

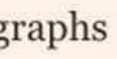
Sabine Weiss: an accidental tourist at 93

The Swiss-born photographer has built a career on acute observations of French life



Sabine Weiss © Samuel Kirzenbaum

Tobias Grey JUNE 13, 2018



For many years the Swiss-born photographer Sabine Weiss resisted the idea of exhibiting her work. She was earning a decent living as a commercial photographer and everything that fell outside that domain was carefully stored in boxes and tucked away from prying eyes. Even today, Weiss's "secret garden", as she calls her black-and-white photography from the 1950s and 1960s, is full of rarities that no one has ever seen.

Still full of vigour at the age of 93, Weiss is the last surviving representative of the French movement of photographic humanists, which included Robert Doisneau, Edouard Boubat and Willy Ronis. She continues to watch over her work from that postwar period with a fiercely critical eye. Her latest exhibition, which begins showing in Paris at the Centre Pompidou's Galerie de Photographies on Wednesday, is a case in point. Not all of the 80 photographs in *Les Villes, La Rue, L'Autre*, which have been carefully chosen by the Pompidou's in-house curator Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska, have met with Weiss's approval.

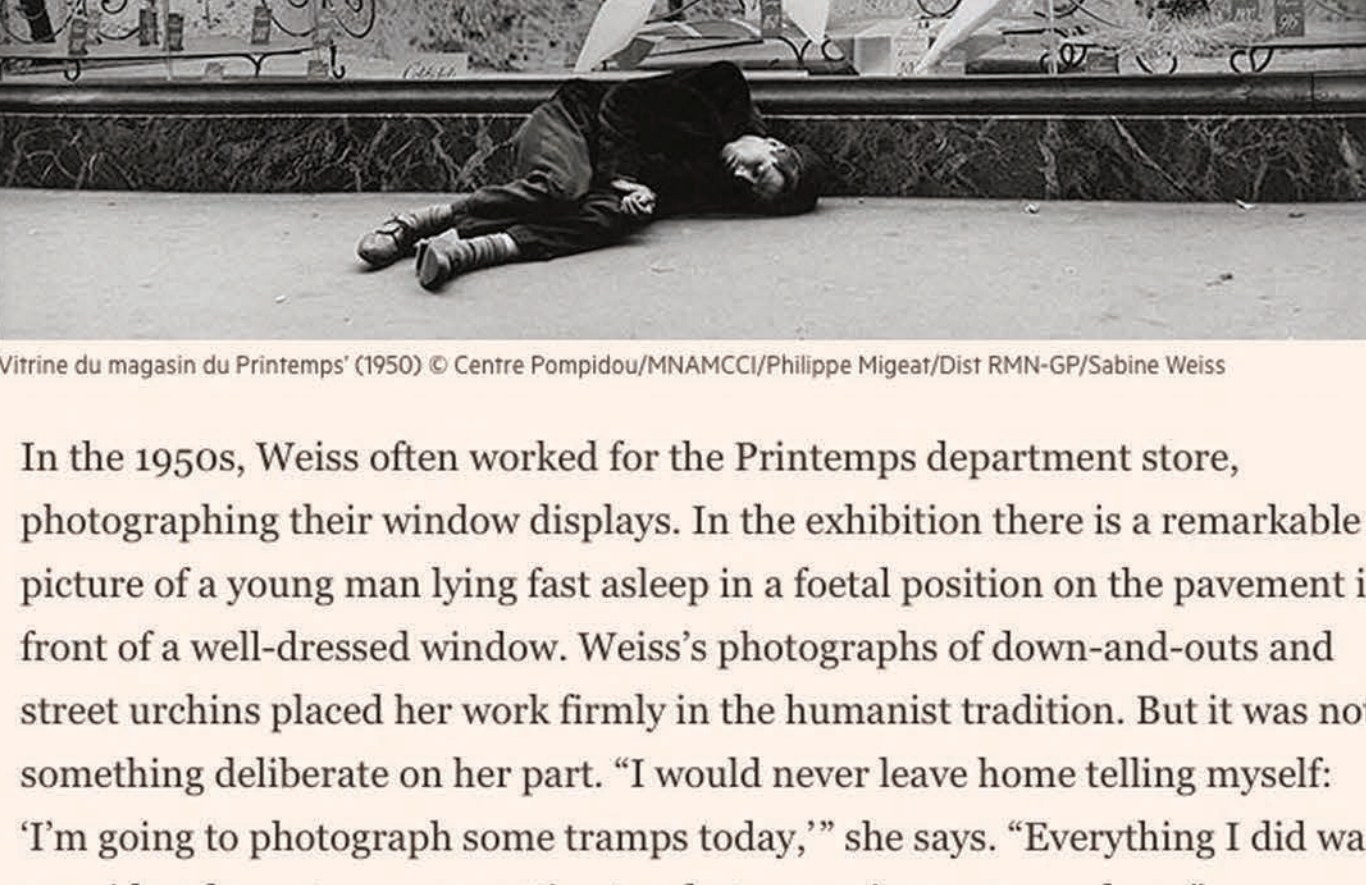
"There are a lot I wouldn't have chosen," she tells me. But as we go through the photographs one by one, she starts to soften. Maybe it's not such a bad selection after all? "Maybe," she concedes. Weiss's home in Paris's 16th arrondissement is an expanded version of the one she moved into with her late husband, the American-born avant-garde painter Hugh Weiss, in 1949. Over time it has gained several rooms and a second floor. The living room is like a cabinet of curiosities, with the floors covered in Persian carpets, religious icons hanging from the ceiling and various objets d'art adorning the walls.

