

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
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JOHN GUTMANN: BEYOND THE DOCUMENT

April 19 - July 17, 1990

An exhibition of works by German-born photographer John Gutmann, who has resided in San Francisco since 1933, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on April 19, 1990. JOHN GUTMANN: BEYOND THE DOCUMENT features photographs that transcend photojournalism to reveal a poetic, often disturbing vision. The exhibition was selected from a larger exhibition organized by Sandra S. Phillips, curator of photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and coordinated by Susan Kismaric, curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art.

On view until July 17, JOHN GUTMANN: BEYOND THE DOCUMENT includes approximately sixty black-and-white photographs dating primarily from the 1930s and 1940s. Many of the works are rare vintage prints, and several images have never before been exhibited.

The works featured in the exhibition include photographs taken in San Francisco and during the artist's travels around the United States; images from his graffiti series; and images of circus performers and acrobats. Gutmann, who was in his late twenties when he left Nazi Germany to settle in the Bay area, observed American popular culture with the fresh perception of an outsider. From the drive-in movie theater and the ubiquitous automobile to San Francisco's active street life and waterfront, the artist captured on film the exuberant and often exotic character of his newly adopted home.

Gutmann's images have a dual nature: they are both documents of objective facts and open-ended riddles. The photographs embody an ambiguous and almost

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surreal quality. Their deliberately enigmatic content, in most cases assisted by a lyrical rather than a descriptive title, is a constant feature in his work. His photographs are conditioned by his ability to sense the apparent strangeness of his subjects and to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Born in 1905 in Breslau, Germany, Gutmann studied art and philosophy at the University of Breslau, where he became a master student of expressionist painter Otto Müller. He moved to Berlin in 1927 and completed his degree the following year. Gutmann took a part-time job teaching art while devoting the remainder of his time to painting. Realizing in 1933 that his prospects in Nazi Germany were grim, Gutmann moved to San Francisco. Mindful of the difficulty he would have in supporting himself as an artist in Depression-era America, he purchased a Rolleiflex camera, and, without any previous photography training, obtained a contract with a photo agency in Berlin to send them pictures of the United States.

In 1936, Gutmann began working with Pix, an American agency supplying images to American and European magazines, including Life, Look, and The Saturday Evening Post. On assignment for the U.S. Office of War Information in 1943, Gutmann photographed and filmed in China, Burma, and India. Returning to San Francisco in 1946, he established a creative photography department at San Francisco State College, one of the first of its kind in the country. During the next several decades, until his retirement in 1973, Gutmann divided his time between teaching, photojournalism assignments, and photography projects.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.