

Garry Winogrand at Rice University – Deep-Dive Lecture Notes

A structured, in-depth study guide to the 2-hour conversation. Organized for fast review and long-term study.

Overview

Core thesis: Winogrand insists that photographs are **not narratives or opinions in words**; they are **records of what a piece of time and space looked like to a camera**. The photographer’s job is to make pictures that are **more dramatic** (more compelling) than the thing photographed—**without** loading the frame with self-conscious “artiness.”

*“They show you what a piece of time and space looked like **to a camera**.”*

*“The work has to be **more dramatic** than what was photographed.”*

*“I would like **not to exist** [in the picture].”*

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Context & Set-Up

- Informal talk with prints pinned around the room; meandering, blunt, funny, combative.
 - No slides; work prints and seconds; conversation ricochets among **history, gear, editing, ethics,** and **teaching.**
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Key Themes & Arguments

- **Transparency vs. Strategy:** He praises Walker Evans for a near **absence of strategy**—pictures where the photographer seems to *get out of the way*.
- **Camera’s Vision:** A camera **doesn’t see like the eye**; photography records how the camera parses space and time.
- **Anti-Narrative:** Photos don’t “tell stories” well; they **don’t carry literary propositions.**
- **Ambiguity by Specificity:** Good photos are **specific** yet can’t settle narrative facts; they *function like puns.*
- **Drama Threshold:** The photograph must **exceed** the inherent drama/beauty of the subject.

- **Editing is Fluid:** Selections are **contingent**—he could pick a different “top 10” every day.
 - **Learning from Work:** Technique is simple; growth comes from **doing**, looking, and **being your own toughest critic**.
 - **Gear Shapes Behavior:** Tools constrain/enable what you can *physically* do and therefore what pictures you can make.
 - **Distance from Subjects:** He doesn’t “get to know” people while photographing; he’s not “running for mayor.”
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Comparative Aesthetics: Evans, Frank, Weston

Walker Evans — “Transparent”

- *Claim:* Closest to **no overt strategy**; photographer “**gets out of the way.**”
- *Effect:* Pictures feel inevitable rather than designed.

*“Evans... is as close to the **absence of a strategy** as I know of.”*

Robert Frank — Casual Strategy

- *Claim:* Pictures **feel like they happened**; “camera operation” and attitude taught Winogrand a lot.
- *Anecdote:* Both photographed the same LA statue; Frank’s version “killed” Winogrand’s.

*“The picture I made was **made**; the picture he made **happened.**”*

Edward Weston — “Arty”

- *Claim:* Explicitly about **making art**; a self-conscious strategy that can defeat itself.

Bottom line: Arty vs. anti-arty **are both strategies**; Evans is exceptional for **minimizing** the sense of strategy while maintaining an unmistakable voice.

Medium Theory: Camera Seeing vs. Human Seeing

- **Photographs ≠ Sight ≠ Language.**
- Photographs present the **camera's solution** to space/time—**not** what you “saw,” and **not** a sentence.
- Therefore, judging photos as if they were **arguments** or **stories** is a category error.

*“You’re **not a camera**... You don’t see the way a camera sees.”*

Narrative, Ambiguity, and “Puns”

- Photos lack **narrative certainty** (e.g., *is she pulling her swimsuit up or down?*).
- Yet they are **precise** about surfaces and relations.
- They work like **puns**: they **unsettle** your assumptions and then **resolve** into recognition/relief.

*“They function like **puns**... They make you question what you think you know.”*

Drama as the Bar

- Photographing inherently dramatic or inherently dull things: the challenge is the same—
Make a photograph that is more dramatic/interesting than the thing itself.

*“How do you make a photograph that is **more dramatic** than what was photographed? **That’s the problem.**”*

Tools, Lenses, and the Way Gear Designs Your Pictures

- **View cameras:** “Archaic” except for tilt/swing depth; if he used one, it’d be **8×10/11×14** for contacts.
- **Rangefinder (Leica) vs. SLR:**
- Small lenses on SLR ground glass make **everything look sharp** → you add focusing aids → the camera **pushes you** toward **designed illustrations** (especially with long lenses and out-of-focus blobs).
- Rangefinders are **simpler**, fewer moving parts, and avoid “buying mechanism” you don’t use.

*“The tools you use are **responsible** for how the pictures look.”*

*“I don’t want to buy all that **mechanism** I don’t use.”*

Working rule of thumb:

- **Short lenses + rangefinder** → proximity, framing freedom, minimal mechanical bias.
- **Long lenses + SLR** → the finder **manipulates** you into design.

Practice Notes: Rodeo, Football, Access, and “Junk Action”

- **Access defines problem-space.** From the aisle (no arena access), he took what he could get—sometimes “**junk action**” (i.e., not the “money” peak rodeo shots).
- With a **90mm + tele-strobe**, he could engage more “real action” the next year; **equipment changed the problem.**
- Football at night: the **event quality** doesn’t guarantee better pictures—“**It’s only pictures we’re getting.**”

*“It depends on what kind of **murder** you can get away with.”*

Editing, Sequencing, and Being “A Good Editor”

- **Selections are provisional:** He could choose a different set tomorrow; **don’t worship** your selections.
- On *Public Relations*: **Todd Papageorge** curated; Winogrand only lets **equals** edit him (“inferiors” must pay a fortune).

*“If I had to pick 20 today, **10 would be different tomorrow.**”*

*“Only be edited by my **equals**... otherwise pay a **fortune.**”*

Teaching, Learning, and Contact Sheets

- **Technique is easy;** film is forgiving; you can screw up and still print a negative.
- You **learn from work**, not teachers; be your **own toughest critic**.
- Contact sheets later reveal frames you **couldn’t understand** at the time—your **camera outpaces** your comprehension.

