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Eugène Atget: Documenting "The Zone"

November 9, 2001 – January 19, 2002

Ubu Gallery will exhibit a collection of rare, vintage photographs taken by **Eugène Atget** between 1910 and 1913 in the no-man's land of trailers, fortifications, gypsies and ragpickers at the edge of Paris known as the *Zone Militaire*, or more simply, "The Zone." Focusing on the embankments of Porte d'Ivry and Porte d'Italie, these eighteen photographs were part of two album projects of 60 photographs, each which Atget titled *Zoniers* and *Fortifications de Paris*. They manifest an aspect of Atget's aesthetic distinctly different from that of the better known photographs of Paris architecture, architectural adornment and petites metiers which he had provided to artists, set decorators, architects, builders and topographical historians as reference documents. While "The Zone" pictures are still documentary and vernacular in nature, they are much more about a gritty urbanism than about a nostalgic view of Old Paris. They are also much more idiosyncratically personal as well as political.

The pointless argument as to whether Atget's pursuit was one of art or of documentation has raged for seventy years. That Atget was a businessman who took thousands of pictures for the purpose of providing them to end-users needing documentation – painters, carpenters, stonemasons, decorators – there can be no doubt; it is known that he sold more than 15,000 prints in his lifetime. It is also clear that Atget's purpose and technique both changed during this middle period of his output. No longer content to show formalistic, early-morning-light, architectural details or structures of Old Paris, he began taking these photographs at different times of day showing busy and frequently confusing spaces and profoundly troubling subject matter. Whether or not he ever sold a single print from these series is unknown.

The topic of "The Zone" and its inhabitants was a particularly hot one in social, political and intellectual circles at the time these photographs were taken, immediately preceding World War I. On the one hand, there was the tendency on the part of bourgeois intellectuals to romanticize the ragpicker as a sort of "philosopher-king" - a carefree, anti-establishment hero who accepted his poverty as the price for his absolute liberty. On the other hand, the Socialists and trade unionists of the time used the ragpicker as their symbol of the exploited working class, the poster child of the proletariat. Inasmuch as Atget held strong Syndicalist, pacifist and Socialist beliefs, it is likely that these carefully posed photographs were at least in part an exercise in polemics. They, like the pictures of the ragged wasteland of the fortifications where the same underclass took their leisure, such as it was, were – in addition to being Paris documents – propaganda with a distinct political and moral agenda.

The exhibition, which also includes examples of Atget's photographs from some of the other genres referred to herein, opens on Friday, November 8, 2001 and continues through Saturday, January 5, 2002. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 11:00 AM – 6:00 PM.