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Dissertation

**PICTURING REFORM: ASHCAN WOMEN AND THE VISUAL CULTURE OF
THE PROGRESSIVE ERA IN NEW YORK CITY**

by

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ABSTRACT

Between 1895 and 1925, social movements in New York City focused on improving the lives of the urban working classes. Progressive reformers maintained that the environment of the city, growing industry, and systems of exploitation threatened the personal sovereignty of the individual. I argue that the visual culture of the period marshaled documentary photography and styles of realism to comprehend such systemic problems through familiar, recognizable forms. By visualizing overcrowding and oppressive labor conditions on working-class bodies, these realities could be comprehended and reformed.

Each chapter investigates a social movement—the playground movement, the consumer movement, and the birth control movement—in which artists and photographers mobilized pictorial evidence in targeted reform efforts. Period discourses from these movements infiltrated the aesthetic preoccupations of urban realist artists who embraced questions of individuality and artistic identity when depicting the working class. This dissertation takes as its secondary objective the rehabilitation of work by women artists. At the turn of the century, the gendering of realism as masculine by critics

and male artists excluded women. Nevertheless, women artists pursued realist styles, not for their “masculine” flavor but for realism’s utility in illuminating humanistic concerns.

Chapter one examines the playground movement and how immigrant children became symbolic figures for reformers and artists alike and a locus for anxieties about preserving individuality in the automated city. Whereas reformers presented in photographs the orderly playground as a cradle of independence, artists—William Glackens, George Bellows, Jerome Myers, and Abastenia St. Leger Eberle—imagined the freedom of the disorderly city and celebrated a child’s uninhibited exploration of its perilous topography. The second chapter analyzes Lewis Hine’s photographs of tenement homework for the National Consumers’ League and National Child Labor Committee. Such photographs educated middle-class female consumers on the unsavory origins of consumer products and their discounted prices. In contrast, Ethel Myers’s sculptures of unapologetic fashionable women resisted the era’s progressive critiques of female consumerism. The third chapter focuses on the birth control movement, which employed publicity photographs, film, and political cartoons by Lou Rogers to argue for contraceptive reform through representations of the working-class mother.