

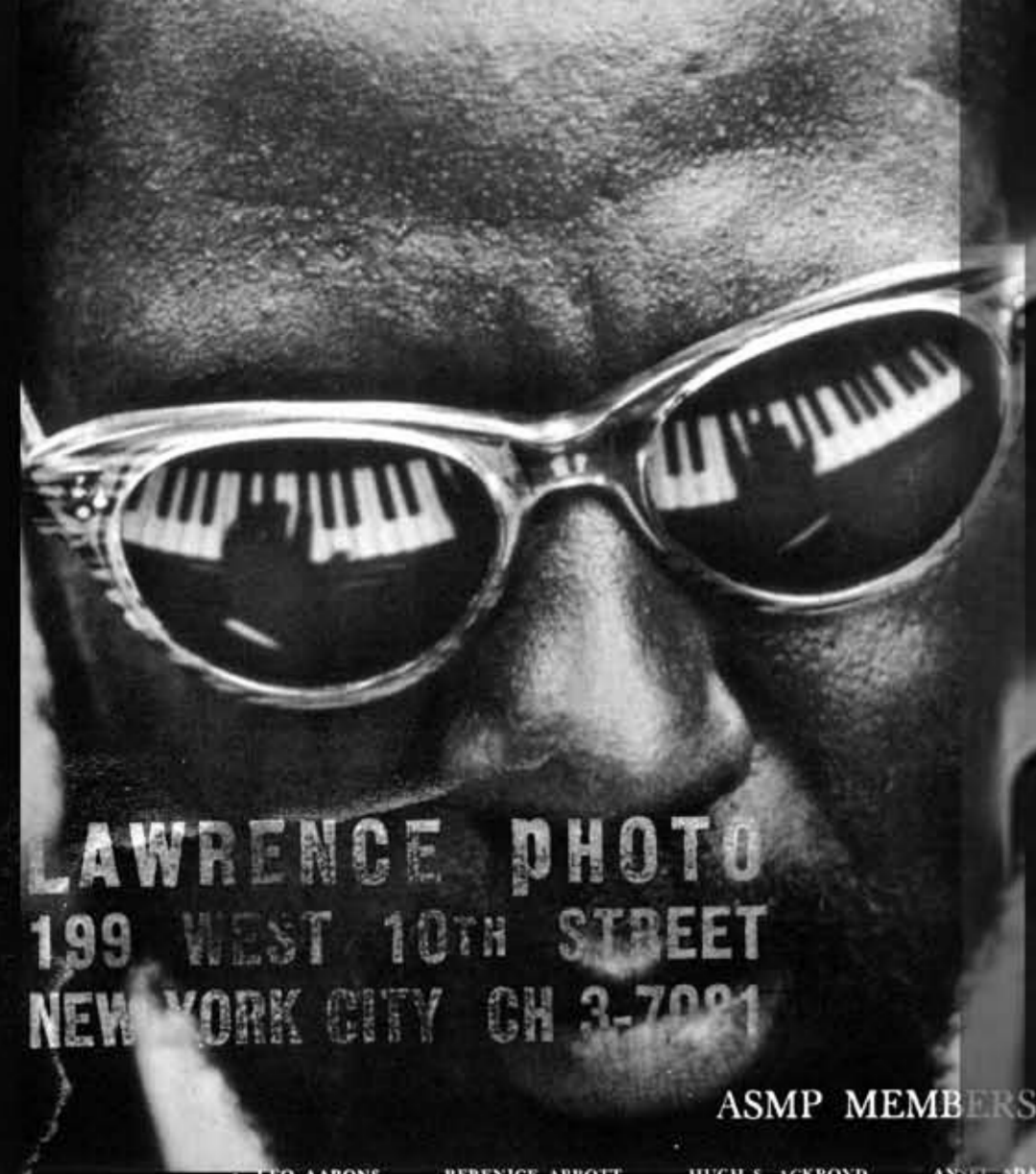
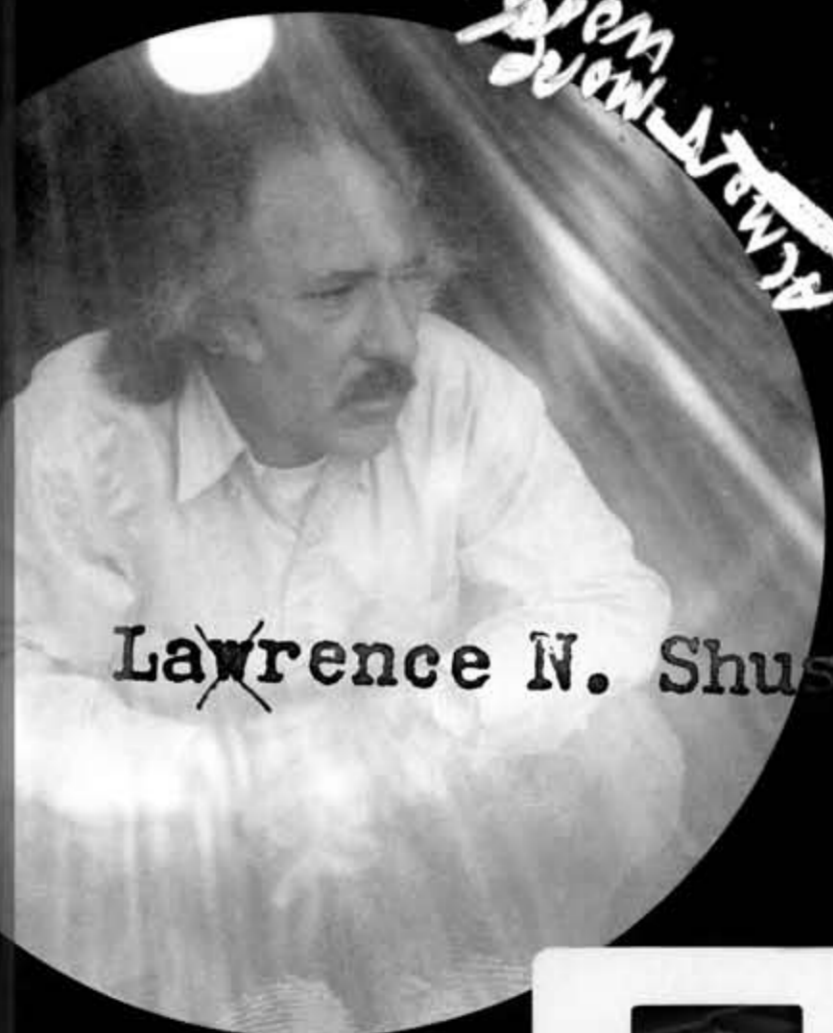
# SHUSTAK

