

## Shifting Perception: Photographing Disabled People During the Civil Rights Era

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**Abstract:** During the American Civil Rights Era, photographic perception of disabled people shifted from constructs that empowered the abled “normal” to an empathetic awareness of social isolation and enfreakment. Through rhetorics of the stare, photographers demonstrated increased cognizance of what it meant to be an “other” in a society that valued homogeneity.

**Key Words:** art history, enfreakment, “other”

As civil rights garnered the attention of many in post-World War II America, notable photographers began to alter their visual rhetoric to embrace a more synesthetic view of disabled people. The resulting photographs addressed the social implications of what it meant to be perceived as different in a Cold War society that encouraged uniformity.

Although homogeneity was less a reality than a corporate-promoted and politically expedient perception, photographic representation in the years immediately following the war often embraced a widely accepted notion of what was considered normal. This exclusive, imagined community was comprised of able-bodied Caucasians who were financially secure and grateful for what their country had to offer. They were also accepting of, and comfortable with, their status in society. Those outside the norm, the “other,” were portrayed in ways that depended upon this imagined community’s predetermined conceptions or stereotypes. As the Civil Rights Era progressed, however, photographers began to bring awareness to the diminished status that had been attached to those considered outside this narrowly focused viewpoint based upon “normalcy.” Primarily through the visual rhetoric of the stare, these photographers drew attention to social isolation and enfreakment of disabled people, rejecting traditional representations that had relied upon a psychological empowerment of the abled.

### Normalizing the “Other”

Concern for the personal experience of the “other” in American photography revealed itself in many ways during the Civil Rights Era as awareness of individual perception increased and stereotyped viewpoints of those outside the corporate-promoted mainstream began to fall away. As American studies scholar James Guimond has demonstrated, the magazines *Life* and *Look*, by far the most prolific venues for photography in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, had blurred the lines between a mass consumer-oriented identity, conveyed largely through advertisements, and reality, thus contributing to a utopian vision of American life (Guimond, 1991). Referred to by sociologist Michael Schudson as “Capitalist Realism,” this national character was portrayed as eternally optimistic and homogenous and although it recognized the “other,” those outside of this imagined ideal community, it did so with a sense of benevolence, which largely avoided scenes of distinctive reality that might shock the viewer away from consumerist escapism (Schudson, 1984). Consider, for example, a goodwill advertisement from the summer of 1961 in *Life* magazine entitled “Dorothea Bendik keeps house for four from a wheel chair” (Dorothea Bendik, 1961, p. 8). Here a woman identified as having multiple sclerosis is portrayed seated at a dinner table within a meticulously kept middle-class home. Despite her disability, a sense of

“normalcy” pervades the image. The implication is that through the benevolence of the General Electric Company, which has provided a specially designed room, her “otherness” has been removed and she has joined the ideal community. She tosses a salad while her husband carves a rather large ham, and their son looks on with anticipation. The framed photograph of Notre Dame Cathedral in the background implies that they are at least familiar with a broader culture. The comfortable lifestyle that capitalism provides is apparent throughout. She has been absorbed into the corporate-promoted mainstream of American society. The only reference to her status as “other” is in the presence of a portion of the wheelchair visible in the lower left of the photograph.

A more poignant and provocative representation of the “other,” in this case an African American, can be seen in Elliott Erwitt’s *Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* from 1950 (fig. 1). Here the effectiveness of the image relies not upon absorption of the “other” into the “normal,” as in the image of Dorothea Bendik, but upon the normal viewer’s projection of stereotyped preconceptions onto the subject. An African American child smiles delightfully at the camera as he points a toy gun to his head in a gesture of mock suicide or perhaps Russian roulette. He stands directly in front of a tree, behind which is an inclined brick street so common in the surrounding ethnic neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. His clothes are outsized, perhaps hand-me-downs, and they fit loosely on his body as his shirt sleeves are rolled and his pants held up by suspenders. Paradoxically, the image is successful in that it presents a droll view of a child at play while inviting further contemplation concerning the collective plight of an oppressed minority. One might refer to the common reaction to this image as an uncomfortable amusement, a response often sought by Erwitt that plays upon our ability, based upon preconceptions, to, as he explained, laugh and cry alternately (Erwitt, 1988). This reaction is dependent upon a collective preconception of African Americans at the time, who were often depicted in popular media as enduring their oppression with humility and humor. Well-known popular examples of this abiding character are actress Hattie McDaniel’s Mammy from the film, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and the stereotypical roles portrayed by Dudley Dickerson on screen and television (Leff, 1999).

