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Garry Winogrand in L.A.

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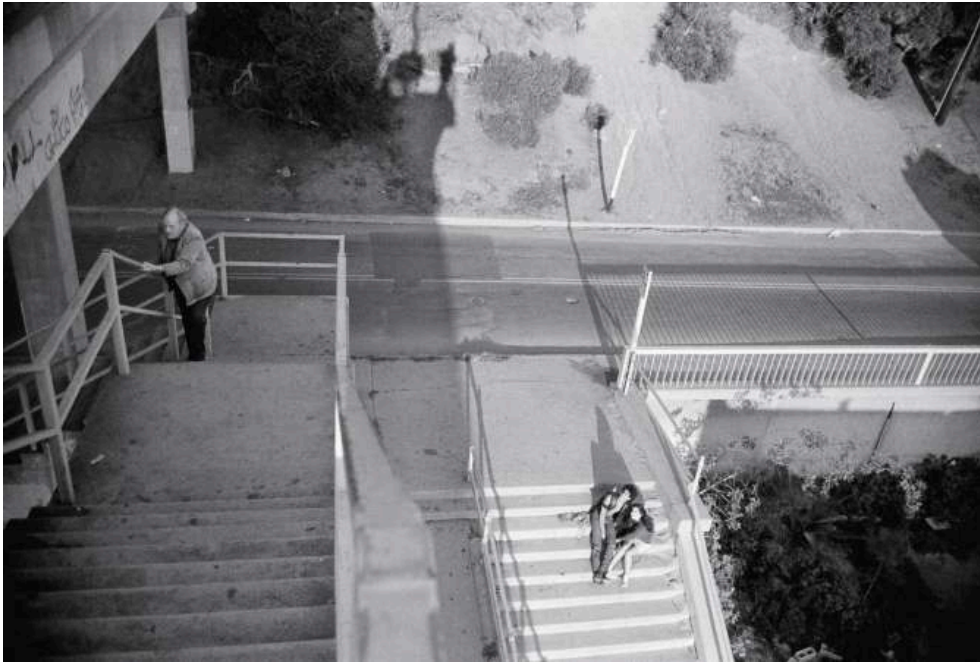


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Garry Winogrand in L.A.

Sandra S. Phillips

- 1 I come from New York, but I never really knew Garry Winogrand, though I certainly knew about him. He could often be seen with other photographers, his pals, on 57th street near Bloomingdale's, or the Museum of Modern Art, not far away. His New York pictures were wonderful, I thought—they were intense and tangential and very true to what I knew from living there. I recognized those streets, that energy, the seasonal changes of its light, the momentary encounters. Open and uninhabited spaces are hard to find in those New York pictures because there is so little of it in New York.
- 2 In 1988 I moved to San Francisco to work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, just as John Szarkowski was preparing his Winogrand retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. I believe our presentation was the show's last United States stop. At the time, our museum was located opposite City Hall, on the third and fourth floors of a building with an auditorium in the middle of it. When I hung the show it was on the walls of the corridor that wrapped around the auditorium. It was a continuous wall on one side, on the other it was punctured by doors that led to the offices. We joked that the so-called gallery more resembled a highway, and how appropriate that was to the pictures, many of which (certainly the later pictures, but some of the earlier work, too) were made as he was shooting out of a moving automobile. The exhibition was hung chronologically, and the last pictures made in California were the last ones in the show, and because of where my office was located, I saw those pictures every day.
- 3 Winogrand lived in California for the last six years of his life, before he died in 1984. As Leo Rubinfien writes, he "emigrated definitively" from New York in 1972 but it took a while for him to find his way to California. While he still lived in New York, he was reasonably well acquainted with the country beyond it, especially in 1964, when he received a Guggenheim award to make pictures travelling freely in the United States. Through this experience, he developed a particular interest in the American West, because it was so different from what he knew, certainly, but also because it seemed to articulate the future direction of the country. I was especially struck by one picture which I encountered daily, it was especially compelling because it represented something I was trying to understand too.



Garry Winogrand, Santa Monica, 1980-83 (ill. No 377).

