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Unboxing Thousands of Photos of New York City in the '70s and '80s

Arlene Gottfried, a sister of the late comedian Gilbert Gottfried, memorialized a grittier era of the city. Now her family wants to share her collection with the world.



By Corey Kilgannon

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A nondescript locker in a Lower Manhattan storage center is a portal to a New York City still plagued by crack, AIDS and rampant crime.

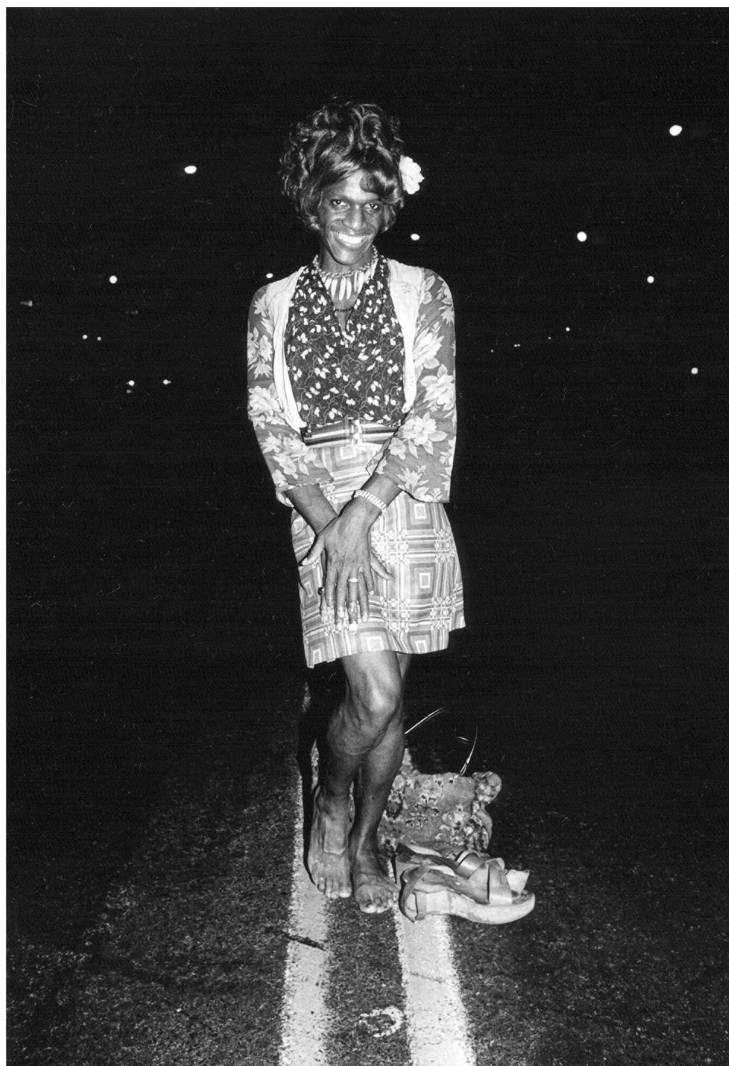
A drug user squats for a fix in a squalid Manhattan heroin den. A man wearing a Savage Riders biker gang jacket holds a yawning baby. A child straddles a stripped bicycle on a trash-strewn street in Spanish Harlem.