#### INSERT FIGURE 1

Erwitt’s image evokes mild shock while engendering sympathetic interest, as it embodies that distinct recognizable aspect of photographs that semiotician Roland Barthes has described as the “studium” (Barthes, 1981). Relying as it does on stereotyped preconceptions, however, Erwitt’s photograph is less dependent upon that second of Barthes’ photographic essentialities, the “punctum,” which is an element to which an individual viewer may relate personally. It lacks what art historian Erina Duganne has explored as intersubjectivity, a complex weave of photography, subject and viewer (Duganne, 2010). Erwitt’s image depends upon a common perception from a particularly narrow point of view. It is presented as a “fait accompli” in that it answers its own questions.

When Erwitt turned his camera to disabled people, he approached his subject with a similar expectation of the collective viewer’s perception of the “other.” In *Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* (fig. 2), also taken in 1950, he relies upon a common benevolent and colonial view of disabled people as remarkable individuals who overcome dissimilarity in pursuit of the

normal. By equating the central figure, walking with what appears to be a perfectly normal gait on truncated legs, which extend only to just above the knee, with a more commonly encountered “normal” man who has the use of complete legs and feet, and who with apparent ease carries the added burden of a child in his arms, Erwitte projects normality as a positive attainment, while strengthening the viewer’s own identity as “normal.” Mobility is reflected not only in the two walking figures who stand out sharply against the dark brick wall, but also in the aerodynamic lines and hood ornament of the front end of the automobile, which enters the scene from the right. Difference here is absorbed into the corporate myth of a homogenous American society, as the figure with disabilities becomes nearly indistinct from the everyday “normal,” thus reinforcing a desirable monolithic perfection. He fulfills what disabilities studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has referred to as the utopian fantasy of creating a perfect American society (Garland-Thomson, 2001, p. 364). Accepting the man with disabilities, who is clearly the exception rather than the rule, as “normal” however, depends upon his embodiment within a collective idea of normalcy. His activity is thus framed within a traditional inspirational “struggle and accomplishment” rhetoric associated with the “other” with disabilities, thereby making him palatable and, for the viewer, self-affirming (Biklen, 1987, p. 81). Both inspiring wonder and affirming a common perception of reality, the image embodies two of the four visual rhetorics identified by Garland-Thomson as stereotypical ways of portraying disabled people (Garland-Thomson, 2001). While it invites the viewer to identify with the reality of the man’s ordinary activity of walking, the photograph distinguishes him through the wondrous and extraordinary detail of his walking on truncated legs. Though this has the effect of bringing the man with disabilities into the “normal” world, it does so by reinforcing the ideal of the collective common. The desired attainment of a monolithic society has been achieved as the “other” with disabilities has been fixed and absorbed.

## INSERT FIGURE 2

Rejecting this façade of a desirable monolithic society, while questioning the diminished status projected upon the “other,” photographer Robert Frank presented an America in which he saw very little homogeneity and which celebrated diversity in a way that ran counter to reinforcing the corporate view presented in magazines and other media outlets. As a Swiss immigrant, he abandoned the dependence upon a collective viewpoint by introducing an objective aesthetic that defied any one stereotypical read. *Canal Street – New Orleans*, 1955, for example, captures on a purely visual basis a diverse and varied group of people as they pass by the photographer’s lens on a crowded city sidewalk. Cropped at mid-waist and captured largely in profile, young and old, multiracial, tall and short, carefully shorn heads of hair and middle-aged balding ones all merge together in this image that captures the rhythmic dance of urban dwellers as they weave their way through the crowd. Although he is enormously successful in conveying his perception of a society that is multifaceted, Frank presents the *other* as fact. His images generally lack the “haptic,” not in a traditional physical sense but in the expanded definition offered by cultural theorist Tina Campt as the way a photograph touches us in a synesthetic sense of extended associations of community and social relationships (Campt, 2012, pp. 43-45). One “sees” diversity in his photographs as one would see many different colors of fish in a fish tank; one does not “experience” it through one’s body by association, or for that matter through the bodies of those portrayed here. While Frank abandoned the stereotypical and

common apparent in Erwit's images, he also represented difference as ordinary – largely disregarding the experience of being an “other” in a society that values normality.

