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Why Winogrand

Leo Rubinfien

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This text has been adapted from a lecture given at Pratt Institute and at Fordham College, New York City, in September and November 2014.

- 1 I thought I'd begin by reading you a talk I put together a couple of months ago. For lack of a better title, I called it "The Reasons for Winogrand." I didn't mean the reasons why Garry Winogrand became what he was or why he did the work he did—I meant why he and his work matter. I want to assume that everyone here has seen a reasonable amount of his work, that we don't need to go back over where he photographed and when, what books and shows he produced, how his interests and his style developed, what prizes he won. Instead, I want to see if I can convey why his work, and his example, are important—to me, and perhaps why they should be important to you.
- 2 Why am I your guest tonight? Over the last few years, I've worked as guest curator of Winogrand's recent retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the show that closed at the Metropolitan Museum a few months ago and is running in Paris now. The project produced this heavy book [Leo Rubinfien, *Garry Winogrand*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University Press, 2013], but before that it required a full re-evaluation of Winogrand's very large body of work, which had been left in a raw, unfinished state at his early death in 1984. He was 56 years old then, and found out so suddenly that he was dying, and had so little time left that there was no chance of his putting his archive in order—and he had never been a fiend for organizing it anyway. In the end I reviewed about 22,000 rolls of film, about 800,000 photographs, roughly one quarter of which were still unprocessed or unproofed when Winogrand died—and strangely, I ended up seeing a good deal more of his work than he ever did. It's important to say that I'm not a professional curator—I'm a photographer, and sometimes also a writer—and before Winogrand, I'd only done one curatorial project, and I like to think that I was given the SFMOMA job partly *because* it might

have been difficult for a professional curator to deal with material that was so unresolved. In any case, none had been clamoring to do it, even 25 years after Winogrand's previous big show.

- 3 Apart from this, I was known to have been one of Winogrand's protégés. I don't think this is a mark of great distinction, by the way, since he had many of them. Winogrand seemed to love young people—their energy, the way they sought to discover, the way they'd speak directly when older people were trapped in propriety and indecision, the way they demanded the truth even if they had no idea what it was. He sought young friends. But it was enormously important to all of these people, in their own minds, that they were associated with Winogrand. And some of them weren't really so young—they included Tod Papageorge and Henry Wessel, and at certain times Lee Friedlander, who were much closer in years to Winogrand than I was, yet admired him not just as an accomplished colleague, but as a sort of sage. By 1970 or so, people who were hostile to Winogrand—people he'd insulted or who disliked his combative behavior—and there were many of these—would often say that the circle of his associates was a kind of cult, and that its members were blind followers, but this was unjust. Many of the people in that circle had critical minds, and even if they could not explain it fully, they saw in Winogrand and his work a force and an honesty with which they felt a deep and inspiring connection. Perhaps these qualities were latent in the best of them, themselves—and perhaps they hoped to nourish and realize them through a connection to him.
- 4 It was intoxicating to encounter Winogrand's photographs, which seemed to show you that photography could take on the largest issues at which art aims, and reach the kind of nobility that people had long expected from music and painting and architecture and writing, but to which photography has mostly held itself inferior. His work seemed to sweep up the whole of life in the United States, from the dark depths of Manhattan in winter to the sun-blasted desert of the west—but it was not just a matter of where, it was also a matter of who, and what they felt, and if they really fit together as a nation, or whether “America” was characterized most strongly by how it was continually spinning apart. Winogrand's work was a little like one of those endless lists in Whitman —“here is the sailor”—this is from the introduction I wrote for SFMOMA's Winogrand book—“here is the sailor and here is the beauty, and here is the president, and here the beggar, and here the dwarf, and here is the ape in the zoo... The rain is there, the sun, the night, the road, the people trudging up the sidewalk through blowing snow; the slow train, the 747, the Greyhound bus, ferryboat, Electra Glide, moon rocket, and pony.” That Winogrand was giving you the whole of America was an illusion, of course. Like every photographer, he was giving you just an infinitesimal fraction of the world, but he made you feel the whole when you'd really seen just a few grains of sand. There really has been no other body of work by a photographer, except perhaps Atget's, that has thrown its arms so far around the life of a nation. It was a project of great audacity—and in fact, since Winogrand would have little to show for himself if he failed, if anything at all, it was actually brave. So there was this, first of all: appetite, and the great optimism that one would have to have to follow out all the roads down which it sent one, and the courage that one would have to have not to turn away.
- 5 When this was, and where I myself came from also figure in what I'm telling you. I met Winogrand in 1974—he was 46 then—the year when President Richard Nixon went down in disgrace; the year before the year when the United States finally gave up in