STUART PAGE

Friday 11 July - Friday 15 August, 2008  
Opening 11 July 8pm



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LEFT TO RIGHT: 180° Nude, NYC 1968 • *Thelonious Monk* at Lincoln Center, NYC 1962 • *CLICK*, NYC c.1960 • from *Black Jews*, NYC 1961 • *Harry's Luncheonette*, NYC 1960 • *Statue of Liberty*, NYC 1960 • *Graffiti S-I*, Staten Island 1960 (detail) • *Untitled*, NZ 1993 • All images © Laurence N. Shustak.

Shustak comes from Shostakovich, a Jewish surname, shared by the famous Russian composer. Shortened, it takes on the sound of a heavy lidded camera shutter delivering a satisfying Shus-tak! So director Stuart Page, student and long time friend of Laurence Shustak gives us *Shustak*. Both man and documentary are unconventional in more than just name and Page emphasises this photographic onomatopoeia extending aural and visual into a unique character study. Though biography is always an incomplete project Page rethinks how a documentary functions, to match it's subject, knowingly and playfully to exist as an artwork in it's own right. What results is a multi-layered work that reflects on its own process of production. A multifaceted portrait of an artist, as the one time apprentice radically yet respectfully re-masters the teacher through friends, family, students, and colleagues and most importantly the artist's own output.

*Shustak* shows itself as a construct and so does not neglect truthful reality for artifice but reflects on how the two co-exist even more forcefully and productively. For “nonfiction contains any number of ‘fictive’ elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention.”<sup>1</sup> And as Howard Zinn exclaimed, “Art moves away from reality and invents something that may be ultimately more accurate about the world than what a photograph can depict.”<sup>2</sup> Both Shustak and Page understand the ambiguous status of the photographic and filmic image. Suitably overloaded with visual stimulus, Page has made use not only of the art but this dense marginalia and scrawl of Laurence Shustak.