### Affirming Difference

As the Civil Rights Movement expanded and increasingly drew attention to the experience of what it meant to be an oppressed “other” within a society that strove for and projected a common normality, photographers began to alter their visual rhetoric to consider a more synesthetic view that addressed the social implications of being perceived as different, thereby provoking a perception beyond the narrowly focused common viewpoint of what is “normal.” As with the photographs we have examined, that provocation was predicated upon a viewer's preconceived notions; however, the preconception now emphasized individual experience rather than a collective commonality and stereotyped “other.” Affirming Barthes' contention that photographic poignancy is overwhelmingly brought by the viewer's previous experience, these images prompt understanding by relying upon sympathetic reactions (Barthes, 1981). Moreover, the increased reliance on individuality contributed to the viewer's further understanding of the limited value of framing the “other” within a broad stereotype identification.

In *Los Angeles*, 1969 by Garry Winogrand (fig. 3), the socially objectionable, and thereby salient, activity of staring demarcates the abled from disabled people. In the center of the image are positioned three conventionally attractive women who walk along Hollywood Boulevard toward the camera; the sidewalk stars from the Walk of Fame visible underneath their feet enhance the impression that they are indeed the ideal attainment in a society that values youthful conformity in physical appearance. Their healthy legs are emphasized both by the short, fashionable skirts that reveal them and the exaggerated shadows they cast in front of the women. The lead figure stares intently to her right at a man in a wheelchair. Unlike the three women, who walk easily within a sun-filled world, the disabled figure sits in shadow, slumped over in his chair, barely able to hold himself erect. The cup that sits between his legs for alms is in direct contrast to the bulging purse carried by the staring woman.

### INSERT FIGURE 3

Staring, as Garland-Thomson has pointed out, is an activity that contributes to a form of exclusion from an “imagined community” (Garland-Thomson, 2001). In this instance it also reinforces a societal hierarchy important to Winogrand's work in the 1960s, as it validates and enhances his emphasis on the young and conventionally attractive female as “normal” by contrasting her with an outsider, an “other.” Considered within this context, disability studies scholar David Hevey's contention that Winogrand contributes to the enfreakment of disabled people through an asymmetrical disharmony is significant as segregation from the ideal normal is certainly implied if not stated directly (Hevey, 1992). Embodied in this separation, however, is a street photography directness that contributes to our understanding of the individual experience of “being” the outsider, in this case disabled people, rather than relies upon stereotypical preconceptions—for as it distinguishes through staring, and through formal considerations such as dramatic lighting and composition, it also presents in a very poignant way social isolation, addressing what it means to be singled out as an “other.” Staring makes us

question, reconsider, and challenge our preconceived notions. It is, as Garland-Thomson considered, a form of empathetic communication through visual engagement that can also lead to understanding (Garland-Thomson, 2009).

A similar approach to segregation is apparent in Winogrand's *London* from 1967 (fig. 4). Less concerned with enhancing his view of female attractiveness through contrast, Winogrand here provides a more direct reference to social and physical isolation. As she crosses the street, a young woman wearing leg braces carefully steadies her crutches, shifting her weight from her legs to her arms with considerable effort. Her right hand desperately holds onto packages while grasping a crutch. The physical strain on her body is evident as she manipulates it across the street; her gait is awkward though calculated, intentional and deliberate. In contrast, the gait of those around her is rhythmic and graceful. They place one foot in front of the other without much thought as the posterior leg easily holds the weight of the body while projecting it forward. The fluidity of their walk is intuitive, so much so that their upper bodies give little indication of the remarkable accomplishment of their legs. One woman engages in animated conversation, raising her right arm and extending a finger as if to emphasize a point, while her left hand nimbly holds a handbag and child's jacket while gripping a small change purse between her fingers. To her right a woman listens attentively while holding the hand of a child who walks in unison with her. Following closely behind is another child. Both children walk forward without much thought as they stare off to their right at the woman using crutches. Their stares do not disrupt their progress forward as they continue to make their way across the street. The same can be said of the businessman and the porter behind the children, who also stare at the woman with disabilities. Amplified by the stare, the contrast between the woman with crutches and those around her is stunning.

#### INSERT FIGURE 4

As anyone with a disability can attest, staring is commonplace among children when confronted with an unrecognizable experience, and so Winogrand's capturing of such might not be considered unusual. His unique approach, however, embodies an enlightened view of the personal and social implications of the stare that moves beyond more traditional and acceptable forms of staring at disabled people. These conventional practices of staring often took the form of self-aggrandizing admiration, sentimentality or benevolence (Garland-Thomson, 2001). Winogrand's photograph belies these by conveying in very real terms the social isolation and separation that occurs when one lives as an "other."

#### Shifting Perception Through the Stare

Concern for the personal experience of the "other" became more prevalent in American society as perception shifted from a mass corporate-inspired perception of those considered outside the ideal community and therefore less than, toward a view of how the "other" experiences, and ultimately perceives, that perception. Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and John Howard Griffin's journalistic *Black Like Me* (1961) are just a few examples of noteworthy works that addressed the experience of being seen in terms of a collective "other" without regard to the feelings and complications attending the individual. Griffin, a white man of European descent who chemically altered his skin to appear African American, described his

visceral reaction to the “hate stare,” an indiscriminate superiority response he encountered among some whites based upon the color of his skin (Griffin, 2011/1961). In Ellison’s prologue, his main character, an African American, proclaims his frustration at being seen only through preconceptions, rendering his true identity invisible (Ellison, 1995/1952).

Ellison’s struggle to move beyond this invisibility through his writing, to get at the individual behind the predetermined meaning, is analogous to his interest, both metaphorically and in reality, in photography. As literary and visual culture scholar Sara Blair has suggested, Ellison was aware of the photograph’s tendency to substantiate popular myths and assumptions about African Americans (Blair, 2007). In addition to his own work in portraiture and commercial photography, Ellison collaborated with fellow African American photographer and writer Gordon Parks on a photojournalistic essay concerning the people in Harlem, writing out a shooting script for Parks that emphasized extreme angles to convey psychological dispossession (Jackson, 2002). Ironically, by his own admission, Ellison’s experience with the camera allowed him to hide his true identity while revealing that of the subject. In the single photograph we have extant from Ellison’s notes for *The Invisible Man*, however, invisibility is substantiated through an implied stare. Lying on the pavement is an anonymous middle-aged woman; she is immobile, presumably unconscious, but her situation is not known to us. It is a cold day, judging from her winter clothing and that of the surrounding figures. Her weathered face has a peaceful expression on it, as though she were sleeping. Her left arm is raised to hold the collar of her coat close to her body to keep warm. We see only the upper portion of her body, jutting in from the right side of the photograph. On either side of her, two officers stand passively. The viewer sees only the lower half of the legs of one and the arm and coat of the other, but through the position of their bodies, their unseeing gaze is implied.

Within the realm of disability, the most poignant reflection on what it means to be an “other” was psychologist Beatrice A. Wright’s *Physical Disability – A Psychological Approach* (1960), where she presented a detailed clinical analysis of how disabled people respond to being stared at and other manifestations related to the distinct experience of *being* outside the ordinary. Her intention – to aid in the socio-psychological rehabilitation of disabled people – is noteworthy because of its focus on the perception of those on the receiving end of the real and metaphorical stare and subsequent social isolation. She also pointed out the unique problems encountered by disabled people that differ from those experienced by other minority groups, including the lack of a shared community and subsequent feelings of inferiority that can lead to disabled people idolizing the so-called “normal” (Wright, 1960).

The discussion concerning how “others” perceive a narrowly defined, predetermined perception of them is particularly relevant to the photograph, because the reaction to the image is dependent upon the viewer’s previous experience. As philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre noted, objects in a photograph only become meaningful signs when the mind transforms them into representative matter; thus comprehension of an image is based upon none other than past comprehensions (Sartre, 2004/1940). As Barthes reiterated in *Camera Lucida*, the reaction to a photograph is overwhelmingly brought by the viewer (Barthes, 1981). Succinctly put, when one encounters a photograph one searches for a reference point within one’s realm of experience in order to give it meaning. This activity is heightened by the photograph’s inherent verity, or at

least the belief (less so now but still true) that a photograph captures a moment and holds it still against time, catalogs it for future use.

Reading images of disabled people presents a particular conundrum for the average viewer because reference points, that from which one determines meaning, are often outside the realm of bodily experience from which, as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty posited, one derives one's view of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1945). As we have seen, previous images of "others" provided that reference by alluding to a collective, and often stereotypical, viewpoint. Capturing the stare, however, replaces that collective view with a more personal and individualistic bodily experience, one of a prolonged search for a reference point that is largely missing from past comprehensions. In Winogrand's *Los Angeles* (fig. 3), the stare was effective in conveying this search but couched within conventions of beauty and abnormality. Capturing the staring of children in *London* (fig. 4) evokes a certain innocence that we can associate with our own lack of reference because children have less bodily experience from which to draw meaning. Conversely, or one might even say perversely, a photograph of disabled people and accompanying stare, however socially unacceptable, provides a reference point that enhances our understanding of the experience of being the object of the stare – the "other."

Photographs provide the means for a socially acceptable form of staring – one may look at a photograph intently, searching for meaning, without social consequences. Diane Arbus, in her straightforward photographs of people, not only provoked the stare, but aggressively invited its continuation through a prolonged search for meaning. In *Woman with Bangs, N.Y.C.* (1961), for example, Arbus captured what upon first glance would be considered a quite "normal" person within the recognizable realm of bodily experience. She is dressed for her own comfort, warmly in clothes that are suitable for walking in cold weather. But she is also dressed for someone else, for others in society who might see her. She wears a hat that serves no practical purpose, and her collar is open to reveal a string of beads that serves as cultural decoration along with her blouse, suit and large button. Her purse is haute couture, or at least a knock-off that resembles such, and it dangles from her left gloved hand, which also holds a change purse and the glove from her bare right hand that holds a lit cigarette between two fingers. All of these signs are comprehended because they are within the viewer's realm of bodily experience, and thus reference points are provided. The viewer presumably has experienced cold and subsequent attempts to stay warm and recognizes, therefore, coats and gloves. One also experiences the need to carry things and has seen bags that are as much about fashion as they are about utility. The viewer, particularly in 1961, would have experienced the burning embers and smell of a lit cigarette. These are all mildly interesting and provide what Barthes would refer to as the "studium" – a collection of easily recognizable data. What makes Arbus's photograph so intriguing, however, is that she does not leave the viewer there. She seeks a prolonged stare by inviting interpretation beyond the commonplace and perhaps beyond the viewer's realm of reference. She accomplishes this through a confrontational approach where the woman stares at the camera and, by extension, the viewer. The viewer stares back. The uncomfortable feeling of the activity were it to happen in reality is mediated by the photographic process—on the part of the woman, the camera itself and on the part of the viewer, the photograph. In addition, the intense and prolonged stare is encouraged by the title, which directs the viewer to the woman's short bangs and from there an awareness of the heavy makeup and overt attempt at symmetry to cover up the lines of experience that derive from a life lived.

When Arbus turned her lens to disabled people, to those clearly labeled as “other,” she often did so by contextualizing the unusual within the ordinary and relating it to the viewer with the visual rhetorical device of the stare. In *Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents in the Bronx, NY* (1970) Arbus placed Eddie Carmel, a man whose condition of acromegaly led to his unusually large size, leaning on a cane and stooping in his apartment next to his parents, who stare up in what appears to be amazement and wonder at their oversized son (Millett-Gallant, 2010). Nothing within the image seems out of the ordinary, except the large man who is the object of his parents’ stare. In fact, the setting and the mother and father are, one might say, remarkably ordinary. His father wears a suit and his mother a housedress, and judging by the furniture and their distance from the ceiling they seem of common height and their surroundings suitable for their stature. Nothing appears out of place except the “Jewish Giant,” who, lit up by a strobe, towers over his parents and stoops to fit in this unsuitable environment that has been created for the so-called normal (Millett-Gallant, 2010).

As with *Woman with Bangs*, the title directs us to a narrative content, essentially telling us, as writer and curator Judith Goldman pointed out, how to read the image (Goldman, 1974). Our true comprehension, however, is based primarily upon the stare, which leads us to perceive the extraordinary through the ordinary. Although he is enfreaked, as art historian Ann Millett-Gallant has explained, by virtue of his parents’ stare, he is also brought into a realm of comfortable comprehension (Millett-Gallant, 2010). Because of their privileged relationship, and his comfort in staring back, the social taboo against staring is nullified. It is through the parents’ astonished but socially acceptable gaze that the viewer is likewise given permission to stare and thus begins to understand Mr. Carmel’s perception of a life in which even his parents have marked him as a distinctive “other.”

As Hevey argued, Arbus brought disabled people into a “non-disabled” world view, but did so through spectacle and enfreakment (Hevey, 1992). Her significant innovation, however, was to place the “other,” the enfreaked, within a context that began to approximate the viewer’s bodily experience, primarily through the stare. This approach is analogous to that accomplished earlier in her images of a nudist camp. *Retired Man and His Wife at Home in a Nudist Camp One Morning, N. J.* (1963) captures a familiar setting complete with chair, couch, rug, and television—all materials for which the common viewer has a reference—inhabited by a seemingly ordinary couple who become extraordinary by virtue of the fact that they are completely nude except for shoes on their feet. The viewer is invited to stare at the spectacle, one of the great strengths of Arbus’s photographs; but by bringing them into one’s frame of reference, through a recognizable setting, one is provided a measure of comprehension beyond stereotype. This interpretation contradicts somewhat humanist and cultural critic Susan Sontag’s contention that Arbus’s work does not invite viewers to identify for it reminds the viewer that humanity is not one (Sontag, 1990/1977, p. 32). Indeed, rather than appeal to a compassion based upon preconceived stereotypes, Arbus brought the unique individual into familiarity.

While approximating the bodily experience of what it means to be an “other,” to give us some intimation of being outside the boundaries of what is considered normalcy through contrast with the ordinary, Arbus also conveyed the absurdity of the attempt. Though in her work the “other’s” perception becomes comprehensible, the “other” as being can never fully become part



of the collective normative for the primary means of identification remain salient. In *Masked Woman in a Wheelchair, Pa.* (1970) a woman in a wheelchair holds a Halloween mask up to her face. She is shown completely, nearly in profile in front of a street curb, sidewalk and brick institutional building. It is an early autumn day and her legs are covered with a blanket to keep them warm while in a stationary position. Bright sunlight filters through the tree branches defining the few leaves that have fallen to the ground and glistening off of the metal rims and spokes of the wheel of the wheelchair. Generally used among the common to transform or hide one's identity, the mask here becomes a useless instrument – a fallacy, for the wheelchair, prominently lit and displayed from the side, remains the most salient characteristic of her identity. She will forever remain an “other.” Despite the intense stare the photograph affords the viewer, actual bodily experience remains beyond grasp. There is a profound dichotomy here, for although the photograph contributes to the viewer's understanding of the disabled “other,” the longer one stares, the more one is met with silence – like Ellison's character in *The Invisible Man*, the object of one's stare is yet invisible.

These photographs demonstrate a shift in perception of disabled people as the Civil Rights Era progressed and increasing awareness of the implications of being different in a perceived ideal homogenous society emerged. Largely through the rhetoric of the stare, innovative photographers began to address the complex nature of being disabled within a projected utopian environment based upon the “normal.” By rejecting preconceived stereotypical reference points, which served to reassure the “normal” of their privileged status, photographers began to embrace a more nuanced representation of what it meant to exist outside of the norm. Far from proposing solutions to the accompanying social isolation, these photographers nonetheless enhanced our understanding of what it meant to be a disabled “other.”

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Figure 3 - Garry Winogrand, *Los Angeles*, 1969. © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Figure 4 - Garry Winogrand, *London*, 1967. © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, CA.