Vietnam. It was five years after the Charles Manson murders, six past the Tet Offensive and the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. It was 10 years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and really, for more than a decade the country had seemed to be unraveling with ever-increasing speed. Yet the amazing thing—(“amazing” became a highly popular expression then—Diane Arbus often used it, maybe you remember that)—was that this seemed throughout to be a time of such promise that even amid great rage and disenchantment and destruction (and I’ve listed just now only the most famous horrors) it seemed impossible that things weren’t getting better in America, and going to get better yet. It seemed impossible, likewise, that America wasn’t a sort of light to the larger world. Looking back, these years of eruption represented the unwinding of much of the triumphant feeling with which Americans had come out of the Second World War two decades earlier. If, starting from the celebratory moment in this Winogrand photograph from New Year’s Eve at Times Square, in the year 1952 (or so) when the largest part of the country seems to have believed itself good and right—if, starting from this moment, things went up before they went down, by 1974 they were far down. Despair touched almost everyone now, including the conspiratorial president, sullen and unrepentant as he left the White House.

- 6 When I met Winogrand, then, was a moment of pervasive disillusion. Ten years before I’d been emerging from childhood into a world of ebullience and idealism and what seemed a thousand possibilities, and now, in 1974, all that seemed to have been swept away. One authority after another, almost every object of respect, it often seemed, seemed to have collapsed of its own dishonesty. Little but a certain kind of hipster rejectionism seemed not to be fraudulent, but by 1974 I, at least, felt that that couldn’t carry you far at all. And in my personal case, I had left America (with my family) for a faraway country in 1963, and was absent for much of those 10 years, returning just intermittently. Each time I did, the country seemed to have gone through another calamitous, unexpected, astonishing transformation. The movies of those days often ended on a note of bewilderment, and people sang songs about this too. There was a famous and nightmarish Bob Dylan recording that went “Something is happening, and you don’t know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?”
- 7 For his part, Winogrand began in photography as a journalist, serving a number of the picture magazines that, in the 1940s and 50s—until television undid them—were among the most powerful media of mass communication that the modern world had produced. In general, a magazine photographer provided pictures to accompany written stories. But it was the words that told you what the subject was, what was important about it, how the story had transpired, what was its moral, whether the subject was Louis Armstrong or a shipwreck on a tropical island. And this seemed a reasonable division of labor, because without asking *why* something happened, we really have no story, and without being able to describe the past or the future we cannot speak of why and because, so that photographs, which can never really do these things, were almost always secondary to the stories. They were illustrations, they gave you feeling and texture—they gave you the circumstances, essentially, in which the story occurred. This is what they were except once in a while, when something happened in a picture that was so fascinating, so much a result of photographic observation and description that the picture seemed to disconnect from the story altogether. A lot of the time, though, a magazine editor wouldn’t use an image of this kind at all.