#### Beginnings

Laurence Shustak's entry into the world of photography and image-making via the military, enlisting in the army and a Cracker Jack box camera is telling. The kind of historical moment theorist Paul Virilio might cite for his argument tracing the relationship between war, technology and art; his “vision machine” despairing the loss of a grounded humanist perception. Shustak however, quitting his job as tool and die maker to take up the finely tuned workings of the darkroom saw the potential in photography not just as a living but a mode of direct and peaceful expression. As Marshall McLuhan declared, “Photography was almost as decisive in making the break between mere mechanical industrialism and the graphic age of electronic man. The step from the age of Typographic Man to the age of Graphic man was taken with the invention of the photograph.”<sup>3</sup> Shustak made such a break.

#### All that Jazz

Between 1957 and 1965, Eugene Smith was

documenting the Manhattan jazz scene through thousands of photos while recording interviews with musicians. Over a similar period, Shustak too was producing many dynamic and bold photos for *Riverside Records*. He in turn documented the greats of John Coltrane, Chet Baker, Cannonball Adderley, Bill Evans and of course Thelonious Monk. The poster image of Monk (*overleaf*) is one of his most iconic. It has been reproduced dozens of times and other photos, say of Ray Charles nod to its influence on occasion. What one notices about Shustak's jazz images, aside from their striking contrasts, the poise, the strong compositions are the actual instruments themselves. Be it a double bass, sax, trumpet or drums, player and played become one in these shots. Even Monk at his piano, face and brow deep in concentration and black and white keys reflected in his glasses is the perfect example of this harmony. Monk is literally seeing and thinking his music, a sound that would utilize the space and gaps between notes and at the time was perceived as too difficult by mainstream audiences. These photos then not only simply reflect the musicians of the time but also evoke and echo the improvisation, the rearrangement and recombination of form jazz and bebop are known for. Shustak also took the emblematic image that became the Monk postage stamp motif he designed for *Riverside Records*.

#### Black Jews

Being the son of Jewish émigrés, Shustak became fascinated by the socio and cultural implications of African-Americans adopting Zionist beliefs. However *Black Jews* not being European refugees but from another diaspora altogether claimed a direct link from Africa and the Israelites. As Howard Brotz writes, “The *Black Jews* contend that the so-called Negroes in America are really Ethiopian

Hebrews or Falashas who had been stripped of their knowledge of their name and religion during slavery.”<sup>4</sup> One of Shustak's shots fittingly depicts the Ethiopian Hebrews sign in the window of the synagogue, another the intensity of a Rabbi's gaze, the rolling of the Torah, candles on the Menorah and the graphic power and strength of an entwined Star of David. Surface details take on deeper meaning like the washed effect of the glass, enclosed eyes and pointed hands. They possess sanctity and stillness. These images, while very much in a social documentarian mode and carefully composed, avoid the dangers of an exploitative anthropological approach of sheer “otherness” and remain interesting and sympathetic to this day.

As America grappled with the social upheaval brought by the civil rights movement, anti-war protests, feminism and hippiedom, Shustak was there to capture these unfolding in a style somewhat removed from Pop art. His fisheye nudes are provocative works from the sixties yet fall out of any neat art historical classification. Using a wide-angle hemispherical lens Shustak shot nudes in front of heavily tin foiled backdrops creating arresting ocular images in which the female form is contorted and distorted and domestic interiors bend and warp. Voluminous and reminiscent of Henry Moore sculptures the limber prints push figure studies in an interesting new direction. The proof sheets become strings of bulbs, evidence of editing and rejection.

The *Flower People* publication contained interviews by Henry Gross and saw Shustak document the East Village in 1968. The images have an unsettling and gritty vibe, plainly thousands of miles away from clichés of West coast and Haight Ashbury goings on. The foiled and highly reflective backdrops from the nudes are used here for portraits. Shustak also shoots drug paraphernalia, looming, poetic street corners and alternative interiors—all, strangely, during this psychedelic era, in black and white. Yet this series revels in photography's origins in chemicals and light. A twilight shot of an East Village apartment block in shadow illuminates one lone window with the hand written word *PEACE*.