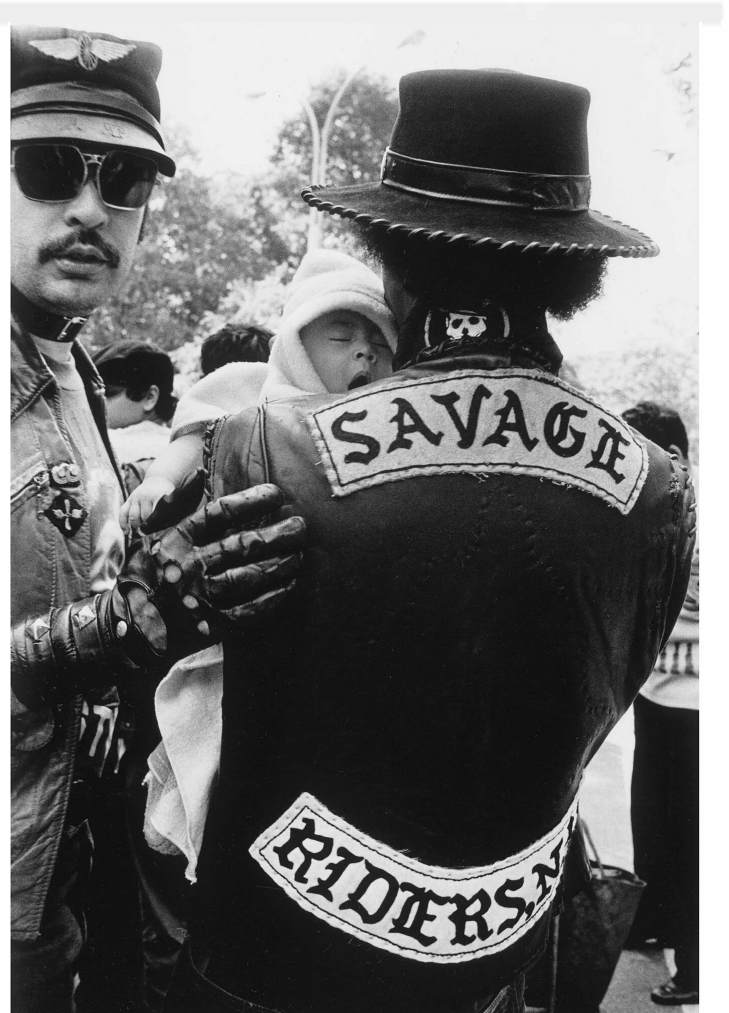
Not everything is bleak. There's a pig roasting on a spit in an abandoned Brooklyn lot. A smiling, bikini-clad bodybuilder flexes next to a Hasidic rabbi on a Queens beach.

These images and countless others are crammed into hundreds of boxes left behind by the heralded street photographer Arlene Gottfried, who trained her unflinching lens on New York's less heralded neighborhoods during the 1970s and 1980s.

The archive, while valued in photography circles for both its artistic integrity and documentation of underrepresented neighborhoods, had remained in limbo and disarray since Ms. Gottfried's death in 2017 at age 66 from complications from breast cancer.

But now, it seems, it is being saved.





Several photos from Arlene Gottfried's archive. From left: "Activist, Marsha P. Johnson"; "Savage Riders at the Puerto Rican Day Parade, 1980"; "No Wheels, El Barrio, 1978." Arlene Gottfried, Courtesy Daniel Cooney Fine Art

Ms. Gottfried left the archive to her brother, the comedian and actor Gilbert Gottfried, and to their sister, Karen Gottfried, a retired schoolteacher. Before she died, the photographer asked her brother and his wife, Dara Gottfried, to preserve her work to ensure her legacy.

But Mr. Gottfried, who relied on his wife to pack his suitcases when traveling to gigs, was not about to sort through his sister's tens of thousands of images on slides, negatives and prints.

Then, not long after Arlene's death, he fell ill himself and died in 2022 at 67.

Last year, Dara Gottfried said, she finally began having the photo collection digitized and organized, with the help of Eryn DuChene, a young photographer.

Once complete, she said, she will determine whether it will go to a museum or a buyer willing to keep the work accessible to the public.

"Arlene wanted her legacy kept alive in museums or shows or galleries," Dara Gottfried said during a recent visit to the locker. "Gilbert and I wanted to honor her wishes to have her work shared with the world, so it could live on forever."

Mr. DuChene has been digitally scanning photos from the boxes piled on cabinets and shelves in a storage unit the size of a bathroom.

He pulled out crates of old film cameras — Ms. Gottfried never switched to digital photography — and yellow Kodak boxes filled with bathroom portraits of clubgoers from the disco era. In another box, tattooed lovers embrace on the street. There isn't a chain store or mobile phone to be seen in the images.



Arlene's sister-in-law Dara Gottfried, right, enlisted the photographer Eryn DuChene, left, to help organize the archive. Sara Messinger for The New York Times



Arlene Gottfried, in a Polaroid self portrait, made photography the center of her life. Sara Messinger for The New York Times

Over the years, her output accumulated in her studio apartment in the Westbeth houses, the subsidized artists' colony in the West Village that was once home to the photographer Diane Arbus, to whom Ms. Gottfried has been compared.

