



**Photographs by Richard Roeller**

November 11–December 17, 1994

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center

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*He Began By Writing 100 Letters: A Reception Honoring Richard Roeller*

November 21, 1994, 7:30 P.M.

Several years ago, I had a brief conversation with Richard Roeller about one of my ill-advised schemes: a proposed AIDS benefit photography exhibit. Richard didn't think he could participate. "I'm not an artist," he said. "I'm just a photographer." He was a photographer, but the qualifier was surely misleading.

Richard worked for the Buffalo News for 39 years, most of them as a photojournalist. The News was virtually his only employer: from the time he went there as a teen he spent almost his entire adult life in its employ, a time span stretching from the days of local ownership to control by international financier Warren Buffet.

Richard was a photojournalist. He didn't just hold a job during those decades, he consciously followed a calling. The pictures here at Hallwalls are a sampling of the work he produced for the News in discharging what I think he conceived as something like a public trust. (Unfortunately, much of that work—particularly from the first two decades of his tenure—has disappeared, having been retained by neither the newspaper nor him.)

Richard's conception of his responsibility and his much-remarked stubbornness of purpose and generosity of spirit were characteristic of his life beyond the newspaper. Born and raised in Eden, New York, and descended from a family prominent in the village, he went to the News as a copyboy. After army reserve service, he asked to become a darkroom technician and within a couple of years he was a photographer. Today, photographers of various stripes come out of college courses, but his experience had been in a high school shop and part-time portrait business. He learned photojournalism on the job, and his interest in his community and his relationship to it developed from that.

"I've enjoyed every aspect of it," he told an in-house interviewer for the News early this year. "It's been something, just being up in front and trying to record it." Reporter Gene Warner remembers Richard's irrepressible penchant for engagement with both the stories' subjects and their writers, occasionally to the mild distress of reporters trying to end an interview or meet a deadline.

Richard's directness of approach and his intentness of purpose—factors in the production of his photographic lifework—were famously evident in his work in various community causes. A quarter of a century ago, he was inspired to enlist other gay men and lesbians to organize quiet resistance to the restrictions and common indignities regularly visited on them by officialdom and ordinary citizens. He wrote 100 letters to area civic leaders asking them to meet with a delegation from the gay community to discuss ways to alleviate the discrimination. Only one man—the head of the area Council of Churches—responded, but from that meeting and others that followed came the start of a local chapter of the Mattachine Society and the first gay community center

The last long campaign Richard undertook—against the often terrible effects of the AIDS pandemic in Western New York—he conducted with the same kind of grit and comprehensiveness he brought to his other interests. He served on the boards of such organizations as Benedict House and AIDS Alliance,

helping draft program guidelines, raising money (and sometimes privately giving it), and enlisting the assistance of people from a variety of social spheres, including some of the public figures he had photographed and his colleagues and superiors at the News. At the newspaper he also inspired and influenced AIDS coverage, in the process raising consciousness about AIDS in its offices and among its readership.

Geniality came naturally to Richard, but he could dispense with politesse if he felt he was encountering unreasonable resistance. He could lecture, protest, even hector. I was several times the object of his less diplomatic approaches, but whether I agreed with his points or not, I never doubted he was doing everything he could to prevent or reduce suffering.

The work in this gallery conjoins and conveys Richard's craft and the humane concerns informing his pictures and his life. To say, as he did, that he wasn't artistically motivated doesn't obviate the work's evocative, sometimes moving, qualities. A brief examination of the shot of the fire victim being carried from the scene—not published locally but picked up by Life magazine—shows the skill and judgement photojournalists like Richard can bring to the task of capturing the disruptive effects of disastrous events on ordinary lives. The color spread of people at Benedict House that Richard composed in 1992 was intended to counterbalance a more somber, less personal feature two years earlier. W. Eugene Smith, the prominent magazine photographer, said almost 20 years ago that photojournalism is documentary photography with a purpose. For much of his life, Richard was a man with a purpose. This exhibit is a small commemoration of a life that harbored some exemplary purposes.

*George Sax*

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center is honored to present an exhibition of the photographs of Richard Roeller as part of its 4th *Ways in Being Gay* festival. Since 1988, Hallwalls has presented this biannual festival to larger and larger audiences, and it has expanded outside of our walls to become a community-wide event in Buffalo, with exhibitions, readings, video and film events, community gatherings, theater, performances, and educational programming. While we celebrate the accomplishments of gay and lesbian artists by bringing them to Buffalo and presenting their work, we also pause to remember those who have passed on, particularly those who have been lost to AIDS, including many artists who appeared or whose work was shown in past festivals. Every year, the names of those to whom we dedicate this festival grows longer, and we continue to work towards the day when no new names need to be added to that list.

Thank you to George Sax, Paul Smith, and Margaret Smith for making this exhibition possible. Thank you to Murray Light, Gene Warner, and Elliott Shapiro at the Buffalo News for their support of *Photographs of Richard Roeller*.

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*Sara Kellner, Exhibitions Curator*

