Photography
Garry Winogrand, Public Eye

BY PEPE KARMEL

Photography critics raised on the classical elegances of Stieglitz and Cartier-Bresson still consider Garry Winogrand's photographs haphazard snapshots, much as 19th-century academic critics saw the first Impressionist canvases as mere sketches, lacking the finish, composition and clear drawing essential to "good" pictures. To neoclassical photography critics, Winogrand's photographs appear deliberately uncomposed. Janet Malcolm writes that Winogrand "embraces disorder and vulgarity like long lost brothers." He has abandoned Cartier-Bresson's criteria that a photograph should achieve "the appearance of a formal work of art," and that the photographer should capture the "decisive moment" of a gesture or event. Since Winogrand's canonization in 1977 by the Museum of Modern Art's mammoth show of his pictures of "medi events," he has become a major scapegoat for those who disliked the experimental photography of the 1960s and '70s.

Winogrand's first comprehensive retrospective, at New York's Light Gallery last April, made it clear that this photographer, like the Impressionists, simply has a new idea of what constitutes the appearance of a formal work of art, and of what kind of gesture constitutes a decisive moment. Winogrand's predecessor in exploring the limits of photographic form and content was Robert Frank. In his superb catalogue essay for Winogrand's 1977 show, "Public Relations," Tod Papageorge pinpointed in Frank's photographs from The Americans three devices that influenced Winogrand: the tilting of the picture frame, the use of a wide-angle lens, and the particular way Frank tested the limits of scale—by, in Frank's words, seeing "how small a thing could be in a frame and still sit as its nominal subject." The tilted frame is a metaphor for an off-balance experience of reality. At the same time, it declares the aesthetic inde-
dependence of the photograph from the reality which it depicts by twisting the frame away from the "natural" verticals and horizontals of buildings and horizons. In addition, Winogrand often tilts his camera to get into the picture everything he sees as part of the scene.

Winogrand's 28mm, extremely wide-angle lens serves the same purpose, only more so. Getting as much stuff in as possible is his imperative. Winogrand's pictures are usually packed with astounding quantities of incident and "information," a catchword popular among practitioners and students of street photography during the early '70s. It is on the city street that every human action is likely to be surrounded by a maximum of buildings, signs, shop windows, shopping bags, policemen, cars, and other people. In this setting, "testing the limits of scale" becomes a virtuoso game. Photography rulebooks are full of instructions on getting close to a subject, framing it carefully so it dominates the picture, and cutting out distracting detail. Winogrand deliberately breaks all these rules. Jacob Javits's face, buried in a sea of other faces at the Metropolitan Museum's 1969 Centennial Ball, emerges as a compositional nexus, successfully balancing the figures of the young couple in the left foreground. Of course, the photographic egalitarianism implicit in the aggrandizement of nearby figures is a mechanical consequence of using a wide-angle lens; Winogrand's accomplishment is to take advantage of this effect while at the same time situating the "nominal subject" in such a way that it remains the pivot of the image.

Winogrand's Light retrospective, selected by the photographer together with Light's director, Peter MacGill, followed the grouping of pictures in his four major published collections: The Animals, Women Are Beautiful, Public Relations, and Stock Photographs. The retrospective was not accompanied by a catalogue or biography, but Papageorge's essay in Public Relations lays out the relevant facts of Winogrand's life and career. Only a few essentials will be repeated here. Winogrand was born in 1928. Beginning at the age of 24, and for almost two decades, he worked as a photojournalist and an advertising photographer. Only in the early 1960s did he begin to be recognized as an "art" photographer.

His first solo show at the Modern, and first book, The Animals (1969), was represented in the Light retrospective by several pictures which have become classics: the walrus staring from its pool at the photographer while a family peers through the pool's railing at it, the lapine young man courting a blond woman while an actual wolf paces in its cage behind them, and other images from New York zoo exposing an animal world full of depression, frustration, and rage, not unlike the modern world around it. In using animals to comment on the human condition, Winogrand continued a long tradition, running from Aesop's Fables to Walt Kelly's Okefenokee Swamp. Winogrand's work insists on the humanity of animals as well as the bestiality of humans. His photograph of an interracial couple, holding chimpanzees, has been attacked by leftist critic Victor Burgin as a racist joke, a photographic depiction of the white fantasy that the children of "miscegenation" would be monkeys. But the joke, of course, belongs to the couple: they, after all, have chosen to confront and parody racist antagonism toward their relationship by carrying their pet chimps around in public. Winogrand becomes an accomplice in their joke by including in the picture a small white boy whose anxiety contrasts with the contentedness of the simian "children".