"It sat in her apartment like an elephant in the room," said Ms. Gottfried's gallerist, Daniel Cooney. "She didn't want to deal with it. She didn't know where to start."

Sean Corcoran, senior curator of prints and photographs at the Museum of the City of New York, called Ms. Gottfried's archive "a unique and important collection, with both artistic value and historical and social relevance to a moment in time in New York City."

"What's at stake," he said, "is choosing the right place for it to go because the material could either wallow in obscurity or, at the right home, be recognized as the important body of work that it really is."

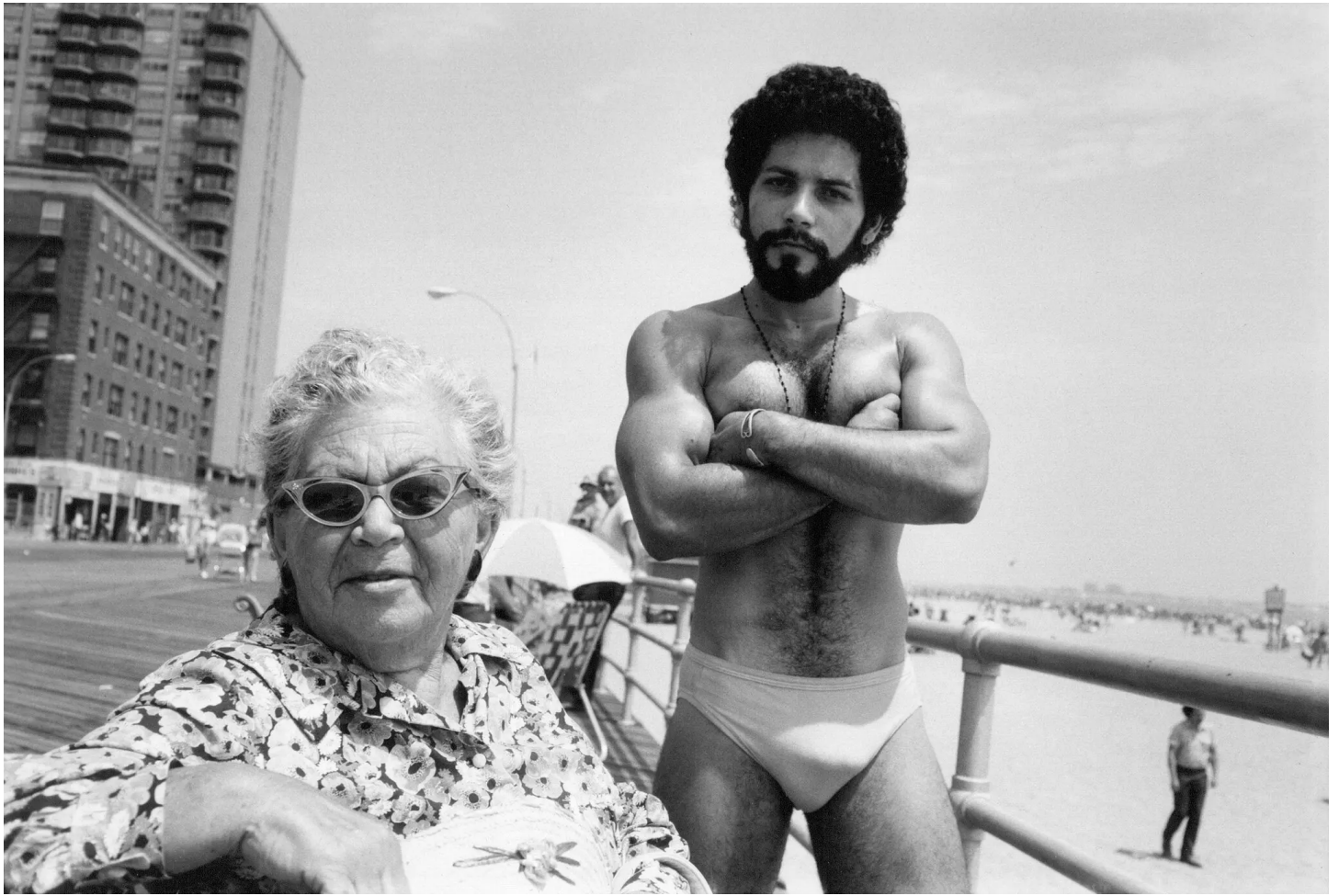
While the Gottfried archive would not necessarily command a price like those of Robert Mapplethorpe or James Van Der Zee, two other New York photographers whose archives brought sizable sums, it could attract offers from top institutions, he added.

