A revelatory clip of 8 mm film footage accompanies the exhibition “Garry Winogrand: Color,” currently at the Brooklyn Museum. In it, Winogrand (1928–84), donning thick 1970s-style wire-rimmed glasses and talking in his Bronx accent at a rapid clip, demonstrates how he shot many of his extraordinary photographs. While loitering on a Fifth Avenue street corner or in full stride at the Central Park Zoo, quick as a cardsharp he would set his exposure, range, and focus, move his Leica up to his face, click, and drop it again, all in one motion like the blink of an eye. He appeared to be scratching his nose, some said. How else could Winogrand have caught so many people unawares, stealing images that haunt and astonish in their candor and serendipity?

A great deal of his black-and-white work is iconic, perhaps none more so than a photo he took at the 1964 World’s Fair of a half-dozen young women on a park bench, legs tangled, torsos and heads turning this way and that in a chaotic chorus line—a still image vibrating with uncanny movement. Seizing upon faces and gestures and chance spatial relationships before his subjects noticed, Winogrand worked in the vein of Robert Frank (though with a kindlier touch) in the age of Diane Arbus (without the posing). A convert from photojournalism, he brought to the walls of such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art images of the political and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and ’70s as well as scenes from everyday life, most prominently in New York but also in Texas, California, and other places where he found what he wanted to express.
“But is it art?,” some asked back then. In her review in a 1975 issue of *The New Yorker*, Janet Malcolm quoted a memo tucked in Winogrand’s file at the moma written by the *éminence grise* Edward Steichen saying, “Dangerously close to snap shots. . . . Buy three at $10 each.” According to the film clip at the Brooklyn Museum, if caught *in flagrante* Winogrand would smile impishly, say something inaudible, and keep moving on to the next snippet of street theater he could find. That Winogrand himself was perpetually in motion makes sense; a frenetic tension, an anxiety, part narrative and part compositional, hovers over his best work. The photos suggest that something has happened, or that more is about to happen in the next split-second. With Winogrand it isn’t so much a “decisive moment” — the expression coined for the charming, if at times precious, work of the Frenchmen Cartier-Bresson and Lartigue of the prior generation— as a loaded moment. No one now asks if these masterpieces are fine art.

All of the work that built Winogrand’s legacy as an artist—the photos he printed, exhibited, and
published himself—is black and white. He never printed a color picture. Though some color images were commissioned by magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and have been reproduced in books, the current show at the Brooklyn Museum introduces the public to a broader swath. It turns out that when shooting Winogrand often had a second camera slung around his neck, with Kodachrome slide film.

In a herculean effort, the hundreds of images in “Garry Winogrand: Color” were gleaned from forty-five thousand slides he left behind. Only once during his lifetime were his color pictures seen in an exhibition, as part of the pivotal “New Documents” show in 1967 at the *moma* (just for a day, because the slides melted in their carousel). At the Brooklyn Museum the curators’ favorites are divided into eight categories and shown on the walls by sixteen projectors in total, which flash through the photographs in sequence.

![Garry Winogrand, Untitled (New York), 1952–58, 35 mm color slide. Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona. © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.](image)

The color work is unmistakably Winogrand. Everything that distinguishes him is present: the
otherworldly ability to frame a finished picture so effortlessly, the deadpan humor, the devastating irony, the implicit eroticism he found in his subjects, and, most importantly, the almost spiritually divined coincidences. One photo depicting a line of men in clean white shirts spreading steaming tar on a city street, their forms emphasized by the arched windows of the brick building next to them, is classic Winogrand. The withering glares of two blonde boys, in another photo taken somewhere out West, are rivaled only by the gaze of Louis Armstrong, shirtless backstage after a performance, or, in a third shot resembling a film still, by the eyes of a girl in a black bathing suit on a beach, livid at Winogrand’s effrontery (“What are you looking at?”). The relentless pace and unforgiving isolation of New York City permeates half the show, while the remainder floats across the expanse of the United States in the 1960s, especially the Southwest, like so many parade balloons.