Many of the photographs in the exhibition were taken during evening strolls with her husband through the streets of Paris. "I worked a lot during the day, so night-time was when I often took photographs for myself," Weiss says. "It was a time before television, so after dinner we'd walk around and I'd photograph anything that interested me."

In her early black-and-white pictures, often shot with a Rolleiflex, Weiss makes great play of the low-slung street lighting, the foggy sky and glistening street puddles. There are several photographs shot inside the Paris Metro and the Gare Saint-Lazare that are full of smoke and shadows. "It was a very different atmosphere back then," Weiss says. "I remember there was a lot more snow, and it was often a great deal colder. The shop windows were covered in condensation: they were literally dripping with water; not everything was heated like it is now."



Paris, 1955' © Centre Pompidou/MNAMCCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist RMN-GP/Sabine Weiss

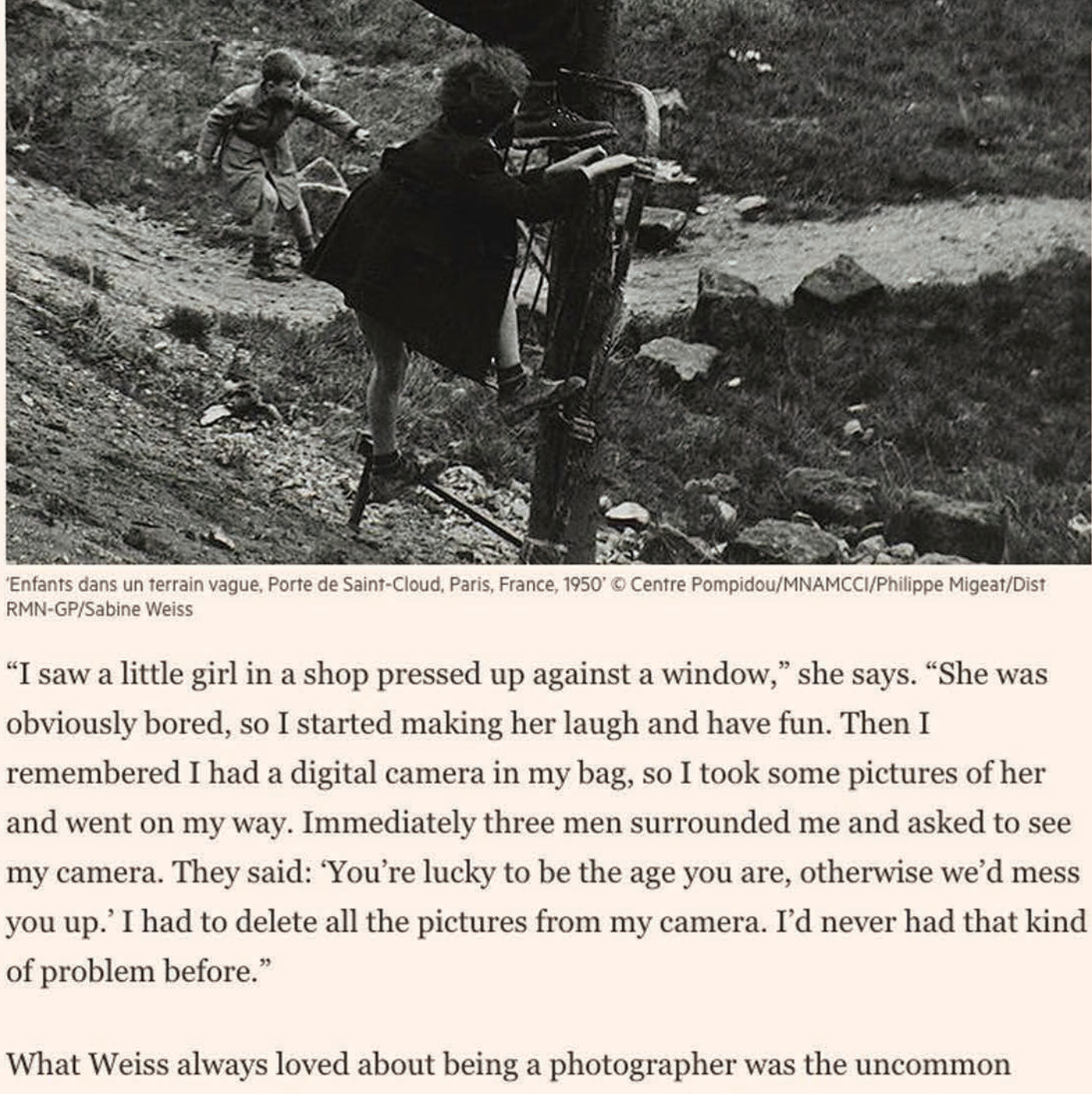


Vitrine du magasin du Printemps' (1950) © Centre Pompidou/MNAMCCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist RMN-GP/Sabine Weiss

In the 1950s, Weiss often worked for the Printemps department store, photographing their window displays. In the exhibition there is a remarkable picture of a young man lying fast asleep in a foetal position on the pavement in front of a well-dressed window. Weiss's photographs of down-and-outs and street urchins placed her work firmly in the humanist tradition. But it was not something deliberate on her part. "I would never leave home telling myself: 'I'm going to photograph some tramps today,'" she says. "Everything I did was a rapid and spontaneous reaction to what was going on around me."

Weiss also rejects those critics who have pigeonholed her as a photographer of children, but nonetheless recognises her pace in that area. "I relished the challenge of capturing their naturalness," she says. "What I found was that kids love to be tested, so I would say things like: 'I bet you can't climb up on to that table in 10 seconds.' And hop, up they'd go."

The show includes a series of photographs of a gang of children using iron bedsteads as ladders to climb up a tree. Their sheer insouciance and disregard for danger is reflected in their joyous howl. A trace of rare nostalgia creeps into Weiss's voice when she remembers how Paris used to be full of wastelands where kids roamed freely. Indeed, her most recent attempt at photographing a young girl around the Gare du Nord left her shaken and disappointed.



'Enfants dans un terrain vague, Porte de Saint-Cloud, Paris, France, 1950' © Centre Pompidou/MNAMCCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist RMN-GP/Sabine Weiss