When Ms. Gottfried was growing up in Brooklyn, her father gave her an old camera, which she used to begin shooting candid street scenes and portraits of strangers.

"We lived in Coney Island, and that was always an exposure to all kinds of people, so I never had trouble walking up to people and asking them to take their picture," she told *The Guardian* in 2014.



"Purim," undated, from the Arlene Gottfried archives. Arlene Gottfried, Courtesy Daniel Cooney Fine Art



“Angel & Woman on Boardwalk in Brighton Beach,” by Arlene Gottfried. Arlene Gottfried, Courtesy Daniel Cooney Fine Art

When the family moved to Crown Heights, a teenage Arlene began shooting her neighbors, and went on to capture daily life and local characters in similar neighborhoods on Manhattan’s Lower East Side and in Spanish Harlem.

“It was a mixture of excitement, devastation and drug use,” she told *The New York Times* in 2016. “But there was more than just that. It was the people, the humanity of the situation. You had very good people there trying to make it.”

She studied photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan and did commercial photography for an advertising agency in the mid-1970s. Then her freelance career saw her work published in *The Times*, *The Village Voice*, and *Fortune* and *Life* magazines.

Over the years, the city became safer, more gentrified and, to Ms. Gottfried, less visually interesting.

“Arlene liked the old New York before it got fancy and rich,” Karen Gottfried, her sister, said. “There were honestly a lot more oddballs around, everyone dressed with individuality and she liked all that. She didn’t like fancy. She liked the funky stuff.”

Ms. Gottfried’s work began attracting a wider interest later in her life. Her work was displayed in books and gallery shows, including a particularly successful one in 2014 at Mr. Cooney’s gallery in Chelsea.

“She was shocked and grateful that people were buying her work,” Mr. Cooney said. Her prints began fetching \$5,000 each, an impressive amount for street photography, he said.

Mr. Cooney organized another Arlene Gottfried show in 2016 and then three more after her death. Dara Gottfried said that a curator has selected prints from the locker for a show in Germany in March. A photography center in France is also selecting photos for a solo show.



"Couple on the street"; "KISS, Halloween Parade, West Village, 1978"; "Woman in red singing." Arlene Gottfried, Courtesy Daniel Cooney Fine Art

“She didn’t get nearly enough attention during her lifetime,” Mr. Cooney said.

Mr. Gottfried loved and encouraged his sister’s photo work. She was featured in “Gilbert,” a 2017 documentary about him.

“How her eye captures people, and how she touches them, that’s hard to explain,” he told The Guardian in 2014.

Ms. Gottfried also encouraged her brother’s artistic interests, both as a talented sketcher and performer. Mr. Gottfried, five years younger than her, entertained the family with jokes and imitations. His interest in standup comedy blossomed in his teens after his sisters took him to an open-mic night in Greenwich Village.

“They had a mutual respect for each other — they supported each other,” said his wife, Dara Gottfried. “I think there’s a lot of parallel between them, the way they grew up and looked at the world. Both were real artists and cared about the art and not the glitz and glamour of show business.”

Adam Reid, a writer and director who was friends with Mr. Gottfried, said the siblings’ similar artistic expression was largely formed during their austere childhood.

“They processed the trauma of growing up in poverty during some of the city’s darkest eras and both found a way to find light in the darkness and turn their pain into bold, creative expression,” he said.