#### The Street and the straight shot

While making a living as a commercial photographer, snapping Jazz musicians for Riverside and embarking on personal projects like *Black Jews*, Shustak also walked and rode the streets of Manhattan. As “a chronicler of downtown bohemia”, he was to also bear witness to such Happenings as Alan Kaprow's towering *The Courtyard* in 1962. Kaprow described these subsequent and residual documents as “dreamings” and

acknowledged them as works in their own right. Shustak saw the photograph as an event and so acknowledges the performative, decisive moments and contingent dimensions to photography. This chance aspect, what Paul Strand called “self-sufficient serendipity” is no better seen than in Shustak's photograph *Click*. An archetypal New York image, the picture frame houses six children's heads, looking up, half-curious, half in disbelief at Shustak's handheld 8x10 camera. They are backed by the patterned wood grain of a bus shelter, the sprayed tag of “Click” written on it. As an image it captures the instant and place so effectively to become timeless.

Harry's Luncheonette is another captivating image, displaying what John Szarkowski called “a discrete parcel of time”<sup>5</sup> It stands within the Walker Evan's tradition of deadpan capture, celebrating the interplay of commercial and handwritten signage. Utterly American, the counter boy is almost lost, sandwiched by advertising boards and homemade hoardings. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag describes the souring of the Walt Whitman dream of generalising beauty with post-war American photography.<sup>7</sup> The problem being that instead of celebrating the everyman the image becomes debased and undignified. Beauty and its antithesis are made indiscriminate. Yet Shustak's graffiti images are beautiful and delicate, combining edginess with sensitivity for surface and a social conscience.

#### Graffiti

Photography has since it's inception documented the urban environment. How could it not arising out of the same rapid industrial milieu as the modern city itself? Think Atget, Stieglitz, Bresson. Yet it was not until the release of William Klein's ground and rule-breaking *Life is good and good for you in New York* in 1956, (a book that was turned down by local publishers and printed in France) that it caught the eye of a new generation of American photographers, Shustak included. Shustak's graffiti images, which would become a touchstone for Page's own work, offer an honesty and an “emphatic flatness of the picture plane” seen in Aaron Siskind's work.<sup>8</sup> These universal and enduring elements, the “I was here impulses”, what Brassai deemed as “Save me, take me with you - tomorrow I'll be gone” sentiments are captured by Shustak. With a concentration on worn surfaces and gestural mark making, at the time these works would have been refreshing and more direct, a riposte to action painting heroics. For these crude, anonymous marks and gestures being re-appropriated and re-contextualised from the street, like Siskind's work, created an interesting dialogue with Abstract Expressionism.

We can see Brassai's love for an elementary language in Shustak's pieces of the period as well as a boyish conveyance of humour and sadness, a mixture that predates say David Shrigley's comic wit and Peter Peryer's pathos. Chalked names and figures vie for attention on brick walls, a faint, racy capitalised “I love you” is directed outwards, but toward whom? A smiling, smirking whale rises to the surface of a picture, numerals and letters become abstract forms. Some leave one looking to Basquiat.

#### Shorts

Hailing Kurosawa as a hero, it was no surprise that Shustak ventured into filmmaking. Having had experience working in television he chose the 16mm format, (this would not be the only time Shustak was to take an amateur market medium and make art from it). *Landscape* (1969) is ironic in title, promising a scenic drive in the country starting with some map opening credits. Yet it becomes a journey of driving shots, the camera remains focused on the perspective of the road through frenetic freeways and industrialised peripheries, the dynamic jazz score giving it a music video sensibility.

Shustak also experimented making a very modern and impressionistic coverage of a town cycle race, exploring the colours of speed and motion. His most powerful film though is *‘Have my friends been asking for me?’* (1970) made for the St. Josephs School for the Blind. Documenting a group of multiple handicapped children with directness and compassion, the film leaves the viewer moved and touched over the Braille end credits.