- 8 Winogrand was hardly the only one of his contemporaries who became enchanted with pictures like these, which held themselves apart, but no one stood up for them more emphatically. They seemed to describe everything and explain nothing, and Winogrand would say that “there is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described.” They had a special kind of poetry, he argued—it came from their rich ambiguity—and it seemed to me that his were imbued not *just* with mystery, but with the longing to understand more, with regret about not being able to understand more, with bewilderment, anxiety, a sense of the loss of one’s grip on the world, and at the same time, with a gorgeous promise of freedom. Winogrand himself claimed to have rejected magazine journalism as early as 1955, only five years after he began photographing, and he would soon accuse it, more or less, of fraud. Journalism and advertising both demanded an effort to make a photograph do what, by its nature, it couldn’t do, and if you went along you were pursuing some form of “success” that was made of tin.
- 9 By the time I met Winogrand, he was a fierce purist. Had he always been one? I’ve never known—but he held that one should mistrust all kinds of activities that were closely related to photography—from story telling to book design to learning about one’s subjects—because these would be distractions from one’s fundamental mission, which was to use the essential character of the camera to find out where (in the largest sense) one was and what was going on. His values were not merely aesthetic, then, they were thoroughly moral, and they began from making a sharp distinction between what a photograph could and couldn’t tell you (nothing, for example, about what was going on inside a subject’s mind, nothing about where he or she had just been or might be going), and an insistence that one be honest about this. He would have said—to borrow the words of a certain illustrious modern philosopher—*what we cannot say truthfully, we must pass over in silence*. One remarkable aspect of his work is that this perception came to Winogrand right around the moment when Americans began to feel so sharply that their lives were becoming incomprehensible. The essence of his art thus aligned perfectly with a prime condition—really a prime anguish—of his age.
- 10 I said before that this was an age of idealism. The world had just emerged from catastrophe, of course, with the United States among the luckiest countries. I’m speaking of the Second World War, of course. Many people of my parents’ generation had expected that when the war ended, the Depression would resume, but instead there was a fantastic flourishing of the most brightly shining hopes—material, intellectual, humanitarian, political, technological. You can see them everywhere in the record of those days, in advertisements, political speeches, in all the arts, in scientific research, on both the left and the right in political life. Yet idealism gives over easily to cant and sentimentality—and hope, as it fails, gives over easily to propaganda and untruth. With the assassinations and the intensifying of the war in Vietnam, a great disintegration began. Soon, people knew that even the government knew that it was unlikely to win the war; soon, the government claimed victories where there had been no victories, just killings, and it began to look as if enormous brutality was being perpetrated to protect an appearance—so that the Democrats might make Republicans, for example, *believe* that Democrats would not go soft on communism; to make the Russians, for example, *believe* that Americans did not lack the kind of courage that had characterized the very president who had been murdered in Dallas in 1963. Soon, one felt that a vast lie was being perpetrated not just with regard to the war, but in every part of life, and in those who were unwilling simply to march on, idealism underwent

an extraordinary inversion. Now, the noble thing would be not to march on, but to unmask, to debunk, to expose the lie. One side of the American people, passionate for what it thought were the nation's essential values, stood violently against the other, which was passionate for what it held to be authenticity, which it held to be no less essential.

