This sample is a critical essay I wrote for Professor Ben Ratliff's advanced writing course "Criticism's Possible Futures" in Fall 2021. In the essay, I examine where the value of street photography lies, why it's quickly becoming hard to come by in a surveilled, social media-dominated world, and provide a critical evaluation of photographer Garry Winogrand's body of work.

Street Photography's Private Punctum

Any time you cross the threshold from the privacy of your home to the intense publicness of the street, there is an ever-present awareness of being watched that prickles at the back of your mind. That sensation never fades, and when you're under the pressure of curious eyes all the time, it informs your public (and even private, because the more time you spend under public scrutiny, the more self-regulation bleeds into your subconscious) behavior. All public life becomes performance. Prior to the 21st century, and aside from CCTV—which expanded widely in the 1980s—it was purely the eyes of the public that surveilled. Occasionally, that public included the street photographer, with their camera acting as their eye, but they were usually elusive and uncommon enough that pedestrians didn't really think to perform for them. Performance was mostly only for the eyes of the others also occupying the same public space.

For the past decade or so, however, smart phones and video cameras have been added to the mix. A lens could also be capturing one's image with just the click of the camera app. No longer are individuals performing for eyes; they are performing for the omnipresent camera, which has become another sort of eye, an extended body part, not just for the photographer, but for the common pedestrian. Anything you do can be captured in a heartbeat, and go viral on

social media just as quickly. Though not everyone sets out with the intention of taking photographs or videos of people when they traverse into shared spaces—though the option is available to anyone that owns a smartphone—there is a subset of people that set out with this intention that has grown in size, or at least in popularity, over the past several years. The casual "pedestrian paparazzi" is most common on platforms such as TikTok, where people approach strangers on the street, armed with their smartphones (and more occasionally, digital or film cameras). This type of media takes a number of different forms: it can be a user showcasing a series of street fashion photos, or an interviewer trying to find out what song someone is listening to in their earbuds, interrupting the pedestrian's daily commute and invading their space. This phenomenon brings on an even more heightened awareness or anxiety that you could make it onto the latest viral post at any possible moment. Because of that awareness, your efforts to perform in public increase exponentially. Who wants to be caught unaware?

What does this mean for street photography in the modern day? True street photography is rooted in creating a private moment even though the subject is in a public space; to me, this illusion is part of what gives the photograph its punctum, as Roland Barthes' terms in *Camera Lucida*. The punctum is "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Though of course not every image that has this quality has punctum, creating the private moment is always necessary for it in street photography. There needs to be some challenge associated with the voyeurism being conveyed in the image: keeping the subject unaware that they are being photographed is one of several components that go into creating this illusion of private bleeding into public. This was possible when cameras were unexpected on the street, and the only thing you had to worry about was people's eyes on you; even though street photography

rose in popularity as far back as the 1930s, the camera itself wasn't widespread enough that the average pedestrian thought to look for it or perform for it (The Art Story). The inclusion of the smartphone in public life changed things; the smartphone and social media add the possibility of your image being captured, posted, spread to a much larger public, and existing digitally for an indeterminable amount of time. There are higher stakes now, and when the subject knows that this is always a possibility—that they could be photographed all the time—is it possible to create the punctum that made street photography valuable in the first place?

No street photograph's essence can be replicated because it has a particular physical and poetic reality that is inherent to the moment it depicts, one that exists between the voyeuristic photographer and the unsuspecting, unfiltered subject. However, the essence of street photography in general—which lies in the aforementioned illusion of privacy due to the lack of performance and unawareness of the pedestrian—is harder and harder to come by, if not altogether impossible to create in the era of the smartphone and social media. Our self regulating behavior usually will always win out, and the facade never drops. Or at least, even in the mind of the viewer of the photograph, the *knowledge* of this facade being in place dampens the photograph's magic. Authenticity, in public, in the age of the smartphone? Unlikely, the viewer thinks.

