Street photography: An approach to strangers: Casual, close and personal encounters

Flavia M. Schuster

Edith Cowan University

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Street photography: an approach to strangers.

Casual, close and personal encounters.

Flavia M. Schuster
Bachelor of Communications
Faculty of Communications, Health and Science
Edith Cowan University
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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

Street photographers can either camouflage or reveal their identities to the strangers they photograph. By choosing to remain anonymous, photographers often create images in which only their subjects are exposed. By unveiling their identities however, they often create images in which their interaction becomes evident in the resulting images.

Casual Encounters looks at the mechanisms employed by photographers that choose to remain anonymous in contrast to the myth of the flâneur. Close Encounters looks at the mechanisms employed between strangers to deal with their daily interactions in urban environments. Personal Encounters serves to explain my own approach to the strangers I photograph.

I certify that this thesis does not to the best of my knowledge or belief:

i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree, or

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17.06.2003
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Introduction

Before the advent of the modern city, while communities were still small and isolated worlds, reduced to villages or neighbourhoods, everything was close, everyone knew each other, and everybody could participate in each other’s intimacy. Human relations were created in familiar environments. With the rise of modernity, people started congregating in one area and cities became bigger, and people within them became anonymous and impersonal. Work and production changed from the familiar, kin-based operations of subsistence to the repetitive, structured and impersonal nature of industrial production. Work done by familiar groups was replaced by scores of unrelated and unacquainted workers. Neighbours turned into strangers, and the city filled up with unknown faces where not much could be known about one another.

Each person understands their own situation in their society through their background and their belonging to a plurality of institutions or groups. In those groups, relationships may be intimate; as it is within families, friendships and acquaintances; or they may be more distant; as with unions, clubs, religious congregations or yet broader ones; such as those who happen to be members of the same community, citizens of the same country.

Urban spaces are social products and people negotiate the physical and cultural structures of spatial systems, transforming them. “The city is a state of mind” wrote Robert Park in 1915 (cited in Donald, 1999, p. 8). Benedict Anderson (1983) explains that communities are ‘imagined’ because, even in the smallest one, no one will know all its members; but in each member’s mind, lives the image of their communion (p. 15). Lefebvre also believed that spaces are both real and representational:
Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors; these actors are collective as well as individual subjects inasmuch as the individuals are always members of groups or classes seeking to appropriate the space in question. This pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance; yet the subject's presence, action and discourse, at the same time as they presuppose this space, also negate it. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26)

Hayden White extends, while questioning, the relevance of Lefebvre's idea of real and representational spaces when he writes that "it does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same" (cited in Soja, 1996, p. 174). The three authors are concerned with the interplay between urban and social spaces and the roles they play in shaping their inhabitants' minds and actions. The authors open up a discourse of subjective interpretations of real and imagined spaces. To them, what matters is not the concrete and palpable but how the individual's perception of spaces shapes and organises people's functioning and understanding of them.

Modernity was partly characterised by the transformation of living spaces, the concepts of progress and their relations to social class associated with industry. Henri Lefebvre has associated 'spatial planning' with the alienation of individuals that arose due to modern lifestyles of the city (in Soja, 1996, p. 40). The spread of industrialisation led to the need for capital cities to be the centres of nations. These brought with them cosmopolitan airs that contributed to the feeling of de-familiarisation of their late 19th century inhabitants. One imagines that people could hardly recognise their hometown anymore. People-centered relationships became displaced by brief interactions. There is a need, according to Kant, to "promote a unity between individuals on the basis of their subjectivity" (cited in Eagleton, 1990, p. 84). What brings people together, in Eagleton's (1990) view is their spontaneous agreements on aesthetic judgement (p. 74). This establishes connections through the mutual understanding of each other's feelings of the sublime. "People learnt to see the fog in London only after Turner showed the mystery and beauty of its effects"
(Oscar Wilde, cited in Sebreli, 1987, p. 89). But there is a contradiction. If concurring on aesthetics is to promote unity between individuals, these judgements are deceptive because they are subjective claims that alienate the individuals by reporting on some feeling only valuable to them.

These historical shifts lead to changes in art styles that placed great significance on descriptive and over-stylised forms in order to attribute some realistic coherence to the instability societies were facing. Stress was given to the narration of the social concerns and quotidian banalities that modernity entailed.

The search for the 'real' and rejection of the 'ideal' became a powerful historic force that shaped social life. In the sciences, the search for 'reality' took the form of empiricism, in which directly observed evidence was studied as a means to understanding phenomena; in the social and political sciences, the study of history shifted from a metaphysical standpoint to one centered around man as a social being within the limits of a psycho physical causality. In art and literature it took the form of Realism, which sought to deal with a reality based on the humdrum, lived experiences of contemporary life. (Aravindan, 1995, p. 7).

Furthermore, Anderson (1983) argues that description and narration serve as reinforcing mechanisms when he asserts that “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating the remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (p. 40).

Photography was invented in modernity, an historical period of significant scientific changes that produced shifts in social needs and conditions and therefore called for new art forms to develop that reflected the times.

...the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly. (Barthes, 1982, p. 98).
Photography was considered a science in which reality could be reproduced unmediatedly and objectively because the camera, considered to be 'the pencil of nature' was a scientific tool and believed to be more reliable than humans. Photography largely replaced the art of portraiture and photographs were understood as accurate presentations of the sitter rather than subjective representations of them. 'Realist', in the modern visual arts discourse is, according to Szarkowski (1978), "the artist's acceptance of the surface appearance of things" (p. 19). The role of the photographer, a realist artist 'par excellence', has mistakenly been seen as that of a deliverer of objective reality. Because the camera has been understood as a scientific tool that was able 'to mirror reality', the photographer has been placed in a status in which objectivity was a possibility and reality was, for the photographer, to be discovered.
CASUAL ENCOUNTERS

What is happening today? What is happening now? And what is this 'now' which we all inhabit, and which defines the moment in which I am writing?


