Proper spaces

Karen Wollins

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PROPER SPACES

by

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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Part I - Introduction -

In photographing for my thesis project, I was often told to look at work by Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Robert Frank, Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, Callahan; all of the photographers who often use people as their subject. It is important as a photographer, to be aware of the works of one’s predecessors, not only to see what has been done so as not to repeat it, but also to free oneself to work in a new and different way.

In the beginning I did not follow the advise of my professors only because I was afraid that I just might be doing what had already been done. I was well aware of the photographs of the photographers I was being directed to look at, but I had not given many of them the attention that they rightly deserved. Frank and Winogrand’s photographs were the ones that I most often dismissed for what I saw as their callousness and sloppyness.

When I was nearly finished with the project I realized that I probably should look closely at the photographs of Frank, Winogrand and Friedlander. I still feel somewhat cheated by their photographs, but at the same time, I now realize what these photographers have done to change the course of photography.

It is for this reason that I felt it necessary to include in my thesis a short essay on the advent of "street photography." I realize that my essay excludes many photographers such as Callahan, Lissette Model, Ray Metzker’s early work, Walker Evans, and Helen Levitt, who are also known for photographing people in public. The essay includes some of the reasons that provoked the
change from the traditional style of formal journalistic photography to the seemingly haphazard style of street photography, then goes on to discuss those photographers whom I see as the major influences: Frank, Winogrand and Friedlander.

The second part of the thesis report is a discussion of my own work. The differences of my work as compared to the above photographers, and why I photographed in this way are included. The third part is the technical section of the thesis. It deals with the types of films that I used, to some of the problems that I encountered in preparing the photographs for the show. The last part of the essay is the conclusion.
Part II - Historical Overview-

During the 1950's, the public's attitude toward photography changed significantly. Before that time, there had been very little attention given to photography, independently as an art form. In fact, it was only considered art by a select few. People such as Steiglitz had done much to stimulate interest in photography, but it had never achieved a broad independent status. The fact that very few photographs were ever shown in museums, exemplifies the disinterest in photography.

There were three events in the 1950's, that changed the public's attitude and appreciation for photography. The first was the exhibition called The Family of Man, mounted in 1955, by Edward Steichen, then Director of the Department of Photography at MOMA. The theme of the show was to portray the "oneness of mankind throughout the world." The exhibition followed the tradition of the popular (pictorialist) humanist documentary photography. And in fact, the show was mounted in much the same way the popular picture magazines of the times such as Life, were handled. The photographers had no control over the context in which the photograph was used, nor did they have any say in the size, cropping and printing style of the photographs. All of the photographs were processed by commercial labs, to Steichen's specifications.

As might be expected, several photographs were used in ways contrary to the intentions of the photographer. Two of the most notable photographs used out of context were Dorothea Lange's photograph of Filipino stoop laborers, and August Sanders
photograph portraying the different class distinctions. In the first case, Lange’s photograph was intended to show the inhumaness of the stoop laborors work. In the exhibition, the photograph was surrounded by other photographs that were meant to "glorify" the workers in a positive way. Sanders photograph was used with other photographs to show people of all races, colors, and classes in an equal light; also the opposite intention of the photographer.

Another criticism of the exhibition was that it was "essentially a picture story to support a concept...an editorial achievement rather than an exhibition of photography in the usual sense."²

Regardless of the problems with the Family of Man exhibition, it was a tremendous success. For the first time, photography had been given a tremendous amount of attention both by the general public and the press. So much publicity was generated that nearly 3,000 people viewed the show daily while it was in New York.

The next important achievement of the 1950’s was the founding of Aperture in 1952. The publication was headed by Minor White who was an advocate of personal expression. Whereas in The Family of Man, humanist photography was in the forefront, White believed in the meaning of the photograph. It is in this light that "reading" photographs, then verbalizing the experience became important. It had been said by many that Aperture was responsible for raising the intellect in photography. Following in the tradition of Steiglitz and Weston, Minor White also
believed in the perfect print.

