

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The people, yes. (Part 2)

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, May 13th, 2020

In the spirit of Carl Sandburg and Garry Winogrand

To introduce the second essay of this occasional series combining a paradigmatic image, with some of my own, I will refer to the last line of **Sandburg's** poetic series by the title of *The People, Yes*.

«How does it feel to be seen everywhere?»

As if to answer this question the well-known street photographer **Garry Winogrand** produced his famous image of seated people on a bench, at the 1964 New York World Fair; it is the photograph I use as feature image and in the section below.

What is it in the feature image which can be said to illustrate Sandburg's last verse with a microcosm of American society, *out to be seen!*



Public bench group dynamic at NY world fair

These six women and two men seem to embody the issues of racial and gender equality, which came to characterize that decade.

Note the African-American man in an "aparté" with a Caucasian lady whose body language shows a bit of discomfort, compared to his easy going one.

Note also the central grouping of three younger women in playful feminine intimacy with hands and bodies touching each other.

Note this self-assured young woman in conversation with an older man reading his paper, under the gaze of another young lady who, wishing not to be left out of that interaction, adopts an attention-attracting pose of hair pruning and fancy dress displaying.

While all their bodies face outward, their heads are turned to face each other in what appears to be three sub-groups, begging the question: Did they all come to sit together, or separately as individuals, or in small groups, or simply in dynamic grouping due to the luck of the draw?

*Photographically I felt challenged to find in my past work images that address similar **social-spatial dimensions**, as developed in the next two sections.*

Figures of *togetherness and aloneness*



Public bench group dynamic at a public market

These terms have *social and physical* references, to wit: all the seated people on these two benches may be ***physically together*** by dint of proximity, but **are they socially so? And to what degree?**

*Ignoring the other three bench occupants the two ladies facing each other, instead of sitting tightly on one bench making it difficult to face each other, have chosen to sit, each at one end of the two back to back benches and, while **farther away physically**, they could simply turn slightly their upper body to be face to face, **at the conventional social distance between friends**.*

*In the image below the lady chose to sit **alone** at the very end of an empty park bench.*



Public bench dynamic at a park

Placing herself at the ***end of the bench*** was the signal by which she communicated the ***physical availability*** of the rest of the bench, while ***reading a book*** was the signal by which she may have wished to communicate her desire to *remain alone and not to be approached socially*.

Note two telling details: *first the placing of her hand bag on the grass rather than on the bench, where it could tempt ill-intentioned sitters and, second the placing of her hand on her face, having detected my telephoto lens aimed at her... both of these details suggest a person whose “personal bubble” should not be invaded from close by or from far away!*

Figures of *co-presence and co-action*

The difference between the first and second type of behavior is as follows:



Co-presence at an outdoor eatery.

*In the **co-presence** instance, shown above, the setting’s function is so strongly suggested **physically** by the triad of outdoor food counter and the series of picnic tables, that people, alone or in groups, may come and go and sit on benches or sidewalk edge, *without affecting the function of the setting, although its **social ambiance** may be so affected.**

*In the **co-acting** instance, shown below, the **social-event-centered setting** of a child’s birthday party in a pizzeria strongly determines **the physical aspects of the setting such as the table grouping, its separation from the rest of the restaurant setting, and the social ones such as the supporting role of parents and restaurant staff hovering around.***



Co-action at a birthday party in a pizzeria.

Last words

I hope the current post may have motivated you to do so, but It may be too early in the current context to go out photographing **public bench** occupants or **outdoor eating** customers ... this will come in due time.

Meanwhile do keep safe!

Credit

Featured image by Garry Winogrand, from ICP website.

All other images to Maurice Amiel

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