



International Center of Photography

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media release



## Signs of Life: Photographs by Peter Sekaer

On view from  
September 9, 2011  
through  
January 8, 2012

Media Preview  
September 8, 2011  
11:30 am–1:00 pm

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Peter Sekaer  
*A Sign Business Shop, New York, 1935*  
© Peter Sekaer Estate  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, purchased with funds from Robert Yellowlees

The Danish documentary photographer Peter Sekaer (1901–1950) was one of the key contributors to U.S. government photographic projects during the Great Depression. Sekaer photographed alongside Walker Evans in the American South during the Farm Security Administration years, and photographs by the two are sometimes indistinguishable. But Sekaer, who was a painter and who made a living as a sign painter, was an accomplished and prolific photographer who combined a strong sense of advocacy with a highly attuned graphic eye. *Signs of Life: Photographs by Peter Sekaer* will be on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) from September 9, 2011 through January 8, 2012. The exhibition, originally organized by Julian Cox, former curator of photography at the High Museum of Art, consists of about 80 vintage gelatin silver prints made from 1935 through 1945, and is the first major museum exhibition devoted to Sekaer's work.

“While Peter Sekaer is not a household name, his photographs are among the finest produced in the Depression era in the United States. He’s a hidden gem,” said Cox.

“Sekaer often made images full of energy and humor despite the bleak circumstances of his time. We are pleased to introduce his work to a new audience in New York,” said ICP Associate Curator Kristen Lubben, who organized the exhibition at ICP.

(more)

The photographs in the exhibition document the effects of the Great Depression in several American cities. Many of the images were made while Sekaer was working as a photographer for government agencies such as the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) and the United States Housing Authority (USHA). He was able to document the realities of the time while maintaining the integrity of his subjects. Sekaer brought a respectful compassion and democratic, liberal-minded politics to his photographic practice. He took his responsibility to record existing conditions seriously, and tried to balance his employer's requirements with his own high aesthetic standards and casual, participatory style.

Born in Denmark in 1901, Peter Sekaer immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen. He owned and operated a successful silk-screening business in New York City throughout the 1920s, producing posters, advertisements and window exhibits for retail stores and manufacturers. In 1929 he enrolled in the Art Students League to study painting. An active member of the League, Sekaer became involved in the New York art scene, befriending photographers Ben Shahn and Evans. By 1934, he had left painting behind to study photography under Berenice Abbott at the New School for Social Research. After subsequent photography jobs with different U.S. government agencies, Sekaer started his own commercial photography business, shooting advertisements and human interest stories for magazines. Sekaer suffered a fatal heart attack in 1950, at the age of forty-nine.

*Signs of Life: Photographs by Peter Sekaer* is organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Generous support of this exhibition is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts; the Mary Alice and Bennett Brown Foundation; the Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York; the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation; and the Terra Foundation. The ICP presentation was made possible with support from the Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation and with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.



### **About ICP**

The International Center of Photography (ICP) was founded in 1974 by Cornell Capa (1918–2008) as an institution dedicated to photography that occupies a vital and central place in contemporary culture as it reflects and influences social change. Through our museum, school and community programs, we embrace photography's ability to open new opportunities for personal and aesthetic expression, transform popular culture, and continually evolve to incorporate new technologies. ICP has presented more than 500 exhibitions, bringing the work of more than 3,000 photographers and other artists to the public in one-person and group exhibitions and provided thousands of classes and workshops that have enriched tens of thousands of students. Visit [www.icp.org](http://www.icp.org) for more information.

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