Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand at Century's End

by A. D. Coleman

The "New Documents" exhibition opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art on February 28, 1967, almost exactly a third of a century ago. Organized by John Szarkowski for the museum's Department of Photography, this show featured almost 100 prints by three relatively unrecognized younger photographers from the east coast of the U.S. — Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand — and came as a watershed moment in the evolution of contemporary photography.[1]

What exactly did this exhibition signify?

MoMA's Department of Photography was at that point one of the few departments devoted to that medium in any art museum in the world, and inarguably the most powerful of all. Its director, John Szarkowski, installed in 1963, had by then fulfilled all the curatorial commitments of his predecessor Edward Steichen and had begun to mount shows that he'd conceived and organized himself. Shortly after he'd assumed what Christopher Phillips has called "the judgment seat of photography,"[2] he'd offered what numerous people in the field took as a full-blown theory of photography, enunciated in the 1964 exhibition "The Photographer's Eye" and the subsequent book version thereof.[3] That exhibit included not just prints by recognized photographers — Edward Weston, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan — but also imagery by lesser-known and even anonymous picture-makers, vernacular studio and press photography, even examples of what we might now call naïf photography.

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[1] The three had appeared together at that venue once before — in the 1965 "Recent Acquisitions" show curated by Szarkowski. For more on this see Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 234.

[2] Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October* 22 (Fall 1982), pp. 27-63.

[3] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art,1966). The exhibition version ran at MoMA from May 27-August 23rd, 1964. Subsequently it traveled.

The theoretical underpinning of this selection of pictures represented in large part a photographic version of high-modernist formalism as it had evolved in the critical writings of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and others who'd been coming to terms for some years with the Abstract Expressionist painters and sculptors. But no one had offered a photography-specific menu thereof as lucidly and engagingly written as Szarkowski's. Unlike those two theorists, however, Szarkowski leavened the high-art assumptions that served as his ground note with an egalitarianism suggesting that anyone, anywhere, at any moment, could (even accidentally!) make a great photograph worthy of preservation and study and placement alongside masterworks by those who'd devoted lifetimes to the medium. This located Szarkowski somewhere between Pop Art's embrace of funky everyday culture and the rigors of the Ab-Ex address to the blank canvas in search of the white whale.

Photography had not until then enjoyed a steady supply of what the philosopher of science Thomas S. Kuhn would shortly identify as *paradigms*: magnetically charged new models of thought.[4] *The Photographer’s Eye* provided not just a thought experiment about how to analyze lens-derived still images but a paradigm, a persuasive hypothesis about the bases and functions of photography and photographs, a foundation on which to explore systematically the making of them: in short, a theory that suggested provocative possibilities for practice, including a set of experiments to test its hypotheses, an instrumentation, and even a methodology.[5]

What would an extensive oeuvre look like that its maker built, either consciously or intuitively, on those carefully articulated grounds? To answer that question,

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[4] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[5] The book version of *The Photographer's Eye* quickly became one of the fundamental teaching texts in the rapidly expanding pedagogy of photography on the college level.

Szarkowski shortly thereafter turned to the work of three younger members of what historians would later identify as the "New York School" of photography,[6] bringing them together under the "New Documents" rubric: Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand. All were under the age of 40; and, though they'd each received at least one Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, none had yet come to any public prominence. MoMA's 1967 sponsorship of their work in this show made the careers of all three individually[7] while simultaneously associating them with each other indelibly and in perpetuity; meanwhile, the collective statement that emerged from their work in aggregate fell like a bombshell on the world of photography.[8] Szarkowski ambitiously sought with it to reconfigure the very way in which photographs were understood, and to suggest thereby something about how the actual making of them could be redirected.

What did these three photographers, buttressed by Szarkowski's theorizing, have in common as practitioners — what paradigm did they constitute? And what drew other practitioners to these ideas?

Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand all worked exclusively in black & white and used small- to medium-format cameras — 35-mm. for Friedlander and Winogrand, 2-1/4-inch twins-lens reflex for Arbus. These are comparatively small, quiet instruments, ideal for unobtrusive sketching in the relatively dense social situations they all favored, light enough to be hand-held — this permitting them quicker responsiveness to facial expressions, body language, and configurations of people and other objects in motion.

