

From the Studio to the Street: Re-interpreting Nelly's Documentary Practice

Prof. Alexandra Moschovi

University of Sunderland

Alexandra.moschovi@sunderland.ac.uk

Active as a photographer for over 40 years, in Dresden, Athens, and New York, Elli Sougioultzoglou-Seraidari (a.k.a. Nelly's, 1899–1998) occupies a prominent place in the history of Greek photography. Her early-twentieth-century work in Greece attracted renewed curatorial and critical attention in the 1980s, yet the trajectory of her career in the course of her self-imposed exile in New York during and after WWII had remained under-researched for years.

As the number of professional women photographers doubled in North America to 10,000 in wartime, their work gained recognition through state commissions, publications, museum exhibitions, and the booming illustrated press. Although Nelly—often celebrated as “the Grand Lady of Greek Photography”—earned notable critical acclaim for her exhibitions and displays of Greek subjects in cultural institutions across North America in the early 1940s,ⁱ financial pressures and the anguish of settlement forced her to focus her photographic energies on establishing a sustainable studio practice. Her studio on East 57th Street in New York became a hub for affluent Greek expatriates while she continued to pursue Hellenic-themed projects, often commissioned by prominent Greek industrialists such as Aristotle Onassis.ⁱⁱ

In 1956, at the age of 57, Nelly attended Alexey Brodovitch's Design Laboratory at the New School for Social Research with a view to exploring documentary photography. The Russian-born photographer, designer, and art director of Harper's Bazaar offered an experimental evening course, which, geared towards the industry, combined design and photography and fostered individuality, creativity, and technical proficiency.ⁱⁱⁱ A strong advocate of street photography, Brodovitch urged the many attendant photographers to challenge normative camera aesthetics and expand the field of photographic visuality, by embracing technical accidents, surprising juxtapositions, unorthodox perspectives, and creative cropping. His emphasis on “available light” and “active camera” methods encouraged photographers to capture candid streets scenes, blending reportage with fashion photography.^{iv} In the context of the course assignments, Nelly ventured beyond the comfort zone of her studio and roamed the bustling streets of New York. From a pedestrian's vantage point, she photographed skyscrapers in midtown Manhattan, fascinated by the immense volume and

form of those emblematic monuments of modernity. She also documented their construction through the narrative structure of the photo-story.^v

Assigned to illustrate “Phantasy,” Nelly took to Fifth Avenue near her studio during the popular Easter Parade on 1st April 1956. Positioned outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral, she waited with two Rolleiflex cameras—one loaded with black-and-white film, the other with colour—for the elite congregation to emerge in their festive attire. Responding to Brodovitch’s directive to use an “active camera,” Nelly navigated the crowd, photographing ladies in fashionable clothing and spring bonnets alongside their elegant escorts, kids in their Sunday best, even pets adorned with hats and matching outfits, all parading against the vibrant urban backdrop.

On that Easter Sunday, Nelly produced about 150 frames out of which she chose around 20 to present to Brodovitch and her peers. Her eclectic selection is telling of her intention to cautiously exercise her photographic muscles. Street photography offered her the subtext and the creative licence to relinquish the full technical control she exercised in the studio, experiment with composition and cropping beyond commercial briefs, and embrace serendipity as an organic part of her photographs. Nelly reported that Brodovitch and her course peers praised her *Easter Parade* series and encouraged her to seek publication in Europe. However, the photographs would not be published for 35 years, that is, until the AD Gallery in Athens, Greece organised an exhibition and print portfolio sets in 1991, recognising the series as a significant part of Nelly’s oeuvre and her legacy.

Drawing on unpublished photographic and archival materials, including personal and family correspondence, and recently rediscovered contact sheets long thought lost since 1991, this paper seeks to re-write the narrative of Nelly’s involvement with documentary photography in post-war North America. By recontextualising the 1956 series *Easter Parade* in the visual cultures of New York and alongside the post-war practice of émigré women photographers and their male counterparts, this research challenges preconceived ideas about Nelly’s aesthetic and ideological positioning. It resituates her practice within broader aesthetic trends of the period, interrogates gender stereotypes of metropolitan women and considerations of class and race against a backdrop of political turbulence and civil unrest. Furthermore, the paper offers a female perspective on the operations of Alexey Brodovitch’s male-dominated photography workshop that shaped the snapshot vision and storytelling methodologies of the New York School of Photography.

ⁱ Carol Frink, "Washington: Greek King's Photographer Exhibits Here," *Times Herald*, Wednesday 22 November 1939, press cutting, Nelly's Archive, Photographic Archives-Benaki Museum.

ⁱⁱ Aliki Tsirgialou, "'Nelly's, a Painter Working with her Camera'", in Aliki Tsirgialou (ed.) *Nelly's: The Work of Greek Photographer Elly Sougioultzoglou-Seraidari 1899–1998* (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2023), 26–71.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kerry William Purcell, *Alexey Brodovitch* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 113.

^{iv} Andy Grundberg, *Brodovitch* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 138.

^v Alexandra Moschovi, "From the Studio to the Street," in Tsirgialou (ed.) *Nelly's*, 402.

Image credit: Nelly's, from the series *Easter Parade*, New York, April 1956
Photographic Archives—Benaki Museum