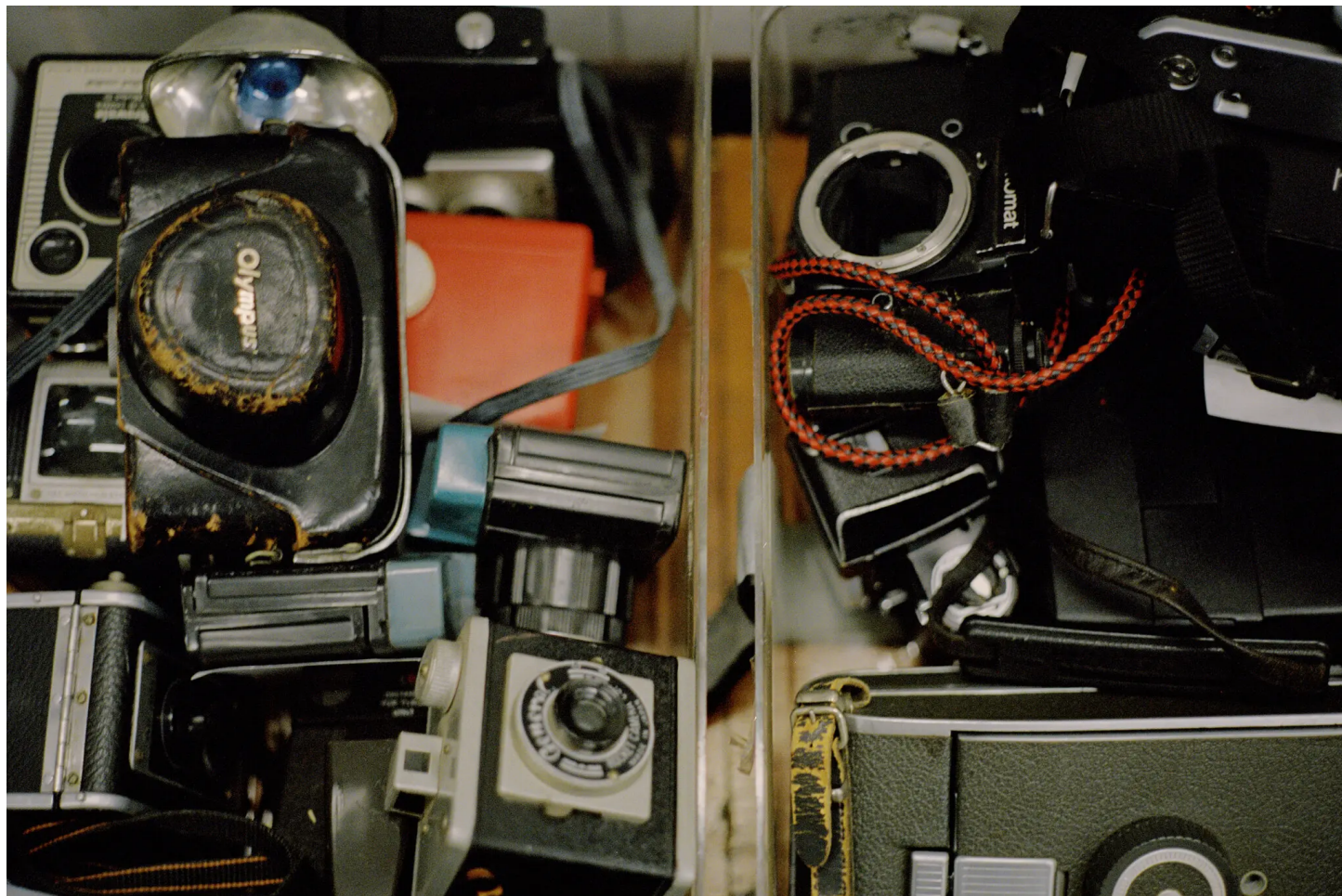
As adults, Arlene Gottfried continued to live near her brother in Manhattan and regularly met him for breakfast. Mr. Gottfried’s fame sparked a running joke among her friends.

“Instead of saying, ‘How are you?’ they’d say, ‘How’s your brother?’” Karen Gottfried recalled. “She loved that.”

When Arlene began declining from cancer, Mr. Gottfried accompanied her through her treatment and kept up her spirits with his humor.

She never married or had children and remained focused on her photography, Karen Gottfried said.

“It wasn’t lucrative, but she did it for love of it,” she said. “She sacrificed a lot for her art. She stuck with it and didn’t sell out.”



Arlene Gottfried shot only on film, never adopting digital technology. Sara Messinger for The New York Times