#### Educator provocateur

So having produced a vast and varied oeuvre in the States, Shustak was to take a job that would see him swap New York for Christchurch in a true counter-cultural move. Shustak was to found the departments of Photography, Film and Design at Ilam School of Fine Arts in 1973. Aside from the dozens of cameras and hundreds of books, he brought to New Zealand a unique and eccentric take on photography, a self-taught attitude and approach that would challenge any academic or institutionalised art forms. Dan Arps recalls that Shustak had told him once “that it was admiration for Buckminster Fuller (the inventor of the geodesic dome) that had led him astray from his happy existence as a freelance photographer, and into academia.”<sup>10</sup> As Buckminster Fuller said of himself, “I may not profess any special preoccupation or capability. I am a random element... I am not professionally classifiable.”<sup>11</sup> Shustak, like Fuller who he had taught alongside at the Southern Illinois University before coming to New Zealand, encapsulated a similar anti-

establishment and pedagogical ethos. Both were not, initially at least, formally trained and what they lacked in degrees and diplomas they made up for with vast experience, pragmatism and charisma. Shustak was to “teach by creative example” and in a memoirium Shustak was described as “a brilliant and idiosyncratic teacher.”<sup>12</sup> The conservative *Robert McDougall Bulletin* records Shustak's talk on photography as “the most informal style we have had for some time”. And another telling comment comes from an *Art New Zealand* issue that exclaimed that Shustak sought “little exposure for himself outside of Christchurch.”<sup>13</sup> So bar a small amount of press Shustak was to go about his work in Edgware and New Brighton quietly it seems. But he was to have a lasting influence on his students.

Shustak was, like McLuhan suspicious of “the camera does not lie” sentiment and aware of “the multiple decepts that are now practiced in its name.”<sup>14</sup> In one of his last interviews with Page he speaks about the end of photojournalism as we enter the age of photo shopped realities and touch ups, embedded reporters, news media monopolies, of infomercials and advertorials. Yet Shustak, having always been an early adapter of new technologies, continued to explore and push the use of Polaroids, digitised mixed media, Mac desktop publishing, and the Internet for image and meaning making in this country.

Utilizing the near instant gratification of the Polaroid format Shustak displayed his eye for a still. One such example involved taking a pair of photos that spoke to each other. One, a woman's crotch, cropped to show the join of legs and pubic hair coupled by a fleshy shot of the corner of a room, where two walls and a ceiling meet to create an evocative Y. So simple, so formalist yet without being formal.

#### Going Public

Shustak's last major project was entitled *‘Art In Public’* and consisted of a CD-Rom of his photographs free to print providing the artist was acknowledged. This final major project was realised in 1999. Before Radiohead released *‘In Rainbows’* making it potentially free and available on-line, shocking an already scared music industry, Shustak (who also made electronic music) had produced a body of work that explored art, copyright and intellectual property issues in a challenging way. Sure, we are now saturated with the digital, *Getty* stock images and *Flickr* photo-sharing but what Shustak was proposing was a shareware art of sorts. Thus after a 30 year professional career he asserted photography, as “an inherently democratic and accessible image-making medium, much of whose importance in all its forms resides in the inexpensive and almost infinite repeatability of

its imagery.”<sup>15</sup> He was to provide a reappraisal and rethinking of Walter Benjamin for the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century pushing the museum and *brothel without walls* further still.

For “by explicitly defining photographic art in opposition to the sprawling mass of ordinary, practical photography, Alfred Stieglitz paradoxically endowed the latter with an embryonic identity it had not possessed. Evans and his successors completed the process by recognizing a coherent aesthetic in the same pile of mundane photographs that everyone knew and used, filed or discarded as the daily occasion required.”<sup>16</sup> And as friend and theorist A.D. Coleman said of this last project by Shustak, he “not only emulsifies all judgements regarding quality and all distinctions between types of ‘Art in Public’ but also rejects the ostensibly ennobling strategy of a high-art photographic style.”<sup>17</sup> He was able to do this through his 35mm snap-shot style and choice of subject matter. Thus, we are presented with quantity over quality, a vast array of images from small town South Island folk excursions. Deliberately daggy and culled kiwiana it was in a vernacular that speaks as much of process and intention as of any final realised aesthetic object. Yet it still dealt with Shustak's preoccupation with new technologies, found objects, public space, signage and the political dimension to art.