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[6] See Jane Livingston, *The New York School: Photographs 1936-1963* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1972).

[7] It also effectively turned them into house brands at the museum. All three remained deeply identified with MoMA throughout their careers and — in the cases of Arbus and Winogrand — after their deaths.

[8] Two concurrent traveling shows, both with catalogues, explored the same territory in different ways: curator Nathan Lyons's "Toward a Social Landscape" at the George Eastman House, which opened on December 16,1966, and ran through February 20, 1967, and curator Thomas H. Garver's “12 Photographers of the American Social Landscape,” whose debut took place from January 9-February 12,1967 at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. Most historians of the period tend to discuss all three exhibitions in tandem — e.g., Gerry Badger, "From Humanism to Formalism: Thoughts on Post-war American Photography," in Peter Turner, ed., *American Images: Photography 1945-1980* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 17-18, and Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 106. A full discussion of the "New Documents" show and its impact requires further consideration of the interaction between these three surveys.

So these camera systems facilitated impulsive, rapid reactivity to nuances and details, along with a fluid, gestural-drawing methodology. The consequent camera-handling strategies, and the gritty, off-kilter imagery that often resulted therefrom, built on the example of older members of the "New York School," especially Robert Frank. They required an unprecedented acceptance of chance elements on every level of the photographic process; often, working in this fashion, one didn't know what one had netted with the lens until scrutinizing the developed film. Increasingly asymmetrical, unbalanced, fragmented, even messy, especially in contrast to the photography that had preceded it, this work demanded of both photographer and viewer an openness to radically unconventional formal structures.

For their raw subject matter this trio, and their counterparts in their cohort,[9] favored the urban/suburban milieu of U.S. car culture in the Vietnam War era. They sometimes photographed in private spaces, and occasionally in rural areas, but most often in interior and exterior public spaces: offices, lobbies, airports, restaurants, buses and subways, but especially the streets of towns and cities across the country — what had just been named the "social landscape."[10]

The resulting imagery emanated an aura of authenticity reminiscent of *cinema verité*, augmented with a tone of hip cynicism and *épater le bourgeois*, combined with a fascination with public behavior in general, an acceptance of the bizarre and grotesque and marginalized, and a distinct hint of cultural criticism — though nothing approximating a social critique emerges from the work of any one of them, nor from their collective output. Indeed, the theory itself, as outlined by Szarkowski, like formalist theory in general, insists that serious contemporary creative photographic image-making has no compatibility whatsoever with such a political, polemical motive. Here's how Szarkowski described the tendency he chose Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand to represent in his wall label for "New Documents":

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[9] Those included in the two other concurrent survey shows mentioned in note 7, above, for example.

[10] Thomas H. Garver credits the term to Lee Friedlander; his source for the phrase is a quote in a brief biographical note about Friedlander accompanying a portfolio of reproductions in *Contemporary Photographer*, Vol. IV, no. 4 (Fall 1963), 15. See Garver, “Acknowledgments” in the catalogue *12 Photographers of the American Social Landscape* (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1967), unp.

"Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago, when the label was new, made their pictures in the service of a social cause. It was their aim to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right.

"In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward 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. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value — no less precious for being irrational. . . ."[11]

This non-political, anti-theoretical posture denies categorically and consistently that such photographs are in any way about their literal subject matter, insisting instead that photographs are entirely about themselves and in no way concerned with either the photographer's inner life or whatever took place in front of the lens at the moment of exposure. As a stance, it became not just widespread but almost mandatory among practitioners of this genre of photography.

That's a particularly problematic position to defend in regard to photographers whose work primarily involves not just the human presence but intricate social interactions in the complex environment of the modern city — the polity at work and at play in the polis. Not to put too fine a point on it, formalists have generally (and, in my opinion, wisely) eschewed, say, portraits of recognizably interracial couples carrying chimpanzees fully dressed in children's clothing in their arms in a crowded zoo,[12] on the reasonable grounds that such subject matter carries so much cultural baggage as to overwhelm whatever formalist inquiry any resulting image might encode.

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[11] Undated, unnumbered one-page typescript on MoMA letterhead, from the archives of MoMA.

Yet one could also argue — as did Szarkowski in many of his writings, and, albeit gnomically, Winogrand himself[13] — that this constituted the most extreme pushing of the envelope, a walking of the razor's edge in which one constantly confronted formalist purpose as content with the risk of falling into the trap of the denotations and connotations of the imagery's contents, its literal subject matter. The work was to be understood as a mix of formal play with neutral (if ironic), apolitical observation of human social behavior, something like Stendhal's "mirror held up along a highway" with attitude.

Many, myself included, have profound disagreements with this posture and the theory on which it relies.[14] Be that as it may, as Gerry Badger points out, "It says much for both the perception of Szarkowski, and the awesome extent of his influence at MoMA, that this trio represents the three figures accepted as the most dominant of the sixties."[15] In effect, to paraphrase the name of a hip 1950s vocal group, when "New Documents" opened in early 1967 Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand became the "Two Jacks and a Jill" of photography, their distinctive voices playing counterpoint to each other, together forever.[16]

What's even more important here is that this first public association of the work of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand proved so germinal that from the paradigm it embodied there sprang a school of photography that proved vital and energized at least through the early eighties. That paradigm still has countless serious practitioners; moreover, it has influenced many workers in other forms of photography, and, even in our current phase of post-paradigm confusion, it refuses to roll over and play dead.

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[12] The reference here is to a famous Winogrand image, "Central Park Zoo, New York City, 1967."

[13] For Winogrand's version of this pronouncement, see Dennis Longwell, "Monkeys Make the Problem More Difficult: A Collective Interview with Garry Winogrand," in Peninah Petruck, ed., *The Camera Viewed: Writings on Twentieth-Century Photography, Vol. II* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979, pp. 118-128.

[14] See, for example, my essay "At Modern, Winogrand 'Unedited'" in the *New York Observer* , Vol. 2, no. 28 (Aug 1, 1988), p. 10.

[15] Turner, op. cit., p. 18.

[16] For Arbus's own ambivalent responses to participation in that show, see Bostworth, pp. 239-41, 245-49.

Because it's the question underlying this selection of work from the 1960s through the early 1980s from the Ralph M. Parsons Collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Los Angeles, one must ask: What does this work mean to us now? Is it merely an historic artifact, a fascinating but exhausted relic of the photographic energies of the sixties and seventies? Does it remain resonant? Does it offer to the future something for further consideration?

One of the reasons that Kuhn disowned the application of his model to a field such as ours is that in art old paradigms never die; instead, they undergo a conversion process that turns them from belief system into style. Though as a paradigm it drew a large and devoted cluster of adherents, the "new documentary" Szarkowski identified, with its presumably "more personal ends," didn't demolish or permanently impeach or even put much a dent in the preceding form, which — taking a cue from the 1990s mitosis of the soft drink Coca-Cola — we might call "classic documentary." Indeed, certifiably at this very moment we have more photography projects worldwide premised unabashedly on the classic documentary paradigm than ever before.

But a number of other, more recent projects that, on the whole, I'd classify as classic documentary in terms of the purpose Szarkowski ascribed to them ("to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right") have since the late sixties come to us evidencing the influence of the "new documentary" approach. The work of Gilles Peress, James Nachtwey, Susan Meiselas, Eugene Richards, Alex Webb, Bastienne Schmidt, Larry Fink, Raghubir Singh, Donna Ferrato, Nick Waplington, and a horde of other young to mid-career documentarians and photojournalists clearly reflects their close study and absorption of the camera-handling and image-construction techniques of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand. In effect, they've reversed the challenge, looking for ways to construct pictures as complex as the issues they address without falling into the traps of formalism. So the formal and stylistic experiments represented by the work of Friedlander and Winogrand have in fact permeated the field and even seeped into the public's idea of photographic practice, to such an extent that nowadays one even finds front-page photos in newspapers and advertising images in magazines replete with those trademark mannerisms.

Moreover, some of these same photographers, and more than a few others — Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham, Larry Clark, Arlene Gottfried, Steve Hart, to name a handful — not only utilize pictorial strategies straight out of the "new documentary" approach but make their own presence at the scene manifest in the photographic work and/or its accompanying text, both as an autobiographical element and as an acknowledgment of what a physicist would call their inevitable "perturbation" of the situations they seek to describe. That tendency found its way into the work of the "new documentary" approach in several forms: the anxious energy that radiates from so much of Arbus's work, her palpable awe, admiration, fear, or disdain for her subjects, her in-your-face proximity to many of them; Winogrand's grab-shooting, mosh-pit immersion in the crush and flow of the crowded streets; Friedlander's own shadow and reflection as elements either central or incidental in image after image, plus his direct self-portraits. Drawing on the work of all three, but especially that of Arbus, the personalization of the documentary mode is widespread today.

Hence we can say that, collectively, Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand revised the ways in which photographers used their cameras, which changed the look of the resulting photographs, and that they made the photographer's participatory role in the photographic event a foregrounded given, which transformed both the behavior of photographers and the way we interpret their work.

But what of of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand individually? What do we make of their work today, and what future does it have in the century to come?

Diane Arbus's death by her own hand in 1971 abruptly and prematurely truncated her address to the set of questions implicit in the "new documentary" paradigm. From the record, we know that up until then she'd redacted her output stringently; during her lifetime, aside from her commissioned work, she'd exhibited and published far fewer than 100 images. Yet, almost three decades after her death, the scholarship devoted to her work has not even attempted to identify that group of images she herself approved for public presentation. Instead, from her posthumous restrospective[17] to the most recent book of her work, *Untitled*, a selection from her final unfinished project,[18] various figures in the field have actively inflated the small set of images to which she committed herself fully, adding to them pictures she'd never endorsed for exhibition or publication. This has seriously confused the criticism of her work, and will continue to do so until it's rectified by rigorous research.

With all that said, we must also recognize that what at least two generations of photographers have taken from Arbus include the example of a photographer (perhaps especially a woman photographer) willing to engage with what set her trembling — whether out of glee, out of reverence, or out of revulsion — and to confront those she perceived as radically Other. Her work is not infrequently characterized as a reverse sideshow, with "normal" people presented as freaks and abnormal people as heroes. If that's the case, then one must also recognize that she anticipated an important cultural evolution: where the physically abnormal and differently abled were then subjected to systematic neglect and abuse, and consequently often chose to hide from the world, we now have Danny DeVito as a major movie star, a long-running TV show featuring a boy with Down's syndrome, the Special Olympics, closed-caption television for the hearing-impaired, increasing wheelchair accessibility everywhere, and the People with Disabilities Act. I interpret all of these as signalling a change for the better in our culture's relationship to those once considered problematically different, and though I don't attribute all of that to Arbus I do think that with her work, which reached the widest audience achieved by any of those under discussion here, she contributed notably to that shift.

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[17] Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel, eds., *Diane Arbus* (Millerton and New York: Aperture/Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

[18] Diane Arbus, *Untitled* (New York: Aperture, 1995). For my critique of this project, see Coleman, "Why I'm Saying No To This New Arbus Book," *New York Observer*, Vol. 9, no. 37, October 2, 1995, p. 25.

Her picture-making strategies as such were more conventional that Friedlander's or Winogrand's, so we have fewer photographers who reveal her stylistic influence. But one can find traces of her spirit in the work of photographers as different from each other as Nan Goldin, Larry Fink, Susan Lipper, and Joel-Peter Witkin, and it seems likely that the permission that's implicit in her work — to pursue whatever one considers to constitute the forbidden — will remain her most enduring legacy.

If, within this troika, subject matter and content are most closely allied in Arbus's work, they're most widely separated in Lee Friedlander's. He's the one who's ranged furthest afield in that regard — producing extended suites of images of everything from public monuments to jazz musicians, including portraits, self-portraits, nudes, floral studies, street scenes, industrial scenes, and desert landscapes. He's also produced by far the most tightly redacted oeuvre — editing and sequencing all of his monographs himself.

Friedlander, much more than his two partners in this paradigm, seems genuinely detached from his nominal subject matter, concerned principally with picture-making problems and strategies. People in public, generic statuary, nude women, and cacti appear as relatively arbitrary and, indeed, interchangeable raw material in his process; what he has to say about them as such seems almost irrelevant, and one would not turn to any of his interpretations thereof for information regarding those subjects. Instead, they function in his work as a variety of game boards, the premises for thoughtful, calculated, highly intellectualized play with the possibilities of photographic image construction. He's treated his various projects as carefully considered building blocks; the result is among the most precisely constructed oeuvres of his generation of photographers. It's from that example, and from his sense of image-making as a form of gamesmanship, and of course from the elegance and dry wit of his specific formal solutions to particular imagistic problems, that photographers will continue to draw lessons for the foreseeable future.

Garry Winogrand's version of the project, by all accounts (even that of his staunchest supporter, John Szarkowski[19]), simply fizzled out in the decade before his death, terminating in increasingly random, voracious, compulsive and non-productive shooting. Of all the members of this triumvirate, he alone manifested no real concern with the process of redacting his own work, preferring instead to generate an endless stream of negatives. The vast, undifferentiated heap of images he left behind thus stands as a cautionary tale for photographers tempted to go down that same path, while posing a vast and probably insoluble conundrum for criticism and scholarship.[20] In some ways, then, he represents the collapse of the paradigm, or at least one ultimately failed experiment therein.

Yet, even though extracted from his output by others, the two best of those books — *The Animals* (1969) and *Public Relations* (1977) — and numerous other individual images retain their compressed, coiled power, as well as their lyricism, their exuberance, their frequent manic energy, and (whether he recognized and admitted it or not) their deflationary, caustic, and often cruel wit. Of these three photographers, Winogrand most insistently walked the presumed fence between formal innovation and social commentary. He refused adamantly to speak of the latter; nonetheless, the tension between these two ways of reading his pictures constitutes the undeniable central energy source of the later ones, and even the early work — up through *The Animals*, at least — cannot disguise its constant attention to the human condition.

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[19] John Szarkowski, *Figments from the Real World* (New York: Museum of Modern Art,1988). See also Ben Lifson, ed.,*The Man in the Crowd: The Uneasy Streets of Garry Winogrand* (San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 1999).

[20] For more on this, see "On Redaction: Heaps and Wholes, or, Who Empties the Circular File?" in A. D. Coleman, *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media and Lens Culture* (University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 25-34.

And, finally, what of the form itself — small-camera street photography addressing the "social landscape"? First, let's remind ourselves that photographers have worked in the streets from the medium's very beginnings, so neither the street as proscenium nor the questions it evokes came bundled with the "new documentary"; they existed as challenges for photographers before that moment in 1967, and will persist long after that form's impact has been fully absorbed.[21] Lauren Greenfield, Bruce Gilden, Sylvia Plachy, Jeff Mermelstein, Amy Arbus (Diane's younger daughter, now a photographer in her own right), Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and hundreds more around the world continue to use the street — broadly defined — as their source of found, surreal theater. So long as streets exist, and laws don't prohibit photographers from working there, variations of this genre will proliferate.

At the moment, however, it's out of fashion. Postmodern theory has proposed that all the questions that thoughtful photographers had begun to ask in the late 1950s and early 1960s — about the non-neutrality of photography, about lens-based observation and photographic seeing, about the tension in a photograph between its transcriptive, descriptive, translative, and interpretive aspects — were insignificant, and had in any case been answered satisfactorily. T'ain't so, methinks. Those questions endure, still open, and such answers as we have for them — in the work of of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand, among many others, along with the theories of Szarkowski and some of his successors — remain provisional, as perhaps they always will.

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[21] For a deeply flawed but still valuable history of the genre, including extended discussions of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand, see Joel Meyerowitz, with Colin Westerbeck, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1994).

Now that, in effect, all of those individuals have gained admission to the pantheon and all the results of their theory and practice have entered the canon, we stand poised at a particular moment of stasis: the pause between several generations that grew up with this work and its makers as living entities and those generations now to come, who will treat them as a distinct chapter in the medium's history and exemplars of an established tradition to either draw from or ignore. What they had to say to the last third of the twentieth century is in any case indelibly inscribed on the record. Let's see what the next century makes of them.

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