Salomon saith. There is no new thing upon the earth. So Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Salomon giveith his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion.

Francis Bacon: Essays LVIII, cited in Borges, 1957, p. 3.

"In order to imagine the unrepresentational space, life and languages of the city, to make them livable, we translate them into narratives" (Donald, 1999, p. 127). Berger argues that experiences are understood narratively. Therefore, to make sense of an image, we give it a life, a past and a future and that way "we insert it into a narrative." (cited in Evans, 1997, p. 40). The image becomes re-contextualised through the viewer's imagination and acquires a new life. The image has potential to become a part of as many narratives as it has viewers, who will give the image a meaning that will depend on their own life, their own narrative. There isn't a correct meaning for an image. All photographs are ambiguous because they are decontextualised and therefore outside a single narrative but are instead, inside many potential ones.

The flâneur, a modernist mythical figure, is useful as a narrative device because it embodies the uncertainty and curiosity necessary to examine the newness of modernity. To simply accept the flâneur at face value would be to accept representations as reality.
The *flâneur* is a mythological figure found in the urban, modernist aesthetic discourse rather than in real life. Nothing, Eagleton (1990) suggests, could be more disabled than a ruling rationality which can know nothing beyond its own concepts, forbidden from inquiring into the very stuff of passion and perception (p. 14). The importance of the *flâneur* is its utopian representation of a carefree but lost individual trying to make sense of the modern *milieu* it inhabits. The *flâneur* fetishises all that is aesthetic, and every sight has the potential to be aestheticized. Observation and aesthetic judgement, the *flâneur's raison d'être*, are pleasurable and fetishistic methods of understanding its reality and relationship to its environment.

The figure may be compared with the way in which the street photographer has often been misrepresented as a narrative and heroic figure. When personified with the aid of a camera, the *flâneur* is expected to be able to render the transitory nature of modernity that positioned it in an alienated status in the first place. The sense of fleetingness and constant flux the modern person was suddenly confronted with (aided by technological developments), led to the spread of photography from the 'studio' to the streets. "What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes, 1982, p. 4). Even though an aesthetic experience does not need the presence of art, it can rarely be lived without knowledge or a sensibility for it. The *flâneur*, though grounded in the aesthetics of everyday life, is an analytic form, a narrative device, a heroic attitude in search of knowledge and understanding of the ever-changing modern spaces and the transforming social contexts they entail. It is a mythical figure that 'slithers' through the social spaces of modernity.

The street photographer embodies the inquisitiveness of the *flâneur* in reading, mapping, and interpreting the social and geographical spaces within which s/he ventures. The
camera becomes both a passport and an excuse that allows this photographer to act on the impetus that drives that curiosity. The flâneur however, promises objectivity, it stands for a detached, God-like, omnipresent figure capable of seeing it all from all points of view, or if only from one, then from the one that stands for 'the real one'. The street photographer has often been attributed the mythical traits associated with the flâneur, as a person who is distanced from the modern flux, but observant enough to be able to view life as an objective reality. His/her work has mistakenly been seen as objective reality rather than a constructed set of representations dependent upon subjectivity.

Traditionally, the flâneur has been understood as a Parisian, modernist male figure. Janet Wolff raises the notions of gender ambiguity and argues against the possibility of a female flâneur, a flâneuse, when she asserts that women were excluded from modernity's construction because it was expressed by the flâneur who is by social (and linguistic) convention, masculine (in Tester, 1994, p. 127).

Wolff believes that gender identities are socially constructed and therefore unstable, even though their boundaries are relatively clear. At the turn of the century, Parisian women were mostly subjected to a domestic and a semi-public life of department stores. The shopping arcades created in the second half of the nineteenth century were 'the new domestic'. They represented a safe haven in which women could hide from the dangers that the new and unpredictable modern world represented. Priscilla P. Ferguson concurs with Wolff when she asserts the impossibility of women engaging in flânerie: "She is unfit for flânerie because she desires the objects spread before her and acts upon that desire. The flâneur, on the other hand, desires the city as a whole, not a particular part of it" (in Tester, 1994, p. 27). Wolff however, admits that "for women of the less conventional circles of the art world, it seems that walking in the streets of Paris was not the outrageous or dangerous activity which persistent bourgeois gender codes implied".
She goes on to quote painter Marie Bashkīrtseff’s journal:

Monday, July 21 [1884]: I walked for more than four hours today in search of a background for my picture; it is to be a street, but I have not yet fixed on a particular spot.

(cited in Tester, 1994, p. 124)

Furthermore, Greta Shiller, in her documentary ‘*Paris was a woman*’ argues that women, artists in particular, enjoyed independence in Paris since the 1st World War when they had to join the work force:

At the dawn of the 20th Century, Paris became a heaven for a new kind of woman... business life in Paris, during the war was taken over by women, so women came into roles outside the house and discovered their interest, their abilities and how to be trained on a job.

("Paris was a woman", 2000).

Moreover, Francie Oppe (2002, [on-line]) questioned the correctness of feminist historians who argue that men occupied the public sphere and women the private sphere:

The inter-connections are complex, and each sex has its own particular access to and involvement in both spheres. But only an intellectual approach which incorporates and explores the historical development of the public and the private and the relationship between them will be able to comprehend the real social relations of gender.

(Women and Culture Recycled. [on-line], 2002).

Even if theory suggests a different gender term for *flâneur* and *flâneuse*, the reality is that *flâneurism* is a myth or a concept rather than a gendered archetype. It is the representation of the modernist ideal of detachment and objectivity. It would be contradictory to assign this particular figure a gendered identity as doing so would limit its mythical characteristics and deny it access to places and thoughts traditionally associated with one gender. The *flâneur* is, above all, a chameleon that negotiates the multiple identities needed in order to camouflage and remain incognito in the new, fleeting and varied circumstances modernity has on offer.
One must differentiate between artistic and aesthetic experiences. Aesthetics concerns "the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical" (Eagleton, 1990, p. 14). An aesthetic consciousness is able to live superfluous moments or find itself in mundane places on which it can infer beauty. In every day life, banal sights constitute, to the rushed modern person, only a neutral background. To the flâneur however, every object, every banal sight, every mundane relationship becomes a source of sentimental and aesthetic value.