First, what is street photography in its purest form? The genre itself is always changing, and there is no one way to practice it, but I will attempt to define the kind of street photography that produces images with punctum, from my own perspective. I will deal with street photography that focuses on people in their environments, specifically, rather than of the street environment devoid of people. This is the only type of street photography, in my view, that pacts

the punctum necessary for the image to transcend. Transcending is at the heart of punctum, and only people have this capacity—only they can create a private moment with the photographer, even though they are unaware of their presence. *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*, Colin Westerbeck makes genre distinctions right out of the gate, in the book's introduction: the core of street photography is that the subject remain totally unaware of their photographer (34). Though this is not always possible—some photographers are noticeable presences, or are noticed at the last minute by the subjects—ideally, the subjects should be totally caught up in their own business when the photo is taken. Permission inevitably destroys what makes the image special; there can be no hesitation before aiming the lens and snapping the photo. The private moment would dissolve, and the moment belongs to both the subject and the photographer in the wrong way (I will explain further on the right way a moment should be shared in the following). Instead, the image must be created out of pure impulse, and as Teju Cole discerns in his *New York Times* article "Lee Friedlander Captures the City's Hustle and Flow," "to head out into a city with a camera is still fundamentally about collaborating with *chance*" (emphasis my own). The images in *Bystander* most frequently are collected from photographers who didn't belong to a particular art school or fall into an aesthetic category; the photos, mostly, were "of a strictly personal and sometimes casual sort" (35). Again, though not always required, the photographer also remained an anonymous figure. As it involves looking and, in a sense, taking a moment not necessarily intended by the subject to be immortalized on film, the photograph itself has a particular sense of discomfort to it; much like the anthropologist, the street photographer is an outsider looking in. But somehow, unlike the anthropologist, they are also "part of the flow" (Cole). There is a common misconception that if they are a voyeur and outsider, the

photographer is bad, and that the photographer that has relationships with their subjects and are a part of their subjects' worlds is more sincere. Firstly, the sense of voyeurism in street photography isn't pure voyeurism. That would involve looking into a private space without permission; to be clear, the street and anything that happens on it is public, and the trick of the street photographer is to *create* a private moment, or the illusion of one, in that space. This is possible when the subject isn't performing for a camera subconsciously, as most do in the smartphone era. Regardless, though, voyeuristic street photographers are a part of the private moment that their image depicts and not, at the same time (hence, the right way a moment should be shared). The street photograph is a portrait of the photographer as well—they had an *impulse* to shoot this thing for a *reason*—but it also totally excludes them, because it's a private moment for the subject, or subjects, only. It's terribly lonely, and terribly intimate. Perhaps this is an aspect of what gives the photograph its illusion of privacy, its punctum, in addition to the lack of performance from its subjects. Impulses are incredibly private, raw things. All around, on every participant's behalf, there is a distinct sincerity to the moment.

One of the most influential street photographers of the 20th century, Garry Winogrand, was successful in capturing this lonely intimacy, this punctum where a moment in public is given the appearance of being private, in many (but, of course, not all) of his works. Winogrand, whose photographs were taken from the 1950s through the 1970s—prior to the invasion of cameras in public life, while eyes were predominantly the only thing watching pedestrians—was able to capture images of people before culture moved in the direction of constant performance. As the documentary *All Things Are Photographable* (2017) notes, Winogrand likely wouldn't have been or be as relevant in this era. As I mentioned, it has become increasingly harder, if not impossible,

to capture the punctum of street photography that some of Winogrand's display when performance is underlying everything. He was able to capture human behavior and how humans behave in and react to the world while it was still partially pure, free of the influence of camera surveillance (at least to the subject's knowledge). Viewers then and even more so in the modern day are aware of this unfiltered-ness—perhaps why they seem even more special to me now. As for Winogrand's intention with his photographs, which is necessary to note, he once told a student: "'My only interest in photographing is photography. That's really the answer'" (Papageorge). He was concerned with what the act of documenting something his eye saw meant; developing relationships with his subjects and voyeurism weren't really on his mind.

An image Winogrand captured of Hollywood Boulevard in 1969 is one of the photographs that I detect punctum in, specifically in regard to its relation to the public and private; it captures pure authenticity, where the subjects aren't aware of the gaze of the photographer, and aren't performing for the gaze of the public. Since they exist in an era where they don't expect a camera lens to be trained on them, they don't know to feel the "eye" of a camera on them. The photograph, aesthetically, is pleasing, and symbolic unintentionally; Winogrand didn't set out to capture this scene, and couldn't have planned how the light hit. The tiltled frame gives it a sense of urgency, that it was captured in an impulsive, snap judgment; he was drawn to the scene on an instinctual level. By putting the information within the edges of the photograph, he transforms its meaning, but it remains unfiltered, untouched aside from Winogrand placing the image within his frame. With his wide-angle lens, the viewer sees three women are walking down the sidewalk, done up with fancy dresses and perfect hair, are backlit by rays of sunlight, and it's almost like the light is coming from them. In the shadow of the