There has to be an unspoken agreement, when humans live stacked upon each other in apartment buildings and tenements, to leave each other alone. Winogrand not only photographed the agreement, he broke it again and again by photographing it. He also captured a sense of how people can stand, sit, or lie side by side, yet exist in entirely different universes. The amusing compositions with inanimate objects in the exhibition—donuts, fans, squeeze bottles of ketchup and mustard—visually refer to his couples, threesomes, rows, and long lines, but are shorn of the psychological resonance that his human images generate.
Winogrand came under a great deal of criticism during his lifetime about his disregard for the privacy of others. One of the eight categories in this exhibition is “Women, 1960s,” but from the work we’re shown here it’s difficult to see why his 1975 book *Women are Beautiful* drew so much ire when it was published. In the photos at hand, Winogrand’s fixation with women is apparent, but few show any evidence that he intruded upon or somehow bullied or demeaned his subjects, and, perhaps because of that, they lack the flawed humanity and discomfort present in the work published and shown while he was alive. You can’t help but wonder if difficult images were passed over by the curators. With the exception of an elegant African-American woman in a red overcoat navigating a street crowded with white pedestrians, and a handful of others who radiate a sort of lonesome independence and strength, the photographs of the women are just pretty. The museum may have tried to dilute the issue, or distance itself from it, by setting opposite these a category they call “White Masculinity, 1960s.” The images in the latter set, of suited, sour-faced business types and sinewy cowpokes, have little of the passion of Winogrand’s photographs of
women.

There’s also something off about the color of Winogrand’s pictures in this exhibition. Kodachrome, so true and subdued, is here exaggerated. The digitizing process has pumped up the reds, yellows, and blues and sharpened the subjects the same way Instagram filters do. A dilemma for the show’s curators was, of course, how to exhibit work realized in only thirty-five millimeters. It would be impossible to project actual slides because of their fragility. Though they’re divorced at least twice from the artist’s own vision, there is something magnificent about seeing the photographs so bright and bigger than life. Yet it’s hard not to think, considering Winogrand was known for his exquisite prints: they’re his images, but are they really his work?

There are bigger problems with “Garry Winogrand: Color,” however. Channeling P. T. Barnum, the curators made two fatal decisions that created, instead of a survey, a kind of Garry Winogrand Experience. First, they chose to flash the images on the walls at short intervals of seven seconds or
so, completely depriving a viewer of the time to look properly at these pivotal photographs. One of the most disturbing pictures in the show—of two African-American men inside chain-link enclosures, poised above water tanks at a carnival dunking booth, a white man hurling balls at the target—appears and then disappears into the pictures that follow, going almost unnoticed because of the slide’s overexposure. I hung around as the photos cycled again and again, as I did with other startling or interesting pictures, trying to really look at it and understand what it has to say. But there was never enough time.

A second faux pas is the arrangement of the sixteen projectors into eight pairings, supposedly to point out to viewers the relationships between the various photos Winogrand made. Did they think no one would notice the common phrasing in Winogrand’s compositional vocabulary, or his humor? This hand-holding detracts from the individual photographs, creating puns (the lowest form of curating) and clever one-liners. The dueling projectors are set to cycle a few seconds apart, so there’s an endless supply of these pairs; they seem eager to explain some joke. Winogrand did often let book editors decide which of his photos would complement each other best in print, yet in this case, at the Brooklyn Museum, it’s more side-show gimmick. As it is, “Garry Winogrand: Color” might make a better book.
When Janet Malcolm wrote about Winogrand’s show at the Light Gallery in 1975, she was contemptuous of the gallery’s overkill: they hung more than two hundred photographs. The audience, however, has changed dramatically since then. We stare at screens rather than wait for *Life* magazine to arrive in the mail. When we are given the time to