Street-Wise: The Photography of Garry Winogrand and Alexey Titarenko

December 06, 2009 John Bailey, ASC

ONE

He held his 35mm Leica M4 low in his right hand like a chain smoker bogarting his cigarette. When something caught his eye as he ambled down the sidewalk, the camera shot up to his face as if to take a toke. Even before the lens reached his eye, his finger snapped the shutter; then the wrist flicked the camera away as if shaking off a persistent ash, dropping it down again at his side. Hardly anyone ever knew they had become a Garry Winogrand photograph.

Leica M4, the camera used by Winogrand

Alexey Titarenko carries his larger format Hasselblad also at his side. It is mounted on a collapsible tripod. His hand grips the legs, the camera hanging from it, upside down. When something catches *his* eye he quickly moves to position, sets the tripod in place, looks down into the large ground glass, snaps the shutter, and waits for the time exposure to end. He picks the rig up and moves on; one could think the whole device was a strange kind of time machine fused to the end of a walking stick.

Winogrand and Titarenko are a breed apart. If you were to tag Penn or Avedon with the label "fashion photographer" or James Nachtwey as "war photographer," then you could call Garry or Alexey "street photographer." Winogrand chose to go where the action was and where he could be invisible, lost in the crowds that were his catnip. He loved being on the street, mostly in large cities such as New York (he preferred Fifth Ave, because of the open light, wide sidewalks and eclectic mix of people) or Los Angeles (where he sometimes shot from a moving car driven by his friend Tom Consilvo), but he also stalked airports, political events, animal stock shows and fairs, public parks, zoos, an aquarium. One thing was certain: Winogrand did not prowl the dark and mean streets. Look for him in the thick of it in broad daylight—a somewhat shabbily dressed, schlump of an everyman with thick glasses and a toothy smile when he deigned to show it. I can describe Garry like this—I knew him. We inhabited the same photo galleries in Los Angeles in the late 70s and just once I saw him at work on the street. But about that a bit later.

Titarenko is altogether different—except for the glasses. He walks with deliberation. The streets he haunts, and haunts *is* the right word, are filled with the cultural history of the "Venice of the North," the locus of the Russian Revolution, the home of centuries of Queens and Czars, the literary home of novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky—in short, a trunk full of ghosts. His city is St. Petersburg, though when he was born amid the dark depths of the Soviet "Cold War" era in 1962, it was still called Leningrad. Titarenko carries the weight of this history through the streets with him, looking for the congeries of place, people, and light—frozen in a blurred frame, that captures

a moment of time in the long saga of a tragic people. This is a critic's statement about his series "City of Shadows."

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s led to an unprecedented economic crisis that created a multitude of human tragedies and suffering, similar to the devastation after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The goal of [the] City of Shadows *series (1991–1994) was not only to document that very crucial time in European history, but also to generate street pictures that could embrace both the present and the past as well as mirror the human condition. Titarenko's idea was to alter the range of his time exposure: from one second to several minutes, using a tripod. One of the obstacles was having an exposure of himself and people's reaction to him included in the image. To resolve this issue, Titarenko decided to use a passing crowd as a shield or screen, which renders the photographer less noticeable behind this flow of people.*

Winogrand, on the other hand, seizes his moment in a *carpe diem* aesthetic; and he gets it right time after time, that ephemeral moment, so fugitive in life, trapped in a hyper reality that says who we Americans are; Titarenko does the same for his Russians, but as a painter, in carefully modulated detail on his photo-canvas of time trapped.

I think they would both hate the appellation of "street photographer" because the street is just the backdrop, the arena against which their differing subjects perform. There exist two films that document the artists at work. The Winogrand is in two parts and is excerpted from a 1982 WNYC series called *Creativity*, hosted by Bill Moyers. The Titarenko film was made for a French-German TV show called *Art et La Maniere*. Both films are short but the Titarenko film, a bit longer, is in three parts. The YouTube links below are in succession. If you have time I suggest that see both films at one sitting—or maybe even intercut the parts. Here is the Winogrand:

Garry Winogrand - Part 1

Garry Winogrand - Part 2

And here is the Titarenko:

Alexey Titarenko: ART ET LA MANIERE

Alexey Titarenko: ART ET LA MANIERE pt.2

Alexey Titarenko: ART ET LA MANIERE pt.3

TWO

Garry Winogrand died on March 19, 1984 at the Gerson Clinic in Tijuana where he had just gained admission for treatment of his gall bladder cancer. He was 56. He left behind 2500 rolls of undeveloped 35mm film in 36 exposure rolls, mostly Tri-X. He also left 6500 rolls of developed film but no contacts, as well as 300 unedited contact sheets—an aggregate of more than 300,000 unexamined images. His archives are deposited at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson. A book with a group of these posthumous images has been published by MOMA. It accompanied the first major traveling retrospective of Winogrand's work, in 1988. The essay is by John Szarkowski, the late head of MOMA's department of Photography, who was an early and stalwart champion of Winogrand's work. His flyleaf quote says simply, "Garry Winogrand is, in my view, the central photographer of his generation [whose] pictures realize a conception of photography that is richer, more complex, and more problematic than any since the Second World War."

I think he says “problematic” because Winogrand *is* so hard to explain. He not so much defied all the canons of good photography as he created a way of looking at the world that is so immediate that it sidesteps any aesthetic category. *Winogrand: Figments from the Real World* is, I think, the best and most comprehensive introduction to his work:

Amazon.com *Winogrand: Figments From The Real World* link

Another book also published after his death comes from the archives in Tucson. It contains almost 200 B/W photos, mostly unseen until now, and a few in color. It is a record of a cross-country trip he made in 1964 using a Guggenheim Grant, much like Robert Frank did for his 1955 road odyssey, “The Americans.” This book is Winogrand’s portrait of America in the mid 60s, *Winogrand 1964*:

Amazon.com *Winogrand 1964* link

Here is a gallery of Winogrand’s photos:

www.faheykleingallery.com link

Alexey Titarenko began photographing his hometown of St. Petersburg when he was 8 years old. At that age his aesthetic sensibilities were pretty inchoate; but a mere five years later he was searching the back streets and courtyards of old St. Petersburg, pre-Soviet relics, “under the influence of Dostoyevsky.” When he graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Culture in 1983 and began his career work, Winogrand was less than a year away from death. Titarenko’s first body of work was the “Nomenklatura of Signs,” a wryly-ironic riff on the semiotics of the end days of the Soviet Union.

Unlike Winogrand, whose posthumous publications have become almost a cottage industry, there is but a single monograph readily available of Titarenko's work: it is beautifully printed with full-page realizations of his meticulously wrought images. The introduction is by Nailya Alexander and the extended captions and comments are by French critic Gabriel Bauret:

Amazon.com *Alexey Titarenko: Photographs* link

There is also a comprehensive slideshow of his work on his own website:

alexeytitarenko.com link

Just roll over any of the titles to isolate that body of work. The "Nomenklatura of Signs" is much in the tradition of early Soviet era Constructivist montage artists like El Lissitsky and Rodchenko, avant-garde and pre-Stalinist. It is almost an autumnal "button" on that great period of Russian work, and Titarenko did this work before forging his own contemporary, forward-looking aesthetic. The street wanderings that constitute the greatest part of his work would have aroused suspicion had they been done before the end of the Soviet Union. Yet a certain gravitas endures in the work, the weight of the older cultural tradition hovering about him.

No such weight bore down on Winogrand; he evoked in every sense Whitman's "barbaric yap." Winogrand was not comfortable talking about theory or technique or, god forbid, "cultural context." For him, a photograph is a record of a life moment—nothing more, nothing less. Here are a few quotes that are the closest he offered to a shooting philosophy:

"A photograph is the illusion of a literal description of how the camera 'saw' a piece of time and space."

"Photography is not about the thing photographed. It is about how that thing looks photographed."

"I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs."

"I like to think of photographing as a two-way act of respect. Respect for the medium, by letting it do what it does best, describe. And respect for the subject, by describing [it] as it is. A photograph must be responsible to both."

"All things are photographable."

Do you detect a theme? And here's the one that really derails any critic's attempt to contextualize him:

"I don't have anything to say in any picture. My only interest in photography is to see what something looks like as a photograph. I have no preconceptions."

I remember an event early in my own career, doing a shoot of John Ford for the BBC, shortly before he died; it was conducted in his living room. The interviewer was a hotshot film scholar who fired off one speculative question after another at the near blind director. Ford just grunted most of the time as a response; finally after a particularly thorny question that exhibited the interviewer's research more than it did common sense, Ford paused a long time as though he were considering a definitive "statement." "I make the movies," he said, "You just talk about them." Then he looked down at me (camera still rolling) and said, "Young man, what is that growth on your lip?" I answered, "Mr. Ford, I'm growing a mustache." He settled back and barked out one word, "Don't."

THREE

That's the direct, irreverent spirit of which I remember Gary Winogrand. I said early in this piece that I saw him at work once. We were filming *American Gigolo* on the streets of Westwood. It was a sequence where a clean-cut Young Republican type is tailing Richard Gere. Gere ducks around the corner at the entry to the Bruin Theater, grabs the guy as he passes, and pins him up against a display poster for Walter Hill's film, *The Warriors*. I was setting up an over-the-shoulder shot, and then turned around on the dolly seat to look toward a sound from the street. There was Garry Winogrand snapping away, wrist flick and all. "Hey, Garry," I shouted out. Paul Schrader said something that caused me to turn back. When I looked back toward Garry—he was gone. I had blown his cover—but I wonder if somewhere in that mass of 300,000 frames there is a Garry Winogrand shot of me, at the camera. And in defiance of Jack Ford, I still had the mustache.

Whenever I have been on the streets of Manhattan with Alexey Titarenko, he has not been carrying a camera. Last time we were together was after a dress rehearsal at the Met Opera of the new, much abused production of *Tosca*. Alexey and his wife, Nailya Alexander, who has a gallery that features Russian photographers, are great lovers of opera. Alexey is still getting used to the topography of Manhattan and is not yet shooting much in NYC. But he has moved here now and has set up a darkroom in the basement of their condo on W.117th St.

Unlike what Winogrand says about what he is trying to do as a photographer (or does not say), Titarenko is eloquent about what he is hoping to find as he walks the streets, an image to fit an idea. For him, the film negative is the beginning point in realizing that idea. Intensive, detailed, time-robbing work in the darkroom is at the heart of his vision. There is something almost 19th century about the Photo-Secessionist, hand-made-ness of it all. You see this clearly in the darkroom sequence of the French TV documentary as he

bleaches and tones the print of the old beggar woman sitting on a dirt pile, the stark white paper in her hand pleading, “Help me for Christ’s sake.”

Winogrand clearly felt constrained in the darkroom. He spent so little time there. He’d much rather be shooting another 100 rolls of Tri-X. It is a wonder that we have any prints from him at all.

When I began to consider how to approach such an encyclopedic subject as “street photography” for this essay, I realized that only the narrowest focus on two widely different artists could begin to suggest the breadth of this history —by tugging at its far edges. I went to my bookshelf and pulled down a volume I have long regarded with respect for its daring to present the rich story of *A History of Street Photography*. That is the subtitle to *Bystander*, by curator/writer Colin Westerbeck and photographer Joel Meyerowitz:

Amazon.com *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* link

Unlike most survey books, this one feels as if it is written from the inside. It’s broken into sections, with essays by Westerbeck and portfolios of supporting images selected by Meyerowitz. One of the book’s glories is the last chapter, a dialogue between the two men. Meyerowitz’s early career was as a street photographer and he shares the most extraordinary stories with Westerbeck about many of the mid-century giants, such as Frank, Arbus, Friedlander and, of course, Winogrand. This book is an indispensible resource for this most important but somewhat overlooked genre. It appeared several years before Alexey Titarenko had his first monograph exhibition in the United States.

Winogrand’s guiding aesthetic, if you can call it that, is pretty simple:

I think that there isn't a photograph in the world that has any narrative ability. Any of 'em. They do not tell stories—they show you what something looks like… . The minute you relate this thing to what was photographed—it's a lie. It's two-dimensional. It's the illusion of literal description. The thing has to be complete in the frame, whether you have the narrative information or not. It has to be complete in the frame. It's a picture problem. It's part of what makes things interesting.

This, of course, flies in the face of how many street photographers work: Andre Kertesz, Henri Cartier-Bresson and most especially the powerful narratives of James Nachtwey (whose street photographs unfold in zones of death). Implicit or explicit, they *are* storytellers. But to take Winogrand at his word is easy. His so-called "snapshot aesthetic" precludes any conscious intention. Many other artists such as those just cited will often wait for the "decisive moment" or (in the case of Nachtwey) become so close, so absorbed into that moment that he is almost a participant. Here is Winogrand's response to a question about the "snapshot aesthetic."

I knew that was coming. That's another stupidity. The people who use the term don't even know the meaning. They use it to refer to photographs they believe are loosely organized, or casually made, whatever you want to call it. Whatever terms you like. The fact is, when they're talking about snapshots they're talking about the family album picture, which is one of the most precisely made photographs. Everybody's fifteen feet away and smiling. The sun is over the viewer's shoulder. That's when the picture is taken, always. It's one of the most carefully made photographs that ever happened.

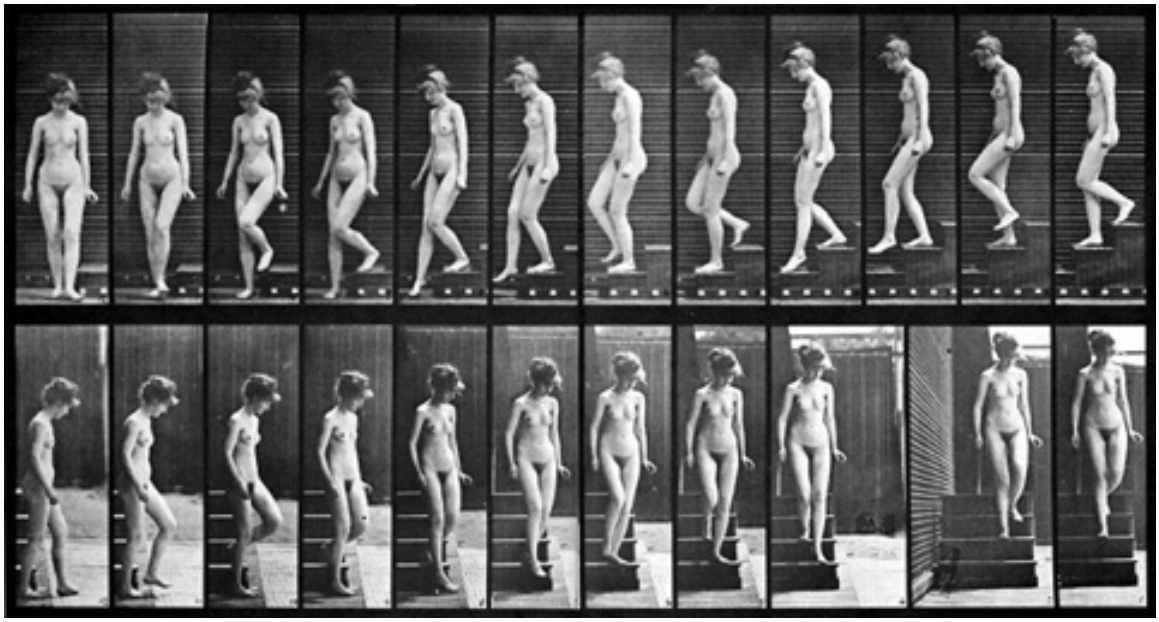
Winogrand “American Legion Convention, Dallas Texas” 1964

Titarenko’s method is much more intentional:

A photographer is filled with ideas he carries around with him… . The act of creation consists in making these ideas visible to others… . The process occurs when I stroll about the city. I walk along and something catches my eye and the scene mingles with my childhood memories.

If Winogrand’s style can be called some form of “grab” or “instant” photography, Titarenko’s is in the tradition of what is called chronophotography, “pictures of time.” Although Titarenko's intentions are much more metaphoric and poetic, his technique goes back in part to the multiple image sequences of human locomotion by Edward Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey. Unlike Muybridge and Marey, Titarenko does not create multiple images of an action in time. He blends the passage of time itself into a single long exposure; what has moved during exposure is caught as the action itself and what is inanimate is frozen in space. This dialogue between

motion and stasis seems to me to lie at the heart of Titarenko's art. It is this tension between subject and field that distinguises his images. He may or may not regard these earlier artists more as scientists, which of course they were. But by expanding the limits of human perception, they, like Titarenko, do what poets do. Muybridge, especially in his ultra-large format work with Watkins in the Yosemite Valley, achieved a kind of pantheism in nature. A friend of mine from USC film school days, Thom Anderson, now a teacher at CalArts, made a feature-length thesis film that so brought Muybridge's motion studies to life, that it was if he breathed life into inanimate matter.



Eadward Muybridge "Woman Descending Steps"

Titarenko works the more art-allusive area of time passage, his images blurred in a fluid sequence. It is no accident that he often quotes as his antecedents several of the earliest pioneers of photography, such as Daguerre. The technical limits of early photography demanded long exposures; Titarenko has turned this into a kind of metaphysics. The paintings of Balla and Duchamp explored similar notions of how to portray time in a static medium.

Giacomo Balla “Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash”

In 1982, Winogrand did something that altered his shooting style and another that may have ultimately changed it radically. He bought a motor drive for his Leicas, which allowed his already fast shooting technique to accelerate even more. John Szarkowski speculates that this unmediated, automatic, advance device fueled a decline in his late style, as it removed that critical connection between mind and hand. That very same day he bought an 8 x 10 view camera, the same format employed by the meticulous Edward Weston; but he apparently never used it. Perhaps he sensed he would soon reach the end of what he could do with the Leicas. Or perhaps the motor drive was the entry point into a wholly new style that he never lived long enough to explore; perhaps by taking up the bulky 8x10 view camera (if he had lived longer), Winogrand may have evolved into a nature and landscape photographer. He had spoken about moving back to New York City and

getting a place up on the Hudson River, outside the city. But we will never know what might have been next.

Alexey Titarenko is now just settled into New York City. We will see if he finds a complex narrative of emotion and poetry that is akin to and a further development of what he had in St. Petersburg. Will he be the one who inherits Winogrand's mantle, albeit one of a much different cut? Or will the energy and the pulse of this city, so different from his native St. Petersburg, spur him forward into a new, yet unknown, narrative?

These artists represent two distinct aspects of photographing people in public places. Both men's disparate work testifies to the elasticity of a medium that at its origins was thought to be not much more than a technical tool to free painting from the onerous recording of quotidian life — but one, which, in fact, has become a bright window into our very souls.

Titarenko "City of Shadows, Variant Crowd 2" 1993

Titarenko From ”Time Standing Still, White Dresses” 1998

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Comments

Keith Towers • 4 years ago

Finding Titarenko's work is like a breath of fresh air. Having tried all sorts of photography in my time I was after something new to try and this is it. Titarenko has developed an enigmatic style that is not only creative, but has heart beating energy pumping through it. I love it.

K. Praslowicz • 7 years ago

Great article. I really need to come back and watch the Titarenko videos when I have more time. I've already watched the Winogrand one a dozen times over the past years.

I've seen a lot of the Titarenko images in teh past, but never really let who shot them sink in. Now it is bugging me trying to remember where I've seen them before. I swear it was in print when I originally seen them.

PhotoBlog • 7 years ago

This is so beautifully written. Thank you. It gives clarity and great insight into these two photographers and their working methods.

Larry • 7 years ago

Really well written and a pleasure to read. Thanks for putting this together.

Kartik Vijay • 8 years ago

Hi John,

Thanks a lot for introducing us to these two great artists.

I should agree with Nick when he says that sometimes some of your blogs coincidentally confront something that I've been thinking about. Not much about technique, but more about how to approach something that I'm going to shoot.

I'm constantly reminded of the exhibits that you and Peter sent me during Cursed. These opened up my mind and expanded my knowledge base and I started looking at things/stories differently.

I'm glad that you started this blog. Even more so, since I learn something new every time I read it.

Thank you.

Best regards,

Kartik

Matyas Erdely • 8 years ago

Dear John,

Thank you so much for your work you put into this blog. This site became one of the most important source of inspiration for me in the last couple of weeks.

Ben Bertucci • 8 years ago

Thanks for this.

The comparison of these two is a great insight into the depth of street photography. Also, it's important to take a look back to where this art-form was created, especially in a time when the words "street photography" in a flickr search yield roughly 537,827 results.

Nick Perron-Siegel • 8 years ago

John, your blog seems worthy of publishing in print on it's own. I look forward to reading each new entry, as they either expose me to new artists or coincidentally confront something I've been thinking about that week. As a student of cinematography myself, reading your posts remind me that cameras, lenses and lighting instruments can't be all that matter to motion picture storytellers. Thanks and keep up the great work.

-Nick Perron-Siegel

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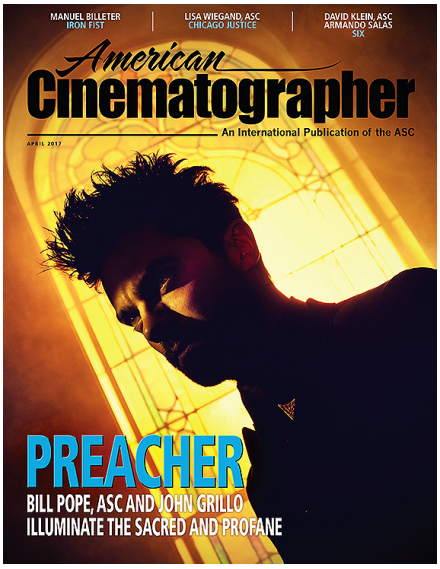

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