"I saw a little girl in a shop pressed up against a window," she says. "She was obviously bored, so I started making her laugh and have fun. Then I remembered I had a camera in my bag, so I took some pictures of her and went on my way. Immediately three men surrounded me and asked to see my camera. They said: 'You're lucky to be the age you are, otherwise we'd mess you up.' I had to delete all the pictures from my camera. I'd never had that kind of problem before."

What Weiss always loved about being a photographer was the uncommon access it gave her. "Whenever I saw a door marked with a no-entry sign, I always opened it," she says. "If I went to the theatre or a concert, I used to go in through the artists' entrance."



Dun-sur-Auron, France, 1950' © Centre Pompidou/MNAMCCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist RMN-GP/Sabine Weiss



L'homme qui court, Paris, 1953' © Centre Pompidou/MNAMCCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist RMN-GP/Sabine Weiss

She credits the astonishing longevity of her career, which she began winding up two or three years ago, on a series of chance encounters and happy accidents. Perhaps foremost among these was her meeting Robert Doisneau, who twice had a telling impact on her future. The first time was in 1952, when she went to a meeting at French Vogue after the magazine had published one of her photographs.

"Doisneau is the one who made everything possible for me," she says. "When I met the director of Vogue to show him my photographs, Robert was also there and liked what he saw. I hadn't met him before and was wondering who this little man was sticking his nose into my business. But his word counted for a lot, and Vogue immediately took me on as a photographer. After that, he also found me a place at the Rapho photographic agency which represented him."



'Paris, France, 1954' © Centre Pompidou/MNAMCCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist RMN-GP/Sabine Weiss

The next Doisneau intervention occurred in 1978 when Weiss, who by then had already had several solo and group exhibitions in the US, was about to have her first French show at the Noroit cultural centre in Arras. "Robert asked me what photographs I planned on exhibiting," she recalls. "I told him that I'd got plenty of boxes of photographs and that I'd simply go along with my boxes and put the pictures into frames."

This notion was pooh-poohed by Doisneau, who told her: "Not at all, not at all. You have to make a proper selection." He also told her that she needed to get her pictures professionally enlarged. "It was a revelation," Weiss says. "When the photographs were blown up and hung on the walls I was quite astonished by what I saw. What struck me most was the sympathy that I have for people, also the compositions and the choices I'd made."

But despite being one of the most distinctive photographers of the 20th century, Weiss insists that she is not an artist. "I am an artisan," she says. "I don't create anything: I am just a witness of what I see and what interests me, which has always been human beings."

June 20-October 15, centrepompidou.fr