*“You don’t learn from teachers. **You learn from work.**”*

*“The camera doesn’t know what you understand... your **understanding may catch up** with a frame.”*

Classroom ethic: If he says something you can’t see in the picture, **nail him**—“If it isn’t physical, it’s **rhetoric.**”

On Other Photographers (Arbus, Sander, Avedon, FSA)

- **Diane Arbus:** Tough, self-aware; sometimes “nice” for her own needs; did **very good work** (and some very bad).
- **August Sander vs. Richard Avedon:**
- Sander: a **catalogue of types** (occupations/costume).
- Avedon: a **more personal/human** interest in individual people.
- **FSA cohort:** Praises **Dorothea Lange** and **Russell Lee**; thinks many others didn’t sustain first-rate work after FSA.

*“Sander was making a **catalog**... Avedon is **absolutely interested** in these people as people.”*

(Note: His critique of Bruce Davidson’s East 100th Street is extremely harsh—he argues it reflects condescending liberal stereotypes. Summarized here without repeating harmful phrasing.)

Place: New York, Austin, LA, SF

- **Photograph where you are.**
- **NYC:** anonymity = **cover**; can return to the same corner for years unseen.
- **Austin:** too small; “no cover.”
- **LA vs. SF:** LA is more interesting to him; SF feels **culturally competitive** with NY in a way he dislikes.

*“I photograph **where I am.**”*

Selected Quotations

*“**I would like not to exist.**”*

*“Evans... is as close to the **absence of a strategy** as I know.”*

*“The picture I made was **made**; the picture he made **happened**.”*

*“It’s only **pictures** we’re getting.”*

*“**Technique is easy**... You learn from **work**.”*

*“If I had to pick 20 today, **10 would be different tomorrow**.”*

*“Only be edited by my **equals**; otherwise pay a **fortune**.”*

*“If I say something you don’t see in the picture, **nail me**... If it isn’t physical, it’s **rhetoric**.”*

Patterns in Winogrand’s Thinking

1. **Physicalism:** What’s in the frame is what you can argue from. Everything else is rhetoric.
 2. **Tool Realism:** Gear is not neutral; it **creates constraints** that shape seeing/behavior.
 3. **Anti-Literary Bias:** Resist treating photos like essays/novels; they are **not** verbal arguments.
 4. **Contingency & Fluidity:** Selections/edits are **time-bound** decisions; be willing to change.
 5. **Learn by Doing:** Critical faculty grows from **volume of work** and **re-seeing** contact sheets.
 6. **Self-Effacement:** Strives toward **transparency**, minimizing the author’s “strategy” in the frame.
 7. **Raise the Bar:** The subject’s drama is **not enough**; the **photograph** must exceed it.
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Practical Takeaways for Your Practice

- **Shoot for transparency:** Compose to **reduce signs of strategy**; let events register.
 - **Let gear fit the job:**
 - **Rangefinder + short lenses** for fluid proximity.
 - **SLR + long lenses** when you must (sports), but stay wary of being pushed into illustration.
 - **Access is a variable:** When blocked, change tools or vantage to **change the problem**.
 - **Edit lightly, often:** Make the show/book, then move on; accept **different “best” lists** across time.
 - **Mine your contact sheets:** Revisit regularly; assume your camera **made pictures you couldn't yet understand**.
 - **Argue from the picture:** In critique, demand **visible evidence**; avoid claims the frame can't support.
 - **Set the drama bar:** Ask whether the frame **surpasses** the subject's inherent interest.
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Audience Q&A Highlights

Q: Do you strive to be transparent?

*“I'd like **not to exist**... In the end, all I can do is wrestle and whatever comes out.”*

Q: Are Leicas archaic vs. auto SLRs?

*Calls that “stupid”; with small lenses, SLRs force focusing aids and **push design**; prefers rangefinders' simplicity.*

Q: Why call your early rodeo frames ‘junk action’?

Relative to the **arena photographers'** peak moments; his access/lens limited him—**different problem**, different pictures.

Q: Are photos ambiguous?

They're **specific** yet can't settle narrative facts; they work like **puns**, upsetting assumptions.

Q: Are you a bad editor?

"Horse****." Also: he **defers to equals** (Papageorge) and accepts that **selections shift**.

Q: Teaching value?

Still interesting because he's still learning **how to talk** about pictures; but **learning comes from work**.

Study Prompts & Exercises

1. **Transparency Drill:** Make 12 pictures in which your presence/strategy is minimal. *What choices produce that feeling?*
 2. **Drama Test:** Photograph an inherently dramatic scene (parade/sport) and an inherently dull scene (parking lot). Edit to frames that **surpass** the scene.
 3. **Gear Constraint Swap:** Re-shoot a familiar spot with a **90mm** after a week with a **28mm**. Note how **problems** change.
 4. **Contact Sheet Audit:** Pull 3 old contact sheets. **Mark frames** you ignored the first time. What did your camera "know" before you did?
 5. **Physical Evidence Critique:** In group review, permit only claims **visible in the frame**. Ban interpretive biography.
 6. **Edit Twice, a Week Apart:** Build a 20-image sequence today; rebuild next week **without looking** at version one. Compare differences.
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Endnotes

- These notes preserve Winograd's **tone** (direct, sometimes abrasive) while organizing ideas for study.
 - Offensive/dated remarks were **contextualized** rather than repeated; the thrust of the critique is maintained without amplifying harmful language.
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