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

- 4 The picture was made in Santa Monica, the beach community of Los Angeles, and I knew the exact spot where he made the photograph because I had a brother-in-law who lived not far away. It shows the pedestrian overpass for the Pacific Coast Highway, which connects the city to the beach. If you look up rather than down—as he did—you see the inevitably blue sky of Southern California, and the welcoming, sunny beach and the beach cottages. The Pacific Coast Highway is the main artery along the edge of the ocean, it is usually very busy, thus dangerous to cross, and so the bridge provides a safe way to get to the beach from the city.
- 5 The picture is illuminated by the splendid light for which LA is famous. Here the light is characteristic of the late afternoon, and the long shadows are also luminous, though you can certainly see a more dense darkness encroaching on the left edge of the picture. Los Angeles was a nondescript town of a few thousand people until the movie industry realized that films can be made year round, so light and weather are still an essential business element in the city, and have characterized its culture. In this picture the long light illuminates a couple looking up at the photographer and smiling. Is it Winogrand's own shadow at the top of the picture, like a conductor who has magically orchestrated the event? The lighter half of the picture also reveals the scruffy, sandy soil near the roadway, where people have crossed the highway in a hurry to get to the beach, eroding the soil's surface. The other half of the picture is divided from the lighter side by shadow, where an older man, alone, climbs the long stairs with effort. His back is turned toward the couple with interlocking limbs, making his isolation all the more poignant, even brutal.
- 6 L.A. is a very different kind of city than New York. When he wanted to photograph crowds of people in L.A.—familiar to him from knowing New York—Winogrand would go to places where people gathered, around the Farmer's Market, among the shoppers in Beverly Hills, or in the crowds at the beaches of Santa Monica and Venice. But most of Los Angeles is open territory, the streets are built for cars, and the people are, in a

way, protected from life on the street in their cars. Many of Winogrand's L.A. pictures are made from a moving car, and many are pictures of cars, or pictures of the streets with cars.¹ Many of Winogrand's pictures of Los Angeles, those he made toward the end of his career were made with an automated drive shooting from the window from a car driven by a friend. To his admirers the last work has proved problematic because there is so much of it and because there is so little that is good. As is now well known and much discussed, Winogrand neglected to edit the later work with the rigor of his early years, and even to process the exposed film in many cases. Thus, the issue of authorship in the conventional sense is an unusually open one for these late pictures. As it is displayed in the retrospective organized by the SFMOMA, the character of the Los Angeles work is very different from what preceded it, and it is my contention that part of what attracted Winogrand to L.A. was that it was a different place.

- 7 In New York, where most people are on the streets, there is an understanding of common space that is different. On the streets of New York you find many different kinds of people who occupy the street. Since the street is the place where you go to get somewhere—to work, to lunch, for appointments—but also where you go for pleasure—to stores which have big windows inviting you to shop inside—there is a fairly constant stream of diverse people.



Garry Winogrand, New York, 1970 (149).

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



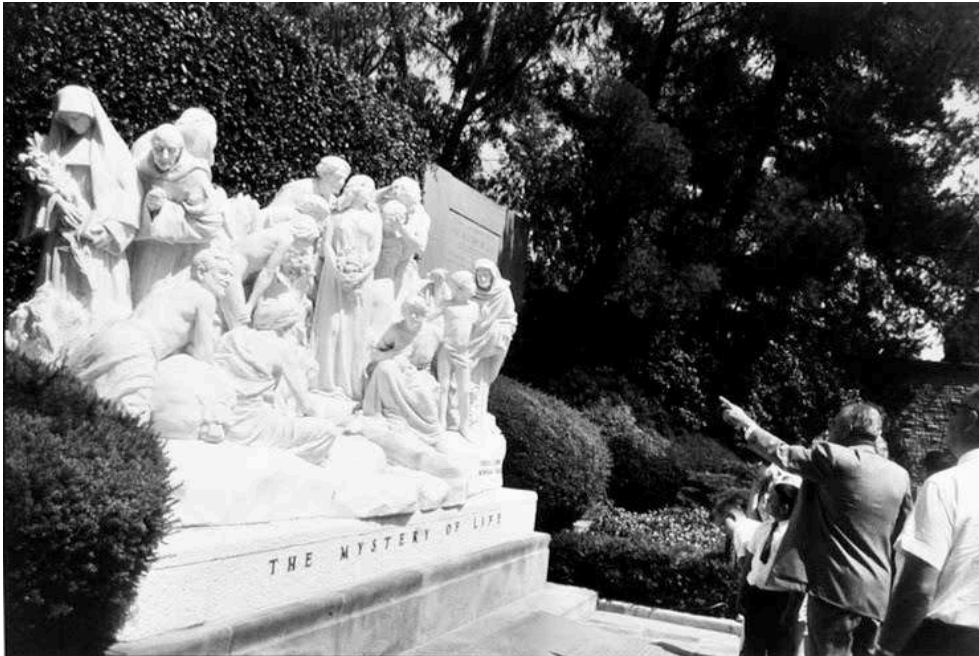
Garry Winogrand, New York, 1968 (114).

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

- 8 New Yorkers look at other people: to examine what they are wearing, see if they are famous, watch them haul equipment and make their deliveries. The street in New York is like a commons. This is not to infer that there is an inherent egalitarianism—social strata are alive and well in New York, though probably not so intensively in the 1960s and 1970s as they are today. Similarly, in Manhattan everyone takes the bus—wealthy women in mink coats and delivery boys crowd on public transportation together. In Los Angeles, as Winogrand noticed, only poor people who do not have cars stand on deserted roadsides or sit in uncomfortable, exposed benches and wait for busses. The weather in New York is also different—it is seasonal, it is not always sunny as it is in Southern California, everyone bustles about when the weather is cold or wet, and when the weather is hot and muggy the pedestrians cope with their discomfort together. Much of the cultural difference of the two cities can be ascribed to their different histories: Manhattan is an older city, it has older traditions, it is generally more hierarchical. It is also built up on an island with limited space for outward growth—most of the growth is upward: it has higher towers and denser populations.
- 9 Los Angeles was originally (in the 19th century, settled by Mexico) populated by separate ranch communities, distinct from each other and not physically close. In the 1920s, oil was discovered and the automobile became important around the same time the film industry determined that year-round sunshine made it the ideal place to establish their studios. Los Angeles is actually a true desert, made clear in the scratched and empty areas of open ground seen in the first picture, especially noticeable near the highways. The city's distinctiveness derives from its history and its climate: it has very different character than a Northeastern city. Because of the automobile, there are still more open spaces than concentrated development, there are few areas where the buildings are more than a few stories high, noticeably downtown where the civic buildings are located (the old City Hall, and more recently some newer buildings such as the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Philharmonic). But the city

has other centers too. The physical area of the city is enormous, the suburbs were originally developed in the 1950s with urban growth after the war, they were designed to be separate entities and essentially remain so. The highway and road system of L.A. became the connecting tissue, its unifying element, not the streets.²

- 10 It is necessary to revisit here the issues surrounding Winogrand's late pictures, which include necessarily those made in Los Angeles. Critics in general, and his primary supporter, John Szarkowski, in particular noted a considerable decline in the quality of the work after he left New York, and this was especially the case with the work made in Los Angeles. It would be fairer to say that the decline was in the percentage of good pictures found amidst all the many exposures he made, since his output—the rapidity with which he consumed film, changed when he lived and worked in the West. Winogrand's pictures of L.A. tend to be simpler—there is not so much going on in them—and also emptier. But the core issue, which has occupied those who try to understand these late pictures is a profound change in the way he worked: unlike his earlier habit of exposing film, developing it and making contact prints, and then proof prints (and finished prints), the whole process of seeing what he had made through examining the negatives and proofs declined to such an extent in Los Angeles that we know he saw and edited only a tiny fraction of the film he exposed while living there. In other words, he really did not see what he was doing. Others, coming after his death, have made those decisions, and thus the authorship of these last pictures is an issue.³ For this writer, it was very clear that some of the later work was very important indeed, acknowledging the circumstances under which the photographer made them. Acknowledging a certain profligacy in his use of materials and perhaps even a certain willful carelessness, they still show—the best pictures—the photographer contending with the great cultural changes of his time. This is true especially in his pictures of Southern California, which have been described as “astonishingly bleak.”⁴
- 11 The West is a different culture than the culture of the old East Coast. It does not hold to the idea of a community as still exists in the cities and towns in the Northeastern U.S. The West was, and to an extent still remains where you can escape your old life and remake it, still relatively easy for Americans to do. This is especially true of Los Angeles, where escapism and blatant individualism is certainly abetted by the movie culture. As a young photographer Winogrand saw the west, I believe, as a kind of fascinating foreign territory, he was sensitized to it because it was so different from what he knew. He noticed how bizarre the statuary at the Forest Lawn cemetery was, for instance, where the sculpture looks uncomfortably cinematic and the light certainly theatrical.



Garry Winogrand, Forest Lawn Cemetery, Los Angeles, 1964 (200).

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

- 12 As Winogrand grew older, the focus of the country, especially its politics, was shifting away from the old center of the Northeast to something that was new, and found in the West. By 1978 when he moved to Los Angeles, Ronald Reagan had left the governor's office only three years earlier. Winogrand died the year Reagan was elected president.
- 13 Reagan's legacy in California was, among other things, the dissolution of the welfare state—he loudly campaigned against what he termed “welfare bums,” and began the process, later accelerated under his presidency, of dismantling the protections established in the 1930s. By reducing taxes he promised greater personal freedom and the potential of greater individual wealth. It is easy to see Reagan as a Western politician, where the pursuit of individual freedom has a long history and is still an ideal. Optimistic entrepreneurialism of this part of the country was ignited in the 19th century when the frontier mythology encouraged rapid development; it was called Manifest Destiny. We have had a corporate culture since the 19th century, but the ideal of personal independence has also been a consistent American ideal. In the last century land in the west was mined for its mineral, agricultural, and other wealth with an intensity, swiftness and profligacy still almost breathtaking. For instance, within 30 years, all the thousands of giant redwood trees in the Pacific northwest were felled—every one of them. Today we see the same kind of reckless entrepreneurialism in what we call fracking, where the immediate rush to petroleum wealth is the driving concern, and caution about environmental damage comes after the fact. The more recent evolution of the Tech culture, also located in the West (in what is called Silicon Valley, south of San Francisco) is really a continuation of Western individualist fantasy. Winogrand's later pictures of Los Angeles describe both the American fantasy of freedom, and the actuality of what can be deduced of the culture, seen on the streets. There is an emptiness and solitariness there in the glorious sunshine, with all the beautiful people that is profoundly tragic.

- 14 There are two other photographers of the West that I came to understand through Winogrand's last pictures, who describe the cultural and geographic particularities of the American west: Robert Adams and Henry Wessel. Both of them were included in the exhibition, *New Topographics, Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, organized by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography, the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y. in 1975, when Winogrand was teaching in Texas. Jenkins referred to the photographers in his show as sharing a "stylistic anonymity," akin to the deadpan work of Ed Ruscha, but despite the apparent similarities, each of the photographers he had chosen for the exhibition had markedly particular aesthetic personalities.
- 15 Certainly the most important contemporary photographer of the New Topographics genre is Robert Adams. His work is deeply understated, especially the early work, the suburban subdivisions in Colorado, in characteristically glorious sunshine. After looking at Winogrand's photographs of Los Angeles I understood that Adams, too, was examining a culture. His photographs of suburban communities sited on the high plains outside of Denver are some of the best and truest visions of the American West of our time; they describe the exhilarating openness of the land there, its amazingly clear light, and the aspirations of those who live there and why they chose to settle and raise families there. The pictures also show a terrible shoddiness in the construction of their homes, the leanness of their fortunes, and an isolation that is shaped by the culture.



Robert Adams, Tract House, Westminster, Colorado, 1974.

© Robert Adams, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

- 16 Most of Adams' work shows the way land in the American West is used: they show how people live in its glorious natural light and open spaces, especially modest people, the common people. Most of Adams's work in *New Topographics* describes the world of its

inhabitants without them, mutely, through artifacts and in the land's particular character.

- 17 Winogrand's good friend, Henry Wessel, is a different personality. His essential subject is the special, transformative light of Northern California. It even has a special silvery glistening quality to it, making it distinctive. Wessel moved from the East Coast to the west because of the light, because it was so particularly clear and beautiful and you could photograph easily almost every day. Wessel is more a marveller and a humorist, excited by the splendor of commonplace things charged by Western light, wondering at the nuttiness of the way things are constructed, the way they look in the American West, which to him is mostly amazing, even beautiful in its own particular way.



Henry Wessel, Hollywood, California, 1972.

© Henry Wessel, courtesy Pace / MacGill Gallery, New York

- 18 His picture of palm trees sprouting out of the Hollywood pavement, dotting the clear sky like people standing tall in the parking lot is witty and culturally true. The light in the parking area is so white it almost bleaches out the white buildings in front of the trees—but not quite. Like Winogrand's photograph of the Santa Monica overpass, Wessel photographs the paved-over open terrain of Southern California, and though his tenor is not tragic, he is also responding to the particular culture of the place. It is not about what we have made of a glorious landscape—Wessel accepts what we have done with what we had. There is no regret in Wessel's work, but an acceptance of things as they are, which contains humor and a glory of its own kind.
- 19 Winogrand's late pictures of Southern California still present issues that many serious admirers of his work find difficult to resolve. They prompt questions about the medium itself: what constitutes authorship in photography? Is it found in the original print made by the photographer, is it in the negative, in the edit? Such questions have become especially relevant with the discovery of Vivian Meier, the *au pair* with a camera who exposed film but generally refused to take on the challenges of editing and printing her work. That task has been left to those who discovered the film, who processed it, printed it and are now creating a market for it by publishing and showing

it, even as the questions have not been addressed so much as obscured. The late work of Winogrand is quite different. As a young man he edited his film, published his pictures, exhibited them and even sold some of them. As he grew older he seemed less interested in most of the normal photographer's tasks, eschewing everything, almost, except shooting. It is also true that those last years, especially from 1978 till his death in 1984, that he made generally many more exposures than any time previously. In the larger scope of his practice this is not altogether surprising, but it does cast a questionable light on the pictures he made in Los Angeles. The most extreme question must be, who, finally is the true author of those pictures?

- 20 If you consider the work in Los Angeles alongside the work he made before, Winogrand's arc of development is quite consistent—as a young man his practice was typical of the ways his contemporaries worked, and as he grew older, for whatever reasons, he became less interested in the process of making prints and worked virtually exclusively exposing film. Thus the failures and successes of these last pictures are to a great extent left to us, his admirers, to determine. Aside from the issue of what can constitute a late Winogrand photograph, we need to also address what the allure was in coming to California and why he stayed there, making so many pictures. I believe it was two things that, in photography, are interrelated. He was interested in the subject of California and the West as a different place from what he knew in the East, and he was interested in making a new kind of picture to express that difference. Sometimes his achievements were amazing: they were new, they described a landscape that was new to him, both in the way it looked and in the way it worked, a kind of life that was clearer to him because it was unfamiliar. Those insights can be astonishing, a brave reach into unfamiliar territory, and they are Winogrand's own.

NOTES

1. It is probably indicative of the two cultures, that of New York and California, that the large highways in the East Coast are called "Thruways," and in the West they are referred to as "Freeways."
2. For a very enlightening, though opinionated understanding of the city, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*, 1990. Earlier important books on the city include Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 1971 and Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, 1946.
3. See John Szarkowski, *Garry Winogrand: Figments from the Real World*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1988, 34 and Leo Rubenfiel, ed., *Garry Winogrand*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in association with Yale University Press, 46ff, for discussions on the late work and the issues it raises.
4. See Rubenfiel, op. cit.

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