- 11 When I think of Winogrand, I think of a man who was always laughing, or ready to laugh, but even more of a man of exceptional truthfulness. Maybe he loved young people, but he was no great enthusiast for the passions that swept through the young people of the later 1960s. He found them fairly ridiculous. He would tell you what he saw—accurately or not—without ever bothering to make it palatable, and if you insisted that he do that he wouldn't hide his disdain for you either. I really don't know what gave him his skepticism—if he couldn't help seeing the flaws in the lie, or if he just couldn't stand the lying. I also can't tell when it emerged—there are few records of Winogrand talking about himself at all. And if he was skeptical with regard to what he saw before him in the world, he was even more so with regard to the photographs and words one used to describe what one saw. He was completely scrupulous, he would always demand precision: “that's not what I said!” he'd forever correct you. And with photographs, his insistence on the primacy of the facts before him was absolute. He would push aside whatever he might have wanted to see—did the photograph tell you what you wanted to be told? Did it look good? Did it connect as you wanted it to with other photographs? Or with ideas that you cherished?—and credit only what was there. *Did it really seem to give you back experience as you knew it?* There was a great rationality in this, a great empiricism, which seemed the enemy of romanticism, though this quickly becomes complicated. Above all, there was the willingness to be led by photographs. A preference for *discovering* over *expressing*, though these things are not terribly easy to separate, and it does often seem that one can only discover what one already knows, and is therefore predisposed to discover.
- 12 In any event, Winogrand would never beautify, certainly not in any conventional way. And he would rather see an awkward or shapeless picture than a phony one. As a result he was often called cruel, and criticized for showing an ugly world in his work. Sometimes this response even came from high places. Once, for example, when I was a student, I brought a photograph of my own into a class Walker Evans was teaching, and he said “Why do you want to photograph people like these? They're like all the people *that man* Winogrand photographs. They're so vulgar.” In reality, there is a lot of beauty in his subjects, especially in the young women there, but there's at least as much of the opposite, and I'm certain that in any given instance, whether the thing in the picture came out looking pleasant or not was of no importance to Winogrand at all.
- 13 People who rejected his work were perhaps even more troubled by the feeling that it was hard to say what it meant. It was characteristic of Winogrand to go to a famous site, then photograph trivial incidents amid the crowd rather than the great thing that had brought the crowd there. He went to countless parades, but photographed far more of the watchers than he did the performers. And it often seemed as if he had made a photograph right before or right after the climactic moment of an action, willfully leaving a blank where we expected the denouement of the event to come. He often showed a figure without a head; he often gave much of a picture away to empty space. Until you came to feel that all these vacancies were intensely expressive—which they are—it was easy to feel that Winogrand was coming close to formlessness.

- 14 And perhaps in fact he was. One way to see this is to put Winogrand next to Robert Frank. These two photographers are often spoken of together but they are really vastly different, even if they shared the 35mm camera, New York and America and the road as subjects—even if Winogrand felt “awe,” as he said, for Frank’s work. One of the most impressive things about Frank’s book, *The Americans*, is its terrific coherence, the way each picture leads with perfect clarity into the next, toward what seems an overwhelming, almost logical truth. Winogrand’s photographs are nothing like this. They cover a great range of subjects, and it’s often not even clear exactly what the subject of any of them is. He pushes very far up toward where a photograph does nothing but describe the surface of the world, where it offers nothing but raw facts, and leaves you alone and mystified. It’s not too much to say that Winogrand leaves open the question of whether what he’s looking at has any meanings at all, whether the events that animate and shape our lives are nothing but occurrences. He’s willing to consider pretty seriously the possibility that everything we love and hate and strive for and grieve over “just doesn’t matter”—and let’s remember these three words because we’ll come back to them later.
- 15 One of the most fascinating things about Winogrand, to me, is that although he was a man of terrific, almost physical energy, combative, voracious, full of laughter, full of anger too, these qualities were accompanied in him by a deep passivity. It appeared superficially in how he delegated the editing of his work to others, how he never even looked at most of the last six years of it, how he gave away the bulk of his prints a year before his death without knowing what was coming. He insisted, as I’ve told you, on everything that photographs *couldn’t* say, on how limited they were, and he described photography as a “passive” medium, though he would say that he himself was aggressive, as photographers go. He would require that one see clearly how small one really was. If you could do this, and if you were fortunate, it could be liberating. He underwent an acute personal crisis in the fall of 1962 at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, when Americans feared for a week or so that their cities might be obliterated at any moment by a nuclear attack—and he wandered the streets in terror, without sleeping, feeling utterly helpless, almost as if he were already almost annihilated. Afterward, he felt himself to be unchained, and would hear in his own mind the injunction “*live your life*.” And he would find his way to a perception that was profound, and sat right at the heart of him—“You have to realize you’re nothing,” he said, “before you can be free.”
- 16 Working on Winogrand’s retrospective it was surprising to see how raw the feelings that surround him still are. Susan Kismaric and I interviewed people whose resentments—we’d thought—should have died thirty years ago. And among those who were close to the project, disagreements were felt painfully. And then, once the book was out and the show was up, the same critical arguments that had hounded Winogrand decades ago reappeared. Our pre-eminent newspaper, for example, said angrily that Winogrand was a nihilist who didn’t believe that photographs could change the world. (It’s true that he didn’t think so, in fact—though this hardly made him a nihilist). And where it was said long ago that his photographs were so formless and mechanical that a monkey with a camera could have made them, more or less the same thing was said again this last summer. It was said that he had no feeling and also that he had no form, and this led to the argument that he had no moral core, that he didn’t care what happened, to his nation, his contemporaries—to the rest of us. I think