#### Conclusion

Therefore, in turn what Page brilliantly offers us is utterly in keeping with his subject. As a documentary, an experiment, an artwork, a testament, it captures the depth and breadth of one man. Eccentric, confrontational, colourful, the pictures and persona are inseparable. McLuhan called photographs “statements without syntax”. This is apt for Shustak, like many visual artists, was dyslexic and so created his own wild lexicon of images. Page takes not only the photos but the curious captions, the throwaway lines, strange titles, dedications and expands on them, highlighting this Joycean game of text and image, face and place. In parts, Page's style echoes the cut and pasted juxtaposed layouts of Quentin Fiore who worked as a graphic designer on many McLuhan books. The film operates in that space, what Rauschenberg called the gap between art and life, collapsing both into a play that its subject would be proud of, a truly *Shustakian* work. Klikk!

JAMES ROBERTSON, MAY 2008

<sup>1</sup> MICHAEL RENOV, *Theorizing Documentary*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> HOWARD ZINN, *Artists in times of war*, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> MARSHALL MCLUHAN, *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*, Ginko Press, California, 2003, p. 259.

<sup>4</sup> HOWARD M. BROTZ, *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro nationalism and the dilemmas of Negro leadership*, Schocken Books, 1970, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/phot/ho\\_2002.334.5.6.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/phot/ho_2002.334.5.6.htm)

<sup>6</sup> JOHN SZARKOWSKI, *The Photographers Eye*, New York, Museum of Modern Art; Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1966.

<sup>7</sup> SUSAN SONTAG, *On Photography*, Penguin Classics, Clays Ltd, St Ives, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> THOMAS B. HESS IN AARON SISKIND'S *Places: Photographs*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1976, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> BRASSAI, *Graffiti*, Flammarion, Paris, 1993, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> DAN ARPS, ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ Christchurch Roundup, *Log Illustrated Nine*, Summer 2000, Physics Room, Christchurch.

<sup>11</sup> Buckminster Fuller in *R. Buckminster Fuller on Education*, edited by Peter Wagschal and Robert Kahn, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1979, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.photoforum-nz.org/newsletters/69/obits/obits.html>

<sup>13</sup> A. LAND from <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/exhibitions10akal.htm>

<sup>14</sup> MARSHALL MCLUHAN, *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, Ginko Press, California, 2003, p. 262.

<sup>15</sup> A.D. COLEMAN, *Critical : Photography in the International Image Community*, Nazaceli Press, Munich, 1995, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> PETER GALASSI, *Walker Evans and company*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2000 p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> A.D. COLEMAN, “There is No Not Art”, Introduction from *Art in Public*, CD-ROM, 2000.

#### Biography

STUART PAGE studied with Shustak at School of Fine Arts, Christchurch, graduated 1980 with a Dip FA (HONS) in Photography. Exhibited photos/photo-screenprints/books widely and drummed for post-punk band AXEMEN during 80s/90s. Moved to Auckland making music videos including the infamous *AFFCO* for the Skeptics in 1987. Self taught cinematographer/editor and several years lighting in NZ film industry. Continues to exhibit photography, experimental films, works as freelance cinematographer/editor and film teacher in Auckland. Features in collections of Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.C., Auckland City Art Gallery, Te Papa Tongarewa, Dowse Art Gallery, Manawatu Art Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery, Dunedin Art Gallery.



ABOVE: L.N. SHUSTAK & S.W. PAGE SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS, ILAM, CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND 1977. PHOTOGRAPH GLENN JOWITT.

#### Front poster photo titles and credits

TOP LEFT *Thelonious Monk* at Lincoln Center, NYC 1962 • TOP CENTRE from *Black Jews*, NYC 1961 • TOP RIGHT *Untitled*, NYC c.1960 • MIDDLE LEFT *Graffiti S-I*, Staten Island 1960 • MIDDLE CENTRE *Laurence N. Shustak*, Illinois, c.1970 (photographer unknown) • MIDDLE RIGHT *Thelonious Monk stamp*, 1956, design Laurence N. Shustak © Riverside Records • MIDDLE RIGHT *Untitled*, S. E. Bronx 1966 • BOTTOM LEFT & BOTTOM CENTRE *180° Nude*, NYC 1968 • BOTTOM CENTRE *Laurence N. Shustak*, Christchurch ©1978 Stuart Page • BOTTOM RIGHT *CLICK*, NYC c.1960. All images © Laurence N. Shustak unless otherwise stated.