nearby building, a man in a wheelchair hangs his head low, face hidden by his hair, with a cup for collecting coins in his lap. On the other side, a woman oversees her children, who are sitting on a bench. One of the children gazes at the crippled man. Where the punctum of this photograph lies is in the sense of unfiltered-ness, the appearance of private realities taking place in a public space, most pointedly in the case of the man in the wheelchair. He's not even looking at the women, who are looking and reacting to him. He isn't performing for anyone, not even the public. Winogrand captures his private reality even in the most public setting of all. There even is a lack of performance from the women that's evident in the photos; if they knew their image was being taken, their reactions to the man wouldn't have been the same. The woman on the far left looks slightly disgusted, and they all appear to be changing their paths to steer clear of him. The mother on the right is unaware of the man and the women, watching for the coming bus; the

boy, staring unabashedly at the man in the wheelchair, does nothing to disguise his curiosity.



Winogrand's ability to translate private realities in public spaces in the '50s through the '70s is entirely unreplicable today, at least in the manner he did it, not invading his subjects' space. This may be the reason for the slight decline of street photography as an art form, or at least the decline in new, prominent names emerging on the scene, that reach the same status as artists like Winogrand. Westerbeck notes this trend in his conversation with photographer Joel Meyerowitz in *Bystander* (402). But the loss of this quality is not entirely the fault of the modern street photographer. The saturation of social media and the smartphone camera have heightened the need for public performance so immensely that the street photographer is no longer an anonymous, invisible presence purely meant to witness things as they are, acting as voyeurs into the lives of unaware people. To be a voyeur, there has to be some sort of boundary that is

crossed, a private moment not meant for the camera to see. Even though the private impulse of the photographer to capture a moment on the street is still entirely possible in the contemporary age, it must be paired with an unaware, genuine subject. Or at least, the viewer must be fooled into thinking the subject is unaware; however, when pedestrian paparazzi can be lurking around every corner, the mask is never dropped, and the viewer knows this. The private remains firmly private and the inauthentic prevails, unless the photographer themself intervenes.

Social media and smartphones aren't going anywhere anytime soon, so that begs the question: Is it possible for modern street photography to have that special element that photographs like Winogrand's did? The only way that perhaps street photography can regain its punctum is perhaps by adopting the method of contemporary New York-based photographer Bruce Gilden, who aggressively inserts himself and his camera into the personal space of the subject, crossing the boundary that most traditional street photographers of the 20th century didn't seem to cross. Hence, the aforementioned "intervention" of the photographer. The street photographer, usually, has purely served as a witness or a "bystander" as Westerbeck writes; the photographer was an outsider looking in on a private moment in a public space. It's an aggressive act, as all voyeurism is, but a distanced one. The best street photographers were passive transgressors, rather than active.

However, since the true, authentic, private moment can no longer find its way to the public space, the only way to truly capture a similar essence of intrusion—of looking in on a moment not intended to be looked in on—is by crossing the boundary physically and invading the viewer's space (that is, the space they occupy while they are in public). The viewer, then, is no longer performing, or in a constant state of posing for the camera they know could be

watching; they are startled and shocked, which results in the layers being stripped back. The camera is no longer an unseen presence. It is *right there* in their face. In a 2008 WNYC video, Gilden shuffles inconspicuously among the masses on the city streets, gripping his camera and swiveling his head in all directions to pinpoint the right subject (remember, the impulse of the photographer, which is necessary for punctum). Then, he lunges into their path in the blink of an eye: close to the subject's face, his flash blinds them.

He's no stranger to this method of photographing; Gilden's been getting in people's faces for decades, long before cell phones and social media transformed people's awareness of their being watched by cameras. However, his method has even more pertinence now. Other than perhaps venturing into a place uncorrupted by social media and portable smartphone cameras, Gilden's is one of the few, if not only, ways to strip the public insincerity of the subject so that they aren't performing, or posing. He's not successful in catching them unaware every time: "She smiled," remarks the videographer in the WNYC video after one of Gilden's conquests. "That's even worse," quips Gilden, fully aware that the punctum of street photography is lost when the subject is able to maintain their public mask. The subjects often look disturbed or shaken; other times (and less impactful), they don't even have time to look at the camera until after Gilden has already gotten the shot. His invasive voyeurism creates a new moment, a genuine one, combined with his private impulses. Though he orchestrates it through his invasiveness, it startles the subject out of their performance, forcing them to drop the facade and react to him only. It is a private instant between subject and artist, in a world where the public governs their every move, every moment.

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