The third event of the 50's, and on the opposite end of the spectrum from Aperture, was the publication of Robert Frank's, The Americans in 1958. This book, although severely criticized in the beginning, would have a tremendous influence on the future of photography. Contrary to White, Frank did not care about print quality, or "reading" images, but he did care about his personal vision of America. Frank, originally from Switzerland, traveled around America for nearly two years photographing his own interpretation of the American people and surroundings.

Jonathan Green summarized the importance of the events as follows:

"These three events were integrally connected. The Family of Man embodied a popular photographic sensibility; Aperture and The Americans evolved as a reaction to that sensibility. And Aperture helped foster the radical vision that ultimately made Frank's work available to Americans... Aperture and The Americans, though they differed from each other in intent and appearance, both had their roots in Anti-establishment culture, a background antithetical to the tradition that produced The Family of Man. Both sprang from the 'underground' - the rise of the Beat movement, and alternative culture."

Although The Family of Man received the greatest publicity, Franks' book probably had the most profound effect on the future of photography. Many of Franks photographs had tilted horizons and little or no attention was paid to the grainyness of the print quality. It was the first time that a professional photographer had paid more attention to the comment than the print itself. According to Janet Malcolm:

"Robert Frank, the Manet of new photography, scrupulously shed all pictoral values of his predecessors - composition, design, tonal balance, print quality - and produced pictures that looked as if a kid had taken them while eating a popsicle and then had them developed and
printed in a drug store."^4

Frank moved to New York from Switzerland when he was twenty-three, to become a commercial photographer. After being an assistant for six years, he decided to become a freelance photographer for the popular picture magazines. His photographs however, were rarely shown. He had developed his own personal style that often did not fit in with the magazines standards. Magazine photographs had to tell a story, with a beginning, middle and end, with no personal expression or biases. And since the magazines were businesses, with the main priority being profit, the photographs had to be easily understood by everyone. That means subtlety and ambiguity were not tolerated. Even though Frank’s work was known and appreciated by those more versed in photography, he could not bring himself to follow the standards needed to to survive as a magazine photographer. He was able however, to have some of his work published in some of the photographic periodicals.

In response to his distrust and dislike of the picture magazines, Frank finally applied for, and received a Guggenheim Fellowship to travel around the country to photograph America. In his words, he planned “to produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation.”^5 His own personal view of what he saw would be the basis for the book The Americans. He was unable to publish the book in America, but finally found a publisher in France in 1958.

When the book did reach America there was a tremendous outrage over what the photographs showed. First of all, on the side of aesthetics, the photographs were crooked, fuzzy, with no
apparent concern for form. This can be seen as Frank's response to the traditional style of photographing seen both in the picture magazines and in the few galleries and museums that featured photography. As far as what the photographs were about, it seemed as though Frank had a distorted view of America. His photographs continually showed alienation, racism, and poverty. The mood of the lighting only increased the negative tone of the photographs.

In the beginning it was not realized that what was most significant about Franks photographs was that he was going against all of the old traditions of photography and forging an entirely new way to communicate.

"Permitting the camera what no art photographer had hitherto let get away with—all of the accidents of light, the messy conjunctions of shape, the randomness of the framing, the disorderliness of the composition, the arbitrariness of gesture and expression, the blurriness and graininess of the printing—he showed America at its most depressing and pathetic. However, Frank has been overvalued as a social critic and undervalued as a photographic innovator, for what he revealed was something not about America, but about photography."

By the 1960's, Frank's style of street photography had become popular with photographers. People such as Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander are probably the most well known. Part of the reason why street photography had become so popular, was a need for personal expression. Another reason for the change was the rejection of the traditional pictorial style that photography had followed for so long. It seemed to come about at a time when photography was finally getting the artistic attention that it had strived for, for so long. Most traditional photographs followed the style of Ansel Adams, Steiglitz, Weston and others
who believed in the perfectly crafted print. These photographers frowned on the new style of photography. To them, the new photographers such as Winogrand and Friedlander were taking a giant step backwards in their own attempt to get photography accepted as a fine art form.

But what actually happened in the marketplace was quite different than what was happening in the photographic establishment. Suddenly in the 60's, the traditional photographs were being bought for unheard of prices. Especially the photographs of Adams, Weston and Strand. While photographers such as Winogrand and Friedlander were being talked about in the journals and being shown in museum exhibitions, very few of their photographs sold. The Family of Man exhibition, which promoted the traditional style of photographing, is more than likely the reason for the popularity in the marketplace, even though Aperture and The Americans were more successful at raising consciousness.

At any rate, the 1960's was the perfect time for street photography, or "social landscape photography," the term coined by Lee Friedlander, to flourish. It was a time when there was a need on the part of the public to be seen, and to participate in society. It was a time full of peace protests, rock and roll, love and dope. The social landscapists took as their mentors, the snapshot, Walker Evans and Robert Frank.

In 1967 John Szarkowski, one of the most vocal proponents of social landscape photography, mounted an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called New Documents. Gary Winogrand, Lee
Friedlander and Diane Arbus were the three photographers whose work was shown. According to Szarkowski:

"In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach towards more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and frailties of society...What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and...the courage to look at it with the minimum of theorizing."

Of the three, Arbus' photographs were the most different from the other two. Her photographs also received the most publicity. The reason for this could lie in the fact that her photographs were the most traditional; the most painterly, compared to Winogrand and Friedlander. According to Janet Malcolm, "the style of her photographs is the composed, static style of the nineteenth century; many of Arbus' pictures could have been taken by Julia Margaret Cameron. It is precisely this disparity between her pictures orderly formalism, and the messy chaos of what they show that creates their fascinating horror."

Winogrand and Friedlander's photographs were also very formal, although formal in a different way.

"Formalism is usually taken in photography in its smaller sense: the orderly and considered distribution of elements within the frame to achieve a 'pleasing' arrangement of shapes, tones, etc. With the works of Friedlander and Winogrand, formalism came to take on the broader definition that critics such as Greenburg and Fried had assigned to it in painting: the investigation of the material and historic possibilities of the medium, using that medium as a tool for investigation."

In the same sense, the term social landscape is used to define not just the urban or suburban landscape, but the photographers perception of that landscape, with an interest in what the camera can do. The photographs become more conceptual,
and at the same time more subtle and complex.

After the New Documents exhibition, both men continued to photograph in ways that negated the traditional pictorial conventions. Gary Winogrand, perhaps the most written about of the two produced several books before his death: Women Are Beautiful, Public Relations and Animals to name a few. In these books, it becomes obvious that Winogrand is more interested in the formal qualities of the photograph. There are often multiple centers of interest, and tilted horizons that appear to be tilted only to try to include as much in the photograph as possible. There is also no focus on certain classes or types of people as in so much other street photography. In the book Women Are Beautiful however, there does seem to be a certain tenseness created by the photographs themselves. It feels to me as though many of the women that are photographed, do not want to be photographed. On the other hand, Leo Rubenfield wrote that "three out of four women act for the photographer himself, who weaves them into a continuous story of mutual lust and distrust."10

Winogrand once said "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed."11 He was more interested in trying to learn something about photography when he photographed. This is the main difference between Winogrand and other tradition photographers. Winogrand made photographs for more personal reasons; he did not know what the picture would look like and he wanted to find out. He did not know if the photograph would be a beautiful or meaningful photograph, as did many other photographers before they even made the photograph.
It is obvious that Frank had a tremendous influence on Winogrand. Neither photographer is interested in beauty. What they were more interested in is personal vision. Both use the tilted horizon, and both produce photographs that are extremely subtle and complex. But, to some there are differences in mood. "Winogrand looks at the world with a greedier, more indiscriminate and ironic eye; Franks photographs are more selective and sadder." 12

Lee Friedlander has also continued to produce social landscape photographs. His are somewhat different from Winogrand's in that his seem more complex, yet comical. He often uses his own reflection in windows, shadows, and signs. Many, considered his photographs difficult to understand. Others take this to be a metaphor for the chaos seen in everyday life.

Friedlander is also interested in what a photograph can do. He is not interested in making a document, since he is not trying to change anything. He is interested in showing everyday life from his own point of view.

I have attempted to show how and why the tradition of social landscape photography came about. These photographers have been an influence on my work in that they have freed me to do what I felt a tremendous need for. Influence is always inevitable; what is most important is that the photographer must be able to use this influence and carry it one step further to create a personal statement.
Part III - Proper Spaces; The Photographs -

I feel that my work differs from Frank, Winogrand and Friedlander in method of photographing, in content, and in the statement made. I feel that I am probably closer to Franks style of photographing in that I am not interested in form in the way that Winogrand and Friedlander are. Many of my photographs were made "from the hip." If form was what I was interested in, I would have been careful to look through the view finder every time I made a photograph. (This does not mean that many of Franks photographs were made without looking through the view finder. I do believe that he was less interested in form than the others). I also feel that my photographs are more about people in relation to their surroundings. I will attempt to show these differences by describing my experiences while working on this project.

I first began to photograph people in this way, after being told over and over again that my photographs looked like calendar art. I had always made very formal-looking landscapes. They were actually, in retrospect, quite boring. I wanted some excitement, both in the photographs themselves, and in the act of photographing. I had never photographed people with any regularity, so I decided, just to get loosened up, I would photograph people, without looking through the view finder. My first photographs were crooked and fuzzy, and the more crooked and fuzzy they were, the better.

I had no direction in the first photographs, I just made pictures of whomever I thought was interesting. Remember, at the time, I was photographing people in this manner only as an
exercise. I had no idea that I would become so excited by the project. And I should add that the people were photographed from a distance because I was extremely shy at first, to photograph them up close.

As I began photographing more and more on the streets, I began to focus on the people in relation to their surroundings. And the more I photographed, the closer I got to the subjects themselves. When I finally decided that I would continue this project for my thesis, my photographs looked completely different from when I first began.

The more I photographed, the more excited I became. Often I would dress up in my red high tops and baggy jeans, just to go out to photograph. The excitement came from the fact that for the first time I was actually going out in public to see, and to be seen. And to me at that time, that was extremely important.

The thesis proposal stated that I would document ordinary individuals doing everyday, normal activities. I wanted to portray something about the people themselves or about their character. So many other street photographs are of poor people. That was the last thing that I wanted for my thesis. I wanted to photograph all types of people, rich, poor, young, old, and everything in between. I said that I would be photographing gestures and the relationship of the people in their surroundings.

When I first began to write the proposal, I gave little attention to the wording. I had not thought through the meanings of the words gesture and document. I was interested in showing
something about people, or about society as a whole. I thought that by photographing gesture (meaning bodily stances or movements to express or emphasize attitude), something about that person would be conveyed. However, a simple gesture such as raising an arm, or turning a head, really could convey very little except that the person could move that particular part of their body. I realize now that body language is the word that I should have used. Websters dictionary defines body language as "gestures, unconscious bodily movements, etc, which function as a means of communication." I wanted to show how people act in public and how they react to others around them.

The meaning of a documentary photograph is something that has confused me from the very beginning of this project. Of course many people say that all straight photographs are documents, and in fact some people insist that to say "documentary photography" is redundant. But in my opinion, a photograph does not become a document unless the photographer specifically intends to call attention to a certain event, problem, or subject. Then, there must be a conscious attempt on the part of the photographer, to be as unbiased as possible in the depiction of the subject. Of course, there is a tremendous amount of debate on this subject, for many believe that it is nearly impossible for photographers not to be biased. Beaumont Newhall calls documentary photography "an inescapably biased form of communication." Others believe that there should be no biases involved. Another important point about documentary photography is that the photographer must be trying to raise consciousness about something at the very least, or trying to
change something at the very most.

The photographs that comprise the thesis project can not honestly be called documents. Certainly they do document the way I see our society, but they are my biased view of the way I see people in public. I did not set out to make a photographic document of the way people act, nor was I trying to raise conciousness about this particular subject. And I certainly was not trying to change the way people act in public, this is a way of life. I photographed because I felt a certain need to react with people, and at the same time attempt to explain the way others react. Do people do the same things that I do in public? Are people aware of the way others see them? Is it all a performance?

The photographs that I ended up with are about several different things. At the very least they are an exploration of people. But mostly, they are about the way that people present themselves in public; about their interaction with others. Many of the people that I photographed appear to be lost in their own thoughts, unaware of others around them. From the body language of the people, we gather that some of them are extremely self assured, while others seem lost, confused, or even dismayed.

Because of the lack of interaction between the people and others around them, the photographs give the feeling of isolation or alienation. This is further enhanced by the way the subjects are placed in space. It is possible to read these feelings into the photographs from the body language of the people.

What is interesting is the differing opinions of the members
of my board. Ken White sees them in terms of the interaction of the people. More so in America, than any other country, people act as though there is an imaginary line around them, through which others are not allowed to enter. An example of this is when sitting say on a bench, people will choose the seat farthest from the others sitting on the bench. He sees isolation as being the most prevalent in the photographs (An important distinction is isolation is done to oneself, alienation as done to you by others).

On the other hand, Charles Werberig sees the placement of people in space as having the most significance. He feels as though there is some type of choreography going on in the photographs. This choreography is what lends itself to the feeling of isolation and alienation. So to Charles it is the form, rather than the content that he is concerned with.

This is what made interaction with my board members so interesting, (and I should say at times frustrating). All four members of my board saw the photographs in a different way. I enjoyed that aspect of the project. In fact I also enjoyed the different responses that I got from others. There is no set of ideas or feelings that I want people who view my work to get. Instead I enjoy it when there are differences of opinion, or when people see different things in the photographs.

The photographs themselves were several different sizes; the largest one being forty-five inches by thirty-seven, and the smallest being forty by twenty seven. The reason I made them that size was mainly to emphasize the placement of the people in space. Since the photographs were almost life-size, one gets the
feeling of being able to walk into the photographs. Since I included the black border around all of the photographs (they were all printed full-frame), it looks as though one is seeing the scene through a window.

Because of the size of the photographs, there is less of an emphasis on detail, and more on the people. The size of the photographs gives more room for isolation. The space surrounding the people can be seen in a different way since the photographs are almost life size.

I had considered making only a few large photographs, with the majority being either 20 x 24 or 16 x 20. The reason I did not was that I was afraid that the smaller photographs would be overpowered by the larger photographs. I did feel that it was necessary for certain photographs to be large because their impact was so much greater as large photographs. However, there were several photographs that I did not use because they did not work as well that large. I also would have been able to include many more photographs had I been able to make smaller photographs.

I began photographing in color because I wanted to make the photographs as true to life as possible. However, the photographs seemed to be more about color itself, rather than body language. As I began to get more involved in the project, it became clear that I did not want to copy life exactly, I wanted to interpret what I saw. So, I began to photograph in black and white. The result was more of an emphasis on the people and the space around them.
PART IV - Technical Considerations-

Most of the photographs were made with tri-x film. The main reason why I did not use plus-x (a film with less grain), was because I had become so accustomed to photographing with tri-x that I was nearly able to guess the exposures. Since I often photographed without looking through the view finder, I felt it was necessary to use a film with which I was most familiar. The grain does not detract from my statement, nor is it so noticeable to become an issue in and of itself.

I used D-76 developer for the same reasons I used the film. I have used that particular developer for nearly all of my work (I have also used HC-110 sporadically). I feel that I am better able to calculate from experience exactly how much to over, or under develop the film when it is necessary. Another reason why I used that developer is that it is provided for us at school. HC-110 was not made available until later in the year. I felt that I should not change developers in the middle of a project, especially one with which I was not as familiar.

I had a tremendous amount of technical problems in printing the photographs. In making large prints the process is different in certain ways than from making normal sized prints. First of all, I had a difficult time finding a decent paper. I planned to use Kodak Polyfiber F mainly because of its lower cost, and because it is a good all around paper. If I had chosen a graded paper such as Elite, I would have had to buy several grades which would have cost more than I could have afforded. I did want a glossy paper, even though cracks and creases in the paper would have
shown up more. But, when I went to pick up the paper, the store had ordered Polyfiber N which is a matte finish paper. I could have ordered new paper, but it would have taken several weeks to come in, plus it would have cost more money. I was concerned that it would not leave me enough time to finish. So I was stuck with four, forty inch by thirty feet rolls of paper that I did not particularly like.

Processing the prints was not an easy task at first. I had to expose the paper on the floor, which I might add was not even. (I had the enlarger balanced to the floor, but since it was not even, it could not be completely balanced. This is why, especially on the largest of prints, the edges are not as focused as the middle of the photograph). The paper had to be measured and cut, then taped to the floor since there was no easel large enough.

Exposing the prints was much different from exposing smaller prints. First of all, exposures were often over a minute, sometimes even two, then at least twice as much burning around the edges alone was needed to make a decent print. That does not even count burning in other brighter areas of the print. The burning and dodging tools that I used were so large, that after a few minutes of holding them over the print, my arms would get tired. Often I would take out the filters to burn in skies and other bright areas to cut down the time.

To process the prints, I used the chemicals that were available from chem-mix. The developer, D-72, was diluted one to two. I must say that the worst part of the whole project was the
smell of the chemicals. I did all of the printing in the large print room which had no ventilation. People complained of smelling the chemicals all the way down the hall. Once the project was nearly finished, a fan was put into the room so that after processing each print, I could open the doors and turn on the fan to get out some of the fumes. I had to get out of the room anyway after each print was made. Often I would get headaches and a terribly dry mouth. After printing for a couple of weeks, I got used to the whole thing, but I must say that I had few visitors while I was printing.

In washing the prints, I normally used two tray siphons, and two regular hoses. I also used a sink stopper that had a hole in the top to allow water to go through that I used to help circulate the water. I would also empty out the sink completely several times during the two hours that I normally washed the prints. I was still always uncertain whether or not the prints were properly washed since I could often see suds in the sink. In fact one of the prints was stained after toning.

As I mentioned above, I was not happy with the matte surface paper that I was using. I was determined to find some kind of wax or spray that I could use that would give more of a glossy finish. The first, and only wax that I tried on a small piece of a photograph was Light Impressions Rennaisance wax. I was told that it would give a gloss to the photograph as well as serve as an archival protection. But it did not make the photograph any glossier. In fact it seemed to give it more of a matte finish. Further, it would have been difficult to spread it evenly on photographs that large. I then tried two different sprays meant
to give a gloss finish to photographs. Neither of them had any archival value. And neither of them worked to my satisfaction. They would also have been difficult to spray evenly over the photographs.

The last attempt was to tone the prints. I realized that this would not make the prints any glossier, but it did give them a much warmer tone that I was actually quite pleased with. After several tests, I decided to tone the prints in a 1:7 dilution of selenium toner and water, for about seven minutes. Since the sinks were made of metal, I had to line them with plastic to prevent the toner from reacting with the metal. Again, I washed the prints after toning in the same manner as described above for about an hour and a half.

Editing the photographs for the show was difficult. I am still not sure today if I made the right decisions about which photographs to exclude. I had approximately twenty prints ready for the show, of which I had planned to use fourteen. But I was only able to fit nine of the prints in the gallery. I chose the photographs that I thought worked the best together. But if I had to do it over today, it is possible that I would do it differently.
Part V - Conclusion -

In conclusion, it is difficult to say whether or not I will continue to photograph people in this way. Considering what I was doing when I first began to study at RIT, it is doubtful whether I will do this for the rest of my life. In fact, when photographers do the same types of photographs, and never explore, there is little chance for growth. I do not want to make it sound as though I will never photograph people again; I know that I will. I have learned a tremendous amount about myself and others around me from working on this project. Further I feel that I have just begun to develop my own style. I hope that I will use what I have learned from this project when working on other projects. It is important for all artists to continue to work in new ways in order to grow.
FOOTNOTES


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