all this gets Winogrand completely wrong—but the way these arguments come back from the deep again and again says that they’re responding to something actual.

- 17 Now I want to bring another point in here, I hope without overcomplicating things. Winogrand had strong defenders too, and the accusation that his work lacked form drew a response from some of them that has caused a certain kind of confusion. As I think you know, he was reluctant to talk about his motives or the meanings of his pictures, and strove to protect the ambiguity that’s at the heart of their poetry. Not long before his time, prominent photographers often described what they were doing in a terribly ponderous way. Eugene Smith said that he aimed, in his photographs, to persuade people to end war, and Edward Steichen said that he wanted to convey the essential nobility of humankind. If you asked Winogrand why *he* photographed, though, he’d only say that it was to find out what things looked like in photographs. And here again he was charged with being amoral—with not caring for what he photographed. It came to be said, widely, that he was mainly interested in form. He himself would speak of “photographic problems,” and the words “virtuoso” and “virtuosic” were often used to praise him, while the word “formalist” was attached to him derisively by his enemies, because in some places a formalist was seen to be a moral agnostic. It sometimes seems as if both his friends and his enemies wanted to bring him closer to Cartier-Bresson, and in fact a few years ago a photographer many of us admire, Josef Koudelka, told me that Winogrand was a photographer he couldn’t take seriously. That his pictures were a mess, shapeless, haphazard, mechanical, that he never edited them, that he didn’t have any good ones... No.—he had one good picture, his famous, intricately constructed photograph of the string of young women on a bench at the World’s Fair in 1965. This was the one picture, Koudelka said, that Cartier-Bresson would have liked.



World's Fair, New York, 1964.

© The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

- 18 Even today, Winogrand’s sympathizers often say that we should admire how well Winogrand manages his pictures, how he juggles so many balls so deftly. But as Mitch

Epstein, another photographer who was once a student of Winogrand's, said to me not long ago, the important thing is, "which ones *are* they?" Winogrand really is unusual in having left so scant a record of his intentions, and of what he thought he'd achieved. It's true that we have many recordings of him talking—but almost all of them speak about photography abstractly and generally, and I can't think of one where he is open about what he got back from his photographs, though he does say somewhere, disdainfully, *I don't sit around looking at them*. But there is one solitary document in which he was extraordinarily candid, and though it represents just one moment in time, that moment may well have been the most critical point in his career. This statement was deeply felt, heartbreaking, in fact, and he wrote it in the fall of 1963, not a year after the crisis of 1962, and his mental crisis, and only six weeks before the elder Kennedy was shot and the great unraveling of the 1960s really began. It was his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship that he won the next spring, and which he used to photograph around the United States for five months in 1964, making many of the pictures I've shown you, and many of the best ones that he ever made. Here's what he wrote:

I have been photographing the United States trying by investigating photographically to learn who we are and how we feel, but seeing what we look like as history has been and is happening to us in this world. Since World War II we have seen the spread of affluence, the move to the suburbs and the spreading of them, the massive shopping centers to serve them, cars for to and from. New schools, churches and banks. And the growing need of tranquillizer peace, missile races, H bombs for overkills, war and peace tensions, and bomb shelter security. Economic automation problems, and since the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools we have the acceleration of the civil liberties battle by Negroes.