Winogrand's next book collection, Women Are Beautiful, appeared in 1975. Winogrand had photographed women everywhere—in swimming pools, in cafeterias, at society parties—but most of all he photographed them in the streets and parks of New York. Avoiding the posed nude or portrait, Winogrand explored how women express their sexuality in social settings, through dress, dancing, sunbathing, flirting and gossiping. In Winogrand's photographs, sex becomes an individualizing force—not, as it usually is in photographs, a depersonalizing one. Indeed, it is the sexual connection that defines the complicated relationship between this photographer and his subjects. Winogrand's pictures express both his desire and his frustration, most eloquently entwined where he has simply confronted a woman on the street, sometimes in mid-stride, sometimes pausing for his lens. The cover image from Women Are Beautiful, included in the Light retrospective, shows a laughing woman holding an ice cream cone, standing in front of an Astor-style shop window that displays a male mannequin. The woman's laugh can be read as a laugh of joy—joy in life, pleasure in her melting ice cream cone (the melting of the phallic cone symbolizing sexual release?), pleasure in the photographer's desire for her. But her laugh might also be read as rejection, as if to say that she finds the photographer's courtship (his desire to photograph her) merely laughable. Perhaps the elegant mannequin in the shop window is the photographer's tacit rival—an appropriate suitor, attired to complement the elegance of her simple white dress, her black handbag, the gloves in her hand, the satin lining of her coat. Winogrand's own reflection in the window reveals, by comparison, a rather rumpled Lothario.

The largest group of images in the Light retrospective came from the 1977 "Public Relations" show at MOMA. The Public Relations project originated with a 1969 Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph "media events." These images place the photographer in an ambiguous position. He may scorn those who delegitimize themselves before the lens, but he envies their power to command his camera's attention. At first glance, Winogrand's photograph of a 1973 press conference given by Elliot Richardson gives the eerie impression that no human beings are present to listen to Richardson, isolated at a bare table loaded with microphones; tape recorders cluster like mechani-

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cal disciples at his feet. American politics in the electronic age have come a long way from the rabble-rousing of Huey Long. What is remarkable is that the man who can command so much attention is so ordinary.

Opposed to Elliot Richardson's (and Richard Nixon's) catatonic chic was the hyperenergetic youth culture of rock-and-roll, long hair, and antiwar demonstrations. This milieu fascinated Winogrand as well, and it is easy to characterize him as a 1960s sensibility, a photographic equivalent of the New Journalist Tom Wolfe. But the era's public sensibility was not Winogrand's own. Winogrand was 40 in 1968, when the generational slogan was: "Don't trust anyone over 30." Feelings of empathy and estrangement compete in his photograph of Bethesda Fountain plaza on Easter Sunday, 1971. The naked young man approaching the camera seems possessed like a Dionysian figure, his face mingling ecstasy and alarm. The amused, incredulous crowd behind him manifests the conjunction of the youth of different backgrounds around common ideals and fantasies. But the two foreground figures flanking the naked Dionysus are full of anxiety and indecision. Strangely, they are looking away from him, beyond the camera, as if into the future towards which he is advancing, unsure whether Dionysian ecstasy will be adequate to contend with it.

A similar fervor appears in Winogrand's party pictures of the "glitterati," at the height of "radical chic," doing the twist while Rome—or Detroit—burns. These pictures derive from Weegee's The Critic, with the poor woman tramp glaring fiercely at two bubble-headed, jewel-bedecked dowagers. (Winogrand's use of flash also owes much to Weegee.) But Winogrand basically has an indulgent, even admiring attitude toward the rich, powerful, and renowned; he seems to feel at heart that they are awfully lucky to be able to make such fools of themselves, without worrying about the consequences. As the reporter Mike says in The Philadelphia Story, "there's no finer sight in this fine world than the privileged classes enjoying their privileges." If anything, Winogrand grants the old and privileged an assurance and respect he denies the young. At the Metropolitan's 1969 ball, Jacob Javits wears a self-assured smile of pleasure, while the young couple in the left foreground seem anxious and preoccupied. To paraphrase Yeats: the young lack all conviction, while the old are full of passionate intensity. One can't help feeling that Winogrand's sympathies are, finally, on the side of passionate intensity, wherever he finds it.

The satirical bent of Public Relations dominated the Light retrospective, which skimmed on the bleaker side of Winogrand's urban vision. There were only a few of his images of the freaks, cripples and beggars who, unseen, inhabit the streets of New York. (More of this work is collected in the catalogue of Winogrand's 1976 Grossmont College show.) Winogrand's Greek work, shown at Light in 1979, was completely omitted. (With no profound grasp of Greek life, Winogrand had fallen back on photographing the tourist culture, with attractive but somehow predictable results.) The retrospective did include selections from Winogrand's 1980 Stock Photographs, taken at the annual Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo. They were notable largely for the innovative combination of action-stopping flash and movement-blurred natural light. The best of this series in the retrospective was, however, a relatively straightforward closeup of a plump young boy and a lamb, the lamb peering poignantly into the camera while the boy looks away.

Winogrand's recent work in Los Angeles was represented by six images that look like the beginning of a new photographic infatuation, this time with the extravagant automobiles and clothes of the Beverly Hills elite. The late '70s were a relatively fallow period in Winogrand's career as well as a dreary spell in American public life. At the beginning of the '80s, we now seem, for better or worse, to be entering a new period of public display and exuberance. Light's retrospective confirmed that no one will be better prepared to capture this phenomenon—and criticize it—than Garry Winogrand.

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