Paris de nuit in the 1930s, this was my New York City nightlife. And I'm proud of it.



Meryl Meisler



 **FROM OUR DESK** 

Congratulations to the [2021 Women Photograph Grantees](#)! As always, here are some of [the best photo stories](#) from around the internet, and what we loved from our desk.

**PHOTOS SHOW THE HORROR AND SCALE
OF THE MIAMI BUILDING COLLAPSE**