I look at the pictures I have done up to now, and they make me feel that who we are and how we feel and what is to become of us just doesn't matter. Our aspirations and successes have been cheap and petty. I read the newspapers, the columnists, some books, I look at some magazines (our press). They all deal in illusions and fantasies. I can only conclude that we have lost ourselves, and that the bomb may finish the job permanently, and it just doesn't matter, we have not loved life.

I cannot accept my conclusions, and so I must continue this photographic investigation further and deeper. This is my project.



Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1957.

© The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

- 19 This photograph here—this was made in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1957, and it’s full of a sense of emergency blooming in the middle of the most ordinary day—though you can’t tell what’s just happened or what’s about to happen or what the danger is. It has something to do with the fragility of the children, with the looming clouds, the blown down tricycle and the vast desert. And of course with the light, which some people have called a “nuclear light”—and that expression doesn’t seem implausible to me. What *does* seem implausible to me is the idea that Winogrand, who served in the Air Force in 1946, who was an obsessive follower of the news, who was sometimes cruelly haunted by the fear of nuclear war, who would say (here’s his passivity again) that a nuclear war was inevitable—it seems implausible to me that he would *not* have known that a hundred miles down that range of blackish mountains was the site of the first atomic detonation, which had occurred just 12 years earlier. He was not that ignorant at *all*. And this picture—eighteen years later in Washington—I happened to be with Winogrand on the day he made it—the building here is the Watergate Hotel. This was in 1975, a year after Nixon had been destroyed by the Watergate scandal, and Winogrand said—we were driving around the city in my Volkswagen *I want you to take me to the Watergate Hotel. Why?* I said. *There’s nothing there.* Nixon had resigned a year before, of course, and the plot that ruined him had unfolded three or four years before that—but Winogrand insisted, so I dropped him off for an hour. In a superficial way I was right, because this photograph has nothing to do with the Watergate scandal. But he was right, of course, because the place was full of ghosts, and he had known that it would be. A few years after that he was talking about himself one time, talking as he was walking and photographing, as he often did. And he said “You can say that I’m a student of photography, and I am! But really I’m a student of America.”
- 20 So what did Winogrand see in this country? What America *did* he discover? Here’s how I described it in the recent Winogrand book.

The America of which Winogrand was a student was not Washington's or Jefferson's nation of gentlemanly virtue or idealistic experiment, nor Evans's nation of perpetual striving, either—it was the country of which Norman Mailer wrote that it “had always been wild. It had always been harsh and hard, it had always had a fever.” This was the republic of boom and bust, whose freedoms have given birth to the hard sell, the hail mary, the big payback, the million dollar ass, and I've got mine, which shine right out—from the pictures we've just seen. It is somewhat misleading, actually, to call Winogrand a photographer of the street. He was really a photographer of what he recognized in the street—of people, for example, in whom you might find traces of a hunger and a fury that seem to run way back—back even to America's time of founding, if you let your imagination go. And if you do, the price of American life shows forth, as it is reckoned in measures of humiliation, gimcrack, pettiness, solitude, and insanity. In that republic, you made your bets and held on as hard as you could, and one can feel that this was so in the intensity with which Winogrand clung to the members of his family, in the sprawl of his work, and in the fierceness with which he pursued it. Where Mailer went on to say, though, that America, “once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, [was] now a beauty with leprous skin,” Winogrand's work is less ready to suggest that things were better once. Winogrand too was interested in screaming ambition and frightful failure, but less as evidence against the American way of living than for how each was woven into the other, as they are in the woman here, whose yearning to be lovely has taken so many wrong turns. He had a longer, more tragic view; the emotion that lives on in his work is not revulsion but a mixture, perhaps, of amazement, affection, and sorrow. (54)

- 21 To say these things is not to say that Winogrand's work lacks joy. It's full of joy, just as it's full of despair. Nor is the point merely that each is present beside the other, either—no, the work is more complicated than that. There is a very special trick in it: the despair makes the joy believable, while the joy makes the despair bearable. From picture to picture, the ratio of each to the other keeps readjusting (until Winogrand's last few years, when the balance seems to go more and more toward the black) but the ratio between joy and despair isn't where the photograph stops either. There's still more, and here I have to back up for just a second—What did Winogrand say in 1963?—*I can only conclude that we have lost ourselves, and that the bomb may finish the job permanently, and it just doesn't matter, we have not loved life.* Here are four powerful, dramatic statements, one after another—“we've lost ourselves,” “the bomb,” “it just doesn't matter,” and “we have not loved life”—but no less important is the whispered coda that you get in the two sentences right after, the last ones—*I cannot accept my conclusions, and so I must continue this photographic investigation further and deeper. This is my project.* What is he saying? That he cannot tolerate his own despair! That he's going to follow his way out through photography until it brings him to some sort of amelioration, some kind of—let's say—redemption, some kind of light. And so, where did it bring him? Where did he come to?...



Los Angeles, 1969.

© The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

- 22 Here is one of his most famous, marvellous photographs, from six years later, 1969, great ghastly LA, the corner of Hollywood and Vine. This is one of the very few pictures of his about which Winogrand would say anything, and several people remember him asking rhetorically, *Do you know what's the great thing about that picture?* and after you hesitated to answer or answered wrong, or even if you answered right, he'd say *It's the light! Look at the light!* In one way this seemed like a bad joke. But in another it went very far.
- 23 Here come these three shapely girls, stepping carefully down the sidewalk with its jagged stars. Are they beautiful?—They're sexy enough, anyway, and it's as if they're riding on a wave of light, jackhammer light that's both magnificent and crushing. If you've spent any time in LA, you may remember it—that desert light that's sweet and golden for a few minutes right after sunrise, and which then grows rapidly stronger, until it breaks down the door, so that you have to cover your eyes or hurry into the shade. The photograph comes at just the moment when the three girls, descending out of a galaxy of light, notice the young cripple in the wheelchair on the left, who lives in a double darkness, who can never go where they come from, whose head slumps to the point where he can't even see them, where he'll never even know what he cannot have. Do the girls make any gesture toward him? Of course not, because there's nothing they can do for him, because the barrier between their world and his is absolute, and they know it as surely as he does. It's the light that tells you how far, far off they are from him, even though they're right there.—But the light does another thing too. It's also the light of recognition—the light of the moment in which the person watching this brutal yet completely trivial event comprehends it, comes into an awareness that lasts only for a moment, preceded by darkness, to be swallowed again by darkness.
- 24 I've come to feel that the redemption to which Winogrand found his way in his work is a cold one. Whether it comforts you or not depends on what you seek, but the work won't tell you that a better day is coming, or that America is a wonderful country, or

that people are innately good, or good at all, or bad, for that matter, or that the world is an orderly place. To a great degree, the world's a riot, where passions flare wildly in a moment, and of which you can only see a corner, and only for a fraction of a second anyway. Yet he does promise you one thing, which is that you can be conscious. You have a chance of that, of seeing what and where you are with vivid—sometimes awful—clarity, and in the work, the fact that every perception is so incomplete helps to assert that it is genuine.

- 25 It should be possible to say that to be conscious is an end in itself, and to have to say no more, but to wake up always involves a struggle, and one popular strand in our avant-garde arts has long held that there is no such thing as being conscious. It's practically a cliché now, especially in the visual arts, to hold that people are dupes, slaves of their own materialism and the advertising and propaganda that fuel it, which would seem to be inexhaustible targets of mockery. Yet for all that he was a skeptic, nothing in Winogrand points toward this kind of cynicism. His work says that it is possible for you to wake up, that it is possible for you to be free, and in this it offers you the opposite of nihilism. And if it puts itself to the most strenuous kinds of test, that makes it so much more positive. Remember what I said earlier?—that I met Winogrand at a time of great disillusion, and that his work itself had seemed to grow in that climate. I don't think that back then, when I was 20 years old, I would have been able to explain his work as I've just done, perhaps not even to say that it was so strenuously affirmative, but I must have felt it, and this must be why I felt that he was so important.

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