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kestrels or bars must speak to the wanderer like a crackling twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying. (Benjamin, 1986, p. 8)

Tied to tensions of the social and spatial metropolis, the flâneur wanders the streets exploring the local hoping to find the Universal. The figure takes pleasure in the diversity of the stimuli of the urban environment. Michel Tournier believes that the freedom and patient wait for the unexpected associated with the street photographer tends to be mystified. He is sceptical about the indiscriminate and whimsical strolls of the street photographer because often, the scenes in his/her work "seem already to bear his (or her) signature" (in Ferguson, 2001, p. 15). Often, the vernacular of the photographer in question creates a narrative that is indicative of his/her style. It is not mere coincidence, that the French word for photographic negative is 'cliché' (in Westerbeck & Meyerowitz, 1994, p.203).
W. Klein, 1995, p.83. ‘Mini gang’
Amsterdam Avenue, 1981

P. Ortiz-Monasterio, 1995, n/p, n/t.

‘Hyères, France’, n/y.

L. Friedlander, 1987 n/p, n/t, n/y.


'Masked woman in a wheelchair, Pa. 1970.'
Walker Evans, noting down ideas for a book wrote that the 'right things' can be found:

in Pittsburgh, Toledo, Detroit (a lot in Detroit, I want to get in some dirty cracks, Detroit's full of chances) Chicago business Stuff, probably nothing of New York but Philadelphia suburbs are smug and Endless:

Architecture, American urban taste Commerce, small scale, large scale. The city Street atmosphere, the street smell. The hateful stuff-- women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay.

The movies.

Evidence of what the people in the city read, Eat, see for amusement, do for relaxation And not get it.

(cited in Rathbone, 1995, n/p)

In America, accentuated by the crash of the 1930's, a shift from the beautifully composed, formalist aesthetic that favoured form above content occurred, and started to look at the social and economic issues of the times. Evans was working in America in the 30's with the photographic tradition that in 1992 Hamilton described as

the representation of major issues and concerns through their impact on specific individuals who are shown as the agents of their own destinies. It is a reaction against those totalitarian ideologies and impersonal economic forces which tend to treat people as monolithic and de-individualised mass (p. 30).

Evans, like the flâneur, rejects any identification with the spaces he frequents but is nevertheless focused on mapping and consuming the spectacles they have to offer. His notes not only confirm Tournier's suspicions but also indicate that his narratives
were pre-written. He knows what he wants to say and he goes were he can find it. There are no such whimsical strolls associated with the street photographer as those assigned to the flâneur, but a set and pre-written discourse to be found aesthetically.

The flâneur's appropriation of urban spaces takes place through its visual consumption. According to Walter Benjamin, the flâneur de-familiarised and became foreign to its native environment to be able to consume it as an exotic spectacle (Tester, 1994, p. 74). The sense of alienation linked to the street photographer is also a means of imposing a foreign and detached status that allows for the ideal of objectivity.

When you are young you are open to influences, and you go to them, you go to museums. Then the street becomes your museum; the museum itself is bad for you. You don't want your work to spring from art; you want it to commence from life, and that's in the street now.


W. Evans, 1994, p. 188. 'Chicago, 1946.

Evans' photographs illustrate him as a tourist, with no direct involvement with any of his subjects. 'Unnatural' camera angles present his subjects as odd and estranged. The idleness of the photographer intends objectivity, as if he could watch life itself, pass right in front of his eyes.
The flâneur closes the gap between the citizen and the city and brings the two together via imagination. “Observation proceeds above all via imagination” (Flaubert, cited in Sebreli, 1964, p. 87). Observation is therefore dependant on narrative and subjectivity. This process takes place via the reconstruction of the trace-evidence of social relations in their environments. Walker Evans’ work reveals an interest in constructing a social condition from which he alienates himself and presents no desire to be a part of. If his subjects are at a distance, they are shown as if he was detached and removed. If the people in his photographs are shot close-up, they are often estranged and odd. Comparatively, the flâneur’s original problem has been suggested to be its sense of alienation derived from the space-time dislocation and disorientation due to the expanding scale of social relations. If the ‘stranger’ is the foreigner who may become a native; the flâneur is the representation of a native who becomes a foreigner (Tester, 1994, p. 49). It is safe in a foreign, alienated status because, as Kant believes, it can console itself with the thought that “whatever can be known of me is by definition not me... since the subject cannot be captured in an objective representation” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 74). If that is the case, it
follows that both the flâneur and the photographer, cannot know their subjects and must come to terms with the fact that their knowledge of others is no more than self-reflected imagination.

According to Michel Foucault, the spaces in which we live are heterogeneous and draw us out of ourselves driving us to self-alienation. He believes that we live inside a set of relations that “delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (cited in Soja, 1996, p. 157). The flâneur sacrifices its mastery of its local environment treating its native city as a foreign world. The figure suffers from what Celeste Olalquiaga calls 'urban psychasthenia'. Urban psychasthenia is defined as a disruption in the understanding and perception of oneself in relation to one's surroundings. “Lost in the immense area that circumscribes it, the psychasthenic organism proceeds to abandon its own identity to embrace the space beyond. It does so by camouflaging itself into the milieu” (cited in Soja, 1996, p. 198). The flâneur not only rejects any identification with the crowd in which it hides but it also alienates itself from itself becoming the sights it consumes and distancing itself from any clues that could lead to self-recognition. The flâneur uses the crowd in which it hides as camouflage, and by blending in, it becomes, at least momentarily, a part of the milieu. The legend is able to mimic and become accustomed with everyone's points of view and gain an objective view of the world by acquiring the point of view of 'everyman'.

