The Animals and Their Keepers

GARRY WINOGRAND
AND PHOTOGRAPHY
AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

BY HILTON ALS

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"The Animals," a book I was moved to reexamine after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, is the deliberately literal-sounding title of photographer Garry Winogrand's first book of photographs, which was published in 1969, some 20 years after the artist embarked on his life's work—that of becoming the Theodore Dreiser of the lens. Winogrand was New York's, not Chicago's, most brilliant modern reporter, a journalist not unaware of the issues implicit in what he chose to photograph: the women and blacks who defined the city's "outsiderness."

"The Animals" consists of 43 black-and-white images shot at the Central Park Zoo over a period of seven years from 1962 to 1969. Published by the Museum of Modern Art, the photos were created with a wide-angle lens, Winogrand's preferred style after 1960. He would follow "The Animals" with four more books: "Women are Beautiful" (1975); "Garry Winogrand" (1976); "Public Relations" (1977); and, in 1980, "Stock Photographs: The Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Garry Winogrand, "Central Park Zoo, New York City," 1967

Winogrand's present-day canonization—St. Garry of the Lens—by the academic community fixes the artist and his work in terms that are antithetical to the work itself. The ways a photographer's vision is preserved by curators who patiently catalog every frame shot, every interview given, and record every reminiscence scratched from the head of the artist's friends, wives and associates kills what we love about photography in general and Winogrand in particular: his derisive attitude toward connoisseurship. Winogrand disdained those who treated photographs not as photographs but as an extension of painting and therefore refused to develop a language about photography distinct from the old dead European art. Painting was never about letting the world in, as Winogrand tried to do, but about editing out as much of it as possible, the better to reflect the artist and not his world.

Indeed, what will always be crucial to Winogrand's *oeuvre* and the history of post-war American photography in general is his powerful, lyrical and common-sense–based language about photography *qua* photography. In a Charles Hagen interview with Winogrand, published in *Afterimage* in 1977, Winogrand said: "When I'm photographing, I don't see photographs, I see faces. I see photographs. When I'm dealing with photography, I have to deal with it as a photograph."

Hagen: "So the interesting face in a photograph isn't enough to make a photograph…."

Winogrand: "Well, it may or may not be. But the point is, I have to deal with it as a photograph. You know, your face doesn't have four corners. There's space that has to be accounted for—the whole frame. You know, what's the subject of a photograph, but a photograph?"

Indeed, what *is* the subject of a photograph but a photograph? And what constitutes a photograph? The actual object? The subjects that fill the frame? The photographer's sensibility in everything and nothing, ranging from pigs, air terminals, rodeos, wallpaper, coffee shops, girls on the street, exhausted ani-

mals of every species? America is lousy with images. Perhaps that's what makes a Winogrand a Winogrand—so-called "lousy" images, the attention paid to the greasy wrapper that advertised the already-eaten hamburger. Winogrand's attention to detail within the frame that is America is literary in tone: The details evoke the story he means to tell. And that story is always political.

Winogrand's large vision, the sheer scope and volume of his unruly work—when he died in 1984, he left a third of a million unedited exposures—bears a distinct relationship to that of Theodore Dreiser, particularly in "Sister Carrie," Dreiser's groundbreaking turn-of-the-century novel of descriptive realism. In fact, Winogrand's "The Animals" and his second book, "Women are Beautiful," can be regarded as visual corollaries to Dreiser's great work in that Winogrand and Dreiser share girl love and are romantics who fed off the distant object and were equally concerned with the political inherent in the details they sought out in the life of cities.

From "Sister Carrie": "A woman should some day write the complete philosophy of clothes. No matter how young, it is one of the things she wholly comprehends. There is an indescribably faint line in the manner of man's apparel that somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not. Once an individual has passed this faint line on the way downward he will get no glance from her. There is another line at which the dress of a man will cause her to study her own. This line the individual at her elbow now marked for Carrie."

Like Winogrand, Dreiser makes distinctions within differences. Carrie is a woman and therefore different, a stranger to the quotidian. Nature and society have taught her that she has no face, no identity, without a man. But Carrie doesn't want just any man. He must be "better" somehow, and confer on Carrie a kind of exalted status. Carrie's single-mindedness of purpose makes her—what? A harridan or a modern woman? Or is the modern woman by definition a harridan, rapacious and Wonder-bra-ed? Dreiser and Winogrand imagined who their female subjects were based on what they saw, which was completely and utterly subjective. They saw their fascination and fear of that "other species."

The woman supplies few clues to her character, but behaves in a way that interested them.

Winogrand photographed many women all over the world, but the women collected in "The Animals" are New Yorkers, female citizens in the part of the world that interested him the most. His women, like Carrie, are urban creatures. They wear attitude like another coat of makeup. They are as threatening and bored as the creatures in the cages, creatures we've locked up less to satisfy our zoological curiosity than to visit what we are not. In his pictures, women are animals stalking city streets, looking to feed, or offended by Winogrand's feeding off of them. Winogrand, it seems, couldn't help himself. He couldn't stop looking. New York, the city's Central Park Zoo and its inhabitants were brilliant metaphors for the lives women and black men lead in public spaces in New York—stalked by the male gaze, confined by the city, which remains the greatest show on earth. In her 1975 essay on Winogrand, Janet Malcolm wrote: "In his book 'The Animals,' [Winogrand] shows the Central Park Zoo for the dirty prison it was, focusing on the bars, the concrete floors, the dispirited ugly animals, the dumb (for thinking they are enjoying themselves), ugly people, and the grubbiness and meanness, conveying an atmosphere of nakedness and brown soap harshness like that found in the paintings of Francis Bacon."

Again, photography is compared with painting, robbing it of its distinct power. The "grubbiness and meanness" Malcolm talks about is the grubbiness and meanness inherent when we look at the real—photography's great subtext. The animals on both sides of the fence are captive to each other's gaze, not recognizing what they see, but looking just the same because what else is there but other animals? And what else is there but cities, specifically New York, a page waiting to be deciphered by writers or developed by photographers?

Born on January 14, 1928 in the Bronx, Winogrand served two years in the Army before he enrolled as a painting student in the General Studies program at Columbia University in 1948. A friend who took pictures for the Columbia

Spectator encouraged the budding artist to join him in the darkroom, which was located in the basement of the architecture building. The darkroom was open 24 hours a day then. Shortly after being introduced to this underground world of dodgers and fixers and the blues of city streets recorded in black and white, Winogrand—pock-marked, chain-smoking and alluring in a tough Jewish way—embarked on and never deviated from his life's work: casting his eye around a city that, 18 years after his death, remains nothing more and nothing less than a "figment" of the real world that defines its life.

Nevertheless, create Winogrand did, using a variety of cameras at first before eventually choosing a Leica, the lightness of which was essential, given that Winogrand's metier was the "street," especially as it had been looked at and sized up in the work of the Swiss-born Robert Frank, whose 1959 photo collection "The Americans" traversed the junk Americans cultivated like weeds: movie posters, raw adolescent sexuality, TV, a cruel disregard for poverty and old age, speed, and an interesting disjunction between thought and action. This was, more or less, the same landscape that photographer Walker Evans had mapped

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out 20 years before Frank arrived on the scene. But Evans' exploration of the American vernacular was quieted by his high style, which owed something to his use of the square-formatted Rolleiflex—the photograph as painter's frame—and his love of literature. Evans's pictures are visual analogies to Flaubert's sentences—controlled to appear natural. Frank picked at Walker's photographic sentences and found something distinctly his in them, which could not and should not be described with language, and which was infinitely dirtier and messier. Frank smashed Evans' stately text by opening his aperture to changing times. But it took Winogrand, with his cineaste's eye and ear and wide-angle lens, to find the political that Frank could grasp but not decipher, and that Evans elevated. Winogrand was a poor New York Jew. As such, he was as much a part of what defines the city—its ethnicity—as he was outside that which makes the city powerful: the rich. Winogrand's work asks: What is it like on the other side of Park Avenue, where blacks and women lived? And was their New York the New York of many things to buy, of (at times) profligate prosperity and love as shiny as hubcaps on new cars? Or were women and blacks simply animals? And what was it like for them on the other side of the camera, framed by a white man's lens?

In "The Animals," there are a number of extraordinary photographs. There is, for example, a young couple standing by a cage, seemingly unmindful of the caged beast—their desire?—stalking them on the other side of the bars. There is also a close-up of a boar gripping his iron cage with his teeth. Each of these photographs has a power all its own, and is the distillation of Winogrand's art, which is the art of the humanist, not the ironist, as observer. However, there is one photograph in "The Animals" that resonates more deeply than others. This picture shows, in medium close-up, a black man and a white woman. The man wears a jacket, a shirt and a tie. She is blonde and sports a head scarf. The man and the woman are each carrying a baby monkey. The monkeys, by implication, are the product of miscegenation: that is, born of parents who defied a natural law—the marriage of black to white—and whose only *natural* progeny could be… animals.

In looking at any number of photographs taken during and directly following the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, I was immediately reminded of the lessons set forth in Winogrand's work: that any documentation about life in New York is about race in New York, the city's great, half-written text. I was also reminded of Winogrand's commitment to photography as a surrealist tool or, rather, as a tool that documented the everyday surrealism we make of our animal lives. Pictures of women with ash lying flat on their heads like plaits. Pictures of handkerchiefs stuffed into eyeglasses slightly askew. Pictures of men and women in suits, shoeless, carrying briefcases and self-importance across the Brooklyn Bridge, despite the nakedness and vulnerability visible in their feet. Somehow, an event had taken place that not only made surrealism real, it made it journalism: an event that made all of us, each and every one, news.

Presumably tragedy humanizes us. In the three daily papers published in New York on Sept. 12, 2001, the lines between race and sex and class were presented as having been blurred by things "never being the same" (a sentiment that Joan Didion decried, saying that, on the contrary, New York was now just like the rest of the world). But the photographs in those papers showed that things were exactly the same. Sex and race and class were, in fact, brought into greater relief against the backdrop of devastation. My eyes focused on pictures of single women, alone and together, and office workers, some black, some white, whose demeanor—as operators in the capitalist machine—had already been one of defeat before Sept. 11. Within a matter of hours or days, many of these workers would be further marginalized since they were, after all, dark-skinned and, perhaps, observers of a non-Christian God. I looked at photographs of blacks and women escaping to the outer boroughs, and others of white, upwardly mobile men trying to contend with a surrealism that was at odds with reality as their privilege had defined it. New York for all New Yorkers. This is the "city of difference," but the terrorist attacks made difference unfashionable.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Garry Winogrand, "New York City," ca. 1962

The photographs in New York's three daily papers on or about Sept. 12, 2001, told the real story or, rather, belied the terrible untruths that marked the implicitly patriotic tone of many of the articles that accompanied them: They revealed a narrative about us and them. What the photographs showed—and what Winogrand showed us photographs about life in the city showed—was that we are still a city of black and white, the marginalized and the prosperous, "real" animals—blacks and women—and their keepers. One was able to see how they reflected, more truthfully than any prose could reveal, the divide and suspicion that grew deeper and wider, and remained largely unspoken, between those who were American (white) and those who weren't (any dark-skinned person, any Muslim). I recall, on the afternoon of Sept. 12, sitting in a Garry Winogrand photograph. I recall sitting with a Muslim friend and her three little girls in Central Park. I recall how she hid her crescent moon and star necklace from people who lived on the east side of the park. And I recall how they regarded her: as someone who, potentially, could blow up their world.

Anything you see is true. In photographs, on the streets. Garry Winogrand knew this before calamity became part of our daily conversation. His pictures presage what is commonly held to be our shared disaster but what in fact reveals that this "brotherhood" is rotten at the core. We are all in a zoo, fat with lethargy and discrimination: this is my cage, not yours. Central Park is the only central metaphor we have for difference in the city, since the brutality of difference is acted out in its environs, again and again. This divide began but did not end there.

Construction on Central Park began in 1857. To some extent, its construction came about to alleviate the stress of the depression of 1857. Another civic-minded project. The park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. From the first, the terrain—scrubby trees, rock outcroppings and

the like—was thought barely hospitable to pigs, goats, and squatters. Egbert L. Viele was commissioned by the Park's board (which included Washington Irving and William Bryant) to make a topographical survey of the land. Squatters bodily ejected him. During the park's construction, issues of safety to strollers, health enthusiasts, boaters and so on were not especially addressed. Unlike parks in Europe, which were shut after dark, Central Park would be available to its citizens on a 24-hour basis. Olmsted expressed his trepidation about the park's accessibility to the very squatters who had tried to eject Viele, but his concerns were ignored. More than a century later, when the park had become something of the city's heart of darkness, a white woman was raped by a number of young men as she jogged in the north end of the park, at the lip of Harlem. She was raped, beaten and left for dead by a number of young men who were a part of the city's underclass: young black men. That the woman these young men "caught" jogging was also marginalized went unremarked upon. That they were part of the narrative of New York's sentimental love of narrative, of stories that could be neatly framed and divided between black and white, rich and poor, the victim and the perpetrator, was much remarked upon, particularly by Joan Didion in her essay, "Sentimental Journeys." That Garry Winogrand confronted our fear and distrust of these two "different" groups in a single image more than 30 years before the fact was not noticed. But it can be seen now, in the most controversial image in "The Animals." In it, we see a white woman and a black man, apparently a couple, holding the product of their most unholy of unions: monkeys. In projecting what we will into this image—about miscegenation, our horror of difference, the forbidden nature of black men with white women—we see the beast that lies in us all.