Benjamin, like Olalquiaga, views the relationship between the flâneur and the city it explores as one of estrangement (1969, p. 95). To the flâneur its city is no longer home because it represents a showplace. The flâneur can read the social characteristics from each face in the crowd. It can read and interiorise the stranger's occupation, social origin, etc. Benjamin refers to this characteristic as the 'phantasmagoria' of the flâneur (Tester, 1994 p. 87). Phantasmagoria is the flâneur's ability to project the social characteristics
needed at the time in order to identify with the crowd. In order to fulfil its myth, it enters people’s souls, it possesses them, it becomes them. Relations with others involve a kind of artistic miming. While it mingles with the crowd, observation and phantasmagoria become instinctive to the figure. As plausible as osmosis is to the flâneur, the photographer must be satisfied with the projection of his/her identity onto his/her subjects. “To go to a strange land where you don’t know anybody and barely speak the language forces you to give up talk, to quit seeking explanations, to live by images alone” (Robert Frank, in Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 352). The crowd is its prop, a means rather than an end. The flâneur, the urban observer, is someone clearly at home in the metropolis, capable of combining watchfulness while remaining incognito. The pleasure, according to Jarvis (1998), is in the sense of adventure through the decoding, reading the signs of its spatial surroundings (p. 43). The flâneur reads the city and maps this space; it calculates it, controls it and exploits it.

Modern spaces are produced and used by the flâneur as commodities. John Berger characterises modernity as “disembedding: 'the lifting out of social relations from local contexts' and their 'recombination' across infinite tracts of time/space” (cited in Evans, 1997, p. 39). In fact, as a Jew who grew up in Nazi Europe, Robert Frank could see clearly the racial prejudices around him in America and had to do something about it. “With the whites sitting in the front and the blacks in the back, it was a straight record shot of the American apartheid” (Szarkowski, n/d, p. 20).
Frank's compositions relied upon sensory experience rather than careful, pictorialist compositions. Images were not to be lyric and beautiful, but their juxtaposition and narrative had to reflect the photographer's stand on the social world which he inhabited. In fact, Helen Gee recalls that one afternoon, while she was walking amongst a crowd of shoppers in New York with Frank,

...he was clicking away, holding his camera by his side. The apparent lack of formal structure in his photographs, aided in part by this deliberate embrace of random shooting, contributed to the development of a style that matched the atomie suffusing the photographs' content. (cited in Ferguson, 2001, p. 10)

Frank's lack of formal structure gave way to a new wave of photographers that placed greater importance on the editing of images in order to construct a desired narrative rather than presenting the 'closed', decisive photographs that were supposed to be somewhat self-explanatory and self-contained that had interested his Europeans predecessors such as Cartier-Bresson or Doisneau.
Baudelaire (1964) writes on the flâneur, that its passion and its profession are to become in flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, "it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude... in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite... to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" (p. 99). Baudelaire shares with Benjamin not only the understanding of how the flâneur views the modern city, but also the way it experiences its constant spatial-temporal renovation. Robert Frank’s ‘New York City, 1947’ serves as an example of the pictorialist, fleeting traces that he carried to America from Europe while it presents the viewer with the sense of alienation and dislocation he was working with at the time. In fact, it cannot be mere coincidence that the building depicted is the 'Times'.

Dear parents,

Never have I experienced so much in one week as here. I feel as if I'm in a film. Life here is very different than in Europe. Only the moment counts, nobody seems to care about What he'll do tomorrow. (Frank, 1996, p. 26)
Modern spaces are characterised by what Baudelaire termed "le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent - what is transitory, fleeting and contingent" (Donald, 1999, p. 45). Cartier-Bresson mastered the halting of time in the modern street. He was concerned with the form and lyricism of a photograph more than with its content. He was not interested in the social issues that could be raised through the creation of a narrative but valued instead the images that were 'closed' or self-contained, "Images à la sauvette", or images made on the run, in the midst of things was the 'Decisive Moment' associated with this photographer" (Cartier-Bresson, 1980, p. 58). He seemed to fastidiously wait for a moment, a revelation, that could, in his eyes, outline modernity's flux. The 'revelation' Cartier-Bresson waited for had to suggest a harmonious unity in its form which transcended the discontinuities of modernity's flux. This new way of seeing began in France between the two World Wars and was introduced by the invention of the hand-
held, small format 35mm camera which used a roll of film that could be rapidly advanced instead of the larger format view camera. Since this camera could stop action instantly, the photographer could make a picture while remaining unseen and anonymous.

Mexican photographer Alvarez Bravo on the other hand, living far from the cultural capitals of modernity, was only able to view the artistic developments of France and America through magazines and journals. That, allowed him to develop a personal style with influences from the thriving national art scene. Moreover, the photographer echoed the role of the popular artist in 1966 when he wrote

> Popular art is the art of the People....A popular painter is an artisan who, as in the Middle Ages, remains anonymous. His work needs no advertisement, as it is done for the people around him.... It is the work of talent nourished by personal experience and by that of the community- rather than being taken from the experiences of other painters in other times and other cultures, which forms the intellectual chain of non-popular art. (Kismaric, 1997, p. 15)

In fact, some of the photographs that he has taken involve wall painting (much like the tradition of Mexican muralists such as Rivera, Tamayo, Siqueiros, etc) and everyday street scenery. The photographs seem to give the illusion that there is correspondence between the subject in the street and the theme of the graffiti. It is only through these
scenes, that Alvarez Bravo works decisively in order to arrest the correspondence presented in the scene. The relationship between the subject and his/her background seem to be inseparable from one another. Mexicans Alvarez Bravo’s, Graciela Iturbide’s and

Pablo Ortiz Monasterio’s photographs present men as empowered icons that watch over women and allude to the juxtaposition between modern urbanism depicted through the clothing, graffiti and advertising and tradition, depicted through the hats and moustaches and the murals which are traditionally Mexican. Alvarez Bravo’s pictures, aided by a large format camera, seem to arise from a thoughtful and planned composition rather than the quick decisive moment associated with his contemporaries who started using the new 35mm in Europe and the U.S.A.

The flâneur guards its individuality by obscuring it beneath the mask of an anonymous person of the crowd. It alienates itself from any subjective exchange with other members of the crowd making objectivity possible through lack of involvement. It is only at home in the crowd, incognito and uncompromised. Benjamin suggests that the crowd is the veil that hides the mass from the flâneur. “The mass is amorphous, an aggregate in which
individuality is lost” (Jervis, 1998, p. 81). The flâneur needs to be understood as a closure to the contradictive ideal of subjective and objective representations. Personifying the fable, Frank told a group of students in 1971,

I think there were only two or three photographs where I did talk to the person, but most of the time I was absolutely silent, walking through the landscape, through the city, and photographing and turning away. Well, that is my temperament, to be silent, just looking on. ... What I liked about photography was precisely this: that I could walk away and I could be silent and it was done very quickly and there was no direct involvement. (Frank, in Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 352).

Even though Garry Winogrand has turned his sense of alienation and dislocation into an aesthetic, confronting style, he concurs with Frank when he stated that:

... You've heard photographers talk about how they want to know the place better and so on - they are really talking about their own comfort. Let me put it this way - I have never seen a photograph from which I could tell how long the photographer was there, how well he knew it... I start shooting. I look. I don't have to know the language, I don't have to know where to get a good cup of coffee.

(Winogrand cited in Ferguson, 2001, p. 13).

The flâneur camouflages its identity in order to blend in and work out multiple (and even opposing) representations of the crowd in which it hides. The photographer on the other hand, is merely able to project his/her own identity onto others and construct from them a subjective representation. The flâneur's interpretations are believed as true because it
offers an omnipresent ideal that is able to see without being seen, to be everywhere at once and therefore present the illusion of objectivity. It is a self-indulgent, self-reflective figure that reinvents itself from the sights it consumes. It can put on whatever mask is necessary in order to gain access where it wants to go. It is in control of the world because it invents its world. The myth of the flâneur promises an ideal of objectivity and truth; the fact of the photographer is the limitation of subjective representations. The flâneur narrates the myth of the modernist hero’s journey who goes on a 'walkabout'; not to find itself but to invent itself. The merging between the hero and the photographer "can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art" (Rabinow, 1984, p. 42). The modern world is their greatest contradiction: on the one hand it is in itself no more than a background or screen to their views and fetishes they consume and project in order to make sense of their renewing reality. On the other hand, the world is sublime, unrepresentable, limitless and overwhelming. Either way, their worlds allow for infinite connections and opportunities for gaze and self-invention.
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.


Photographers that camouflaged their identities have often been misrepresented through their association to the mythical flâneur. By doing so, they have been attributed characteristics that are plausible to an ideal, but impossible to fulfil by a human being. Photographers' interpretations of their realities have been understood as 'Reality': a universal one that is common to everyone and the distinctions between objective myth and subjective representations, belittled.

Once the photographer's identity is revealed to his/her subjects, however, the ideal of objectivity is replaced by a reciprocity that largely determines the outcome of the image. A relationship created between the photographer and the subject is not only evident in the image but, to some extent, their reciprocity and interaction becomes the image itself.

Photography, a realist art form, works with and against apparent banalities of quotidian life. John Berger (1982) explains that appearances constitute language in which their meanings may be understood according to socially constructed codes (p. 112). Appearances constitute language because they rely upon semiological systems; that is, widely understood codes within a society such as body language, fashion, gestures, etc. Secondly, they constitute language because they cohere. They cohere due to cultural codes that facilitate the establishing of visual affinities that allow us to distinguish and
join events. Thirdly, they cohere in the mind as perceptions and memories in which mood and emotions motivate particular readings of the appearances. Berger (1982) concludes by stating that photographs directly 'quote from appearances' (p. 112), with the mundane and apparent becoming as important as what is obviously deep.

People within a community share culturally established, and therefore fluctuating, codes of behaviour. Most people tend to comply with and negotiate those rules whereas others react aberrantly to them. Cultural differences add to social diversity and therefore construct alternative understandings and identities of that community. Photographers make use of those codes of behaviour in order to construct and direct the meaning of their work towards their preferred construct of it. They may use both the compliant and normative behaviours in a community, or those who rebel against them either to criticise or to support their views on that community. The manner in which photographers choose to approach their subjects will largely determine the construct of their work.

Unlike those photographers who are traditionally assigned the detached, impersonal and anonymous characteristics of the flâneur, there are photographers who form an active presence in the images they construct. Their presence becomes apparent due to a face to face interaction that allows for a dynamic reciprocity between the photographer and the subject. The photograph ceases to deceive the viewer into believing that the photographer merely captured an objective reality displayed before him/her but questions, instead, whether the outcome of the image is the result of a two-way interaction and the negotiation between the photographer and the subject is what becomes represented in the image.

Social communication encompasses a wide range of human interactions. Interactions exist whenever there is more than one person present and each is aware of the others'
presence. These people will inevitably accommodate their behaviour in order to better suit the situation they face, and the possible responses of others. Both the recognition and the avoidance of someone else's presence are forms of social interaction. Photographers often encourage the interaction with their subjects in a desired direction in order to promote a reading of its outcome. They goad their subjects into responding in a way that will help to shape their desired construction of their work.

Identity and the Self

As one navigated this vast world of strangers, one quickly learned that to the eyes of countless others one became a stranger oneself. Anonymity was not only the characteristic of others; it was also becoming a component of subjectivity, part of the way one came to understand oneself.

(Sennett, cited in Jervis, 1998, p. 55)
Everybody is born into a culture, and from birth we assimilate its knowledge, beliefs, customs and morals. Individuals that share an environment and have communal experiences, expectations and memories negotiate culture. Through time, our own culture becomes so familiar to us that we tend to take it for granted (Sebreli, 1987, p. 58). Diane Arbus' world reminds us otherwise. Her work represents the strange and hidden, the fairy tale and the nightmare; what is everywhere present but seldom represented or seen because it has been carefully tucked away from view. “The photographs appear to be documents of a world we've never seen or imagined before, which for all its strangeness, is at the same time hauntingly familiar and, in the end, no more or less unfathomable than our own” (Doon Arbus, 1995, n.p). Individuals, according to Walmsley (1988), ascribe meanings within and determined by the culture they live in, which serves as a frame of reference that helps individuals cope with their immediate world and their social interactions (p. 85).

D. Arbus, 1972, n/p.
‘A flower girl at a wedding, Conn., 1964’

Although social conventions are unstated for individuals in their own community, social and cultural realities are not objective, they are subjective, and people constantly need to negotiate their understandings of their culture in order to infer meanings (Karp & Yoels, 1993, p. 54). Diane Arbus' photographs speak to the viewer about herself and her stylised vision of the world rather than only representing her stand on the social reality which she was part of. Her photographs speak of her and the specific milieu she photographed.
rather than America in the '60's. Her work, like many of her contemporaries', arose as a reaction against the idealistic constructions of post-war America. In 1955, the exhibition "The Family of Man" showed at the MoMA. The exhibition was considered seminal for humanist-realist photography because it showed "the great positive image of an unproblematicised and noble world" (Hevey, 1992, p. 55). Arbus' understanding of America in the 60s was very different than the one represented in that exhibition. It was also different from Frank's America in the 50s and even further apart from Evans' America at the time. Even though the three photographers happened to live and work in the same place and at the same time, their understandings of the society they lived in differed and therefore created different sensibilities in their photographic work.

Unlike Arbus' earlier work, where she seemed to hide behind the 'freakishness' of the people she photographed, deceiving the viewer into believing that her representations were an objective, flâneur-like reality, her later work portrayed mentally retarded patients in their residences where she became an active participant in the pictures. "No one else had ever posed for her so unself-consciously, with such abandon, such equanimity about their own sense of identity" (Doon Arbus, "Where I've never been", 1989). Arbus' early
photographs of freaks reveal a fragile relationship between her and her subjects. Her camera acts as a shield of which only one side is singled out. In her later work however, she is as 'visible' as her subjects. The outcome of their negotiation results in an image where the reciprocity between the photographer and her subjects is identifiable or at least a recognisable one to the viewer. The objectivity once promised by the flâneur is discovered, dismissed and replaced by an evident negotiation between the photographer and the subject.

People cannot be captured in an objective representation. People change according to the situation they face and negotiate their interactions in order to drive the interaction towards their desired outcome. Therefore, urban personalities are split subjectivities in constant need to battle and negotiate their performances according to the audiences and their expectations. Through interactions with others, one develops a conception of one’s self. Only through one’s relationships with others can one’s individuality be realised because people can only view themselves, as they believe others view them (Goffman, 1967, p. 84). One simply has to acknowledge that basic and pervasive elements of self-conception may lie behind and motivate the particular performances that individuals choose. Therefore, individuals are constantly fragmented due to the heterogeneous urban milieu in which they live (Smith, 1980, p. 8).
Strangers' interaction

All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.


Sociologists E. Goffman, D. Karp, W. Yoels and G. Stone looked closely at the sociology of the everyday. Instead of limiting their studies to 'the fringes' of the societies they analysed, they concentrated on the seemingly uneventful and banal of the daily interaction between strangers. These studies are useful when analysing the relationship between street photographers and their subjects as they often use the routine and rituals of daily interaction between strangers in their environment in order to construct an artistic discourse of the space and time in which they work.

Much of a person's time in a city is spent in front of an audience of strangers. Part of our lives are spent in front of people whom we have never seen before and are likely to never see again. When strangers meet, they normally play roles that show uncertainty about their encounters. Because strangers arrive at encounters with different beliefs and backgrounds, they need to negotiate their values in order to interpret the interactions.
Patterned and predictable presentations of one's self are necessary to derive meaning from those encounters. It is through the blending of such values and meanings that relationships can evolve. Because strangers select a stylised presentation of themselves, however, the meeting presents itself as segmental and volatile. The role player must be consistent with the performance that is being put forward in order to not run the risk of wariness and mistrust of their audience.

Goffman (1959) believes that people systematically exclude or suppress information about themselves that might be conflicting during the interaction (p. 62). They consider the audience’s values and monitor their own presentation accordingly. Strangers, when interacting, stereotype one another. They attribute qualities to one another that might be deceptive. They mould each other in a patterned and recognisable fashion in order to ease each other’s expectations of the encounter. By assuming particular roles, they encourage each other’s desired perception of themselves and dissipate undesired value judgments. The role players themselves largely form these stereotypes of themselves in order to facilitate the desired reading of their performance by the audience. The audience’s background however, will inevitably differ from the role-player’s and therefore affect the player’s desired reading of the encounter.
If, as Goffman believes, what matters is the role player's appearance, reputation is at stake. Role players must conceal certain aspects of themselves in an attempt to make others view them in the way they wish to be positioned. However, in the documentary "Were I've Never Been", Diane Arbus acknowledges the fragility of role-playing when she asserts that "there is a point between what you want people to know and what you can't help people knowing about you" ("Where I've Never Been", 1989). In her "Untitled" series, a compilation of photographs made at residences for mentally retarded people is on display. About half of those images show her subjects wearing masks. When looking at them, one wonders whether the face behind the mask does in fact belong to one of her 'freaks' or if it belongs to a 'normal' person playing the role of a 'freak'. She plays with the ambiguity of role-playing and our inability to completely see through it. Arbus knows that no matter how many times one looks at the images, one can never completely distil a true representation of the subject, an uncanny ability possessed by the omnipresent fièncur, but not possible to a human being. Goffman's (1967) social analysis also acknowledges the fragility of role-playing by questioning the extent to which role-players are consistent with their own image of self. It is not a matter of judging the sincerity of the individual, as according to Goffman, nobody is exempt from being a multi-roled-player (p. 108). Moreover, referring to the personae constructed in the presence of strangers, especially those armed with a camera, Barthes (1985) has written that:
Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens everything changes; I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one; I feel that the photograph creates my body and mystifies it, according to its caprice... I decide ‘to let drift’ over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be the indefinable in which I might suggest, along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual: I lend myself to the social game, I pose... In front of the lens, I am at the same time, the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. Roland Barthes. p. 13

'Mini gang, Amsterdam Ave, 1955'.

Unless strangers seek to transgress, they tend to conduct themselves in such a way that their own image and those of other participants can be protected. Their performances become predictable and without surprises that could call their personae into question. Both the constructions of a favourable persona and a positive reaction to other’s fabricated impressions give power through the information exchanged. Rebelling not only against people’s compliant behaviour but also criticising the anonymity and mythical belief in objectivity some photographers conduct themselves with William Klein (1981) acknowledged that: “The way a subject reacts to the camera can create a kind of happening. Why pretend the camera isn’t there? Maybe people will reveal themselves as violent or tender, crazed or beautiful. But in some way, they reveal who they are. They’ll have taken a self-portrait” (p. 18). In some way, they do reveal who they are, but the subject will select a persona that s/he considers appropriate or convenient to
reveal at the time. They would be taking one of infinite possible self-portraits. The reciprocity created between the subject and the photographer will create a stylised persona that was made possible by that interaction and camera mediation alone. If any of the factors changed (subject-photographer-context), the outcome would be a different one.

Klein's photographs deal specifically with the interaction created between him and the strangers he seems to blockade in the street. He deals with the notions of trust, intimidation, bullying and defence but does not invite any compassion. He clearly battles notions of alienation, but instead of dealing with this through the secrecy and anonymity associated with the flâneur, he harasses his subjects until they react to him and to his camera. The pictures in which his subjects react to him are the most draining and threatening. As viewers, we are positioned in an awkward situation in which we cannot identify with his subjects nor the photographer. We find ourselves defenseless and threatened by a situation about which we know nothing. The photographer does not identify with his subjects, the subjects do not identify with the photographer and, questioning their own moral stand, the viewer rejects them both.

Attracting people's attention in public requires as much effort as avoiding it. Disobedient to the rules of modernist photography, Klein rebelled against the incognito it represented. Reacting against the detached behaviour the flâneur employs in order to remain anonymous, Klein relentlessly 'pokes' his subjects until he finds a reaction from them. "Klein does not photograph violence but photographs violently, he proceeds about his work in broad daylight, carrying a hand grenade... but without a camera he rarely looks at another person in the eye" (Heilpern in Klein, 1981, p. 7). He rebels against the behaviour that allows for the production of anonymity and plays with the rules and conventions of social conformity. Karp (1993) examines the idea of anonymity by
stating that: “it is the very special characteristic of anonymity that it is the result of a normatively guided social production giving the appearance of normlessness and the absence of social character. To see the social character of anonymity, one must see how anonymity is *produced*” (p. 104 emphasis in the original).

**Anonymity**

Strangers typically confront each other in anonymous situations. Anonymity, however, is maintained through social interaction too, as it is in itself a performance and social strategy (Karp, 1991, p. 103). Taking photographs for Doisneau and Cartier-Bresson, was a means of encapsulating stranger's behaviours without forming an active factor that, in their eyes, could alter the sense of objectivity presented in their photographs. They represented their subjects often unaware of their presence and therefore gave the impression of a flâneur-like, unmediated reality that lacked the stylised conformity of the interaction between strangers.
Anonymity cannot be taken for granted as if it were independent of social relationships. Quite the contrary, anonymity can only be realised through interacting agents (Karp, 1991, p. 103).

“Cartier-Bresson, you might say, is the nocturnal burglar who knows the combination of the safe in advance. He wears a mask, working by stealth with expert economy and grace. No one sees him at work; no one sees him leave. He is a wealthy burglar” (Heilpern in Klein, 1981, p. 18). In Goffman’s (1967) terms, people get involved in ‘civil inattention’ when they recognize the presence of strangers and they wish to remain unacknowledged. To retain anonymity, they minimise the possibility of ‘focused interaction’ through several avoidance mechanisms. The most appropriate descriptions he finds for relationships between strangers in a city are: intimate anonymity, public privacy and involved indifference (p. 133).
Even when Lee Friedlander's face is not seen in his photographs, he is always present.

His unclear reflection, his shadow, his mirrored image is always a part of his images. The viewer sees him but his subject doesn't. We become a voyeur. We become a *flâneur*. We become him. His subjects are always invaded by us. With him, we seem to be omnipresent. He mystifies himself and his alienation by stalking and hunting his prey. The viewer anonymously participates in his crimes and our job is not to be mere viewers of his actions but to watch Friedlander's back.

**Diversity**
A central characteristic of a city is social and cultural diversity. Cultures are not impenetrable, closed circuits. Every culture is interdependent and urbanites learn to tolerate, adapt to and enjoy an array of heterogeneous lifestyles. Even though problems do arise due to intolerance towards different lifestyles or beliefs, urbanism is distinctively multicultural and multiclassed. Ortiz Monasterio records the signs of social disparity in his native Mexico City. He and his city have been influenced by the neighbouring U.S.A and its overwhelming creation of desire for consumption that is not accessible to most.

“Above all, today Mexico City is a city of the poor; it is the poor who at the close of the twentieth century, are its natural inhabitants. The rest of us, though we may have been born here and we live here, have become foreigners” (Pacheco in Ortiz Monasterio, 1995, p. 3). The de-familiarisation and the alienation the flâneur imposes itself in order to became a foreigner and consume its city as an exotic spectacle, is not an option to Ortiz Monasterio. He comes back and forth, investigating and inquiring into both sides of the contradictions that abound in his city in a style that is faithful to the influences of his compatriot photographers and muralist artists.

Each group is likely to interpret the city according to their background. White American literary critic Alfred Kazin and African American novelist Chester Himes wrote their
urban memoirs of New York (cited in Zukin, 1995, p. 197). Even though the memoirs were written thirty-nine years apart, they share the segregation and difference that actively produced division for both authors acting as key strategies to create and maintain social and spatial boundaries.

The early hopelessness burns at my face like fog the minute I get off the subway. I can smell it in the air... It hangs over the Negro tenements in the shadows of the El-darkened street, the torn and flapping canvas sign still listing the boys who went to war, the stagnant wells of candy store and pool parlours, the torches flaring at dusk over the vegetable carts and pushcarts, the neon signs blazing fronts of liquor stores, the piles of Halifax and chocolate kisses in the window of the candy store next to News and Mirror, the dusty old drugstores where suns of rose and blue and pink coloured water still swing from chairs, and where next door Mr. A's sign still tells anyone walking down Rockaway Avenue that he has pants to fit any colour suit. Alfred Kazin, 1951.

Seavil Avenue ran from 55th Street to 14th Street on the edge of the black ghetto and was the most degraded street I had ever seen. The police once estimated that there were 1,599 black prostitutes cruising the 40 blocks of Seavil Avenue at one time. The black whores on Seavil for the most part were past their thirties, vulgar, scarred, dim-witted, in many instances without teeth, diseased, and poverty-stricken. Most of the black men in the neighbourhood lived on the earnings of the whores and robbed the "hunkies". They gambled for small change, fought, drank poisonous 'white mule', cut each other up, and died in the gutter. Chester Himes, 1990.

Both authors start their memoirs by describing the sense of hopelessness they felt in the area even though there is a notable difference in how the spatial and cultural perception of the city is described by these authors. For both, the perceived spaces they describe materialise to them in the formation of their own identities. They experience spaces very differently: what is culture to one, is exclusion to the other. White middle-class Kazin's New York is made up of displays and commodities, sights and colours, nostalgia of lost times. African American lower class Himes' New York is made up of poverty and boundaries, ghettos and exclusion, rejecting any identification with the group he describes. The city, for each person, is the core of completely different values and sights that are largely determined by their background and the meanings they infer from them.
It is precisely in the diversity, heterogeneity and the apparent anarchic consciousness of a community that the foundation of its identities are most likely to be discovered. Manifested through their interaction, photographers make use of their subject's understandings of their society in order to construct a discursive body of work that represents the photographer’s stand on the society in which they work. In the collective interpretations of the environment, and of the human relations within it, are interspersed the subjective understandings each member infers from those relationships. Both the subjective and collective interpretations produce the cultures a community share.

Everyday life has its own specialised sociology; community and cultural identity help to form a unique conception of self within the structure of a collective identity. Our performances and concepts of self are partly conditioned by our daily interactions with strangers and their expectations, with whom we control our inevitable encounters by the
use of varying degrees of anonymity. By remaining anonymous, photographers make a choice and therefore construct stylised and subjective body of works. By choosing to interact with their subjects, photographers create a reciprocity that becomes visible in their images. The almighty flâneur is able to see through the performances employed by strangers when interacting and in their fruitless attempts to avoid doing so. He is therefore able to gain objectivity. Photographers however, lacking that figure's superpowers, are limited to the characteristics of human beings and must be content with the power to direct the course of the interaction with the strangers they photograph in order to obtain a desired outcome to be represented in their images.
Personal Encounters

By moving from my homeland but photographing there I am, like the flâneur, a native who has become a foreigner. As such, I too am placed in a position where I consume my own as an exotic spectacle. Nevertheless, by mostly approaching my subjects in a face to face manner, the reciprocity created between us is far from being one of estrangement. I disregard the incognito, ubiquity and psychasthenic characteristics of the myth and replace them with a synergy that is negotiated between the stranger's selection of the persona put forward to me and my camera, and my own expectations of our encounter that become evident in the resulting images.

The use of a medium-format camera forces me to work slowly, and the use of a wide angle lens allows me to get closer to the person, justifying the curiosity that lures me towards each stranger. The images become a negotiation between the strangers and me within specific interactions and contexts. We interact and pose for each other in order to find a common ground of identification. This reciprocity is reflected in the image, speaking almost as much about my reaction toward the poseur as it does about the strangers' reaction to my intrusion.

Aware of the clichés the medium employs, I scrutinise them and exploit them by repeating the ready-made formulas of other photographers. Masks, 'freaks', mirrors and reflections, photographs within photographs, all are easy prey. The photographer, the subject, the context, or all three, will be different and therefore the photograph will inevitably be too.
I choose to work in colour because South America is stained with it. Few of the photographers I made use of as examples experimented with colour because it was unavailable until the 1940s. It was impermanent and the resources were scarce and expensive. Black and white photographs tend to evoke lyricism and nostalgia by moving the viewer a step backward from the realistic nature of the medium. Colour, on the other hand, denotes 'the present' and 'the real' and stimulates the viewer into intuiting the chaotic nature of South American cities, whereas the tonal limits of black and white would reduce them to an undulating blend.

Raised and educated under Latin American canons and values, I immigrated to Australia at nineteen incorporating the various and disordered aspects that constitute me as who I am today: a first and third world mixture of formality and clumsiness, order and confusion. Her and I, another person and me travel back to South America and merge, with the help of others, into the camera, not knowing who they are, she is or I am. Whether it is me, her, both of us, others, or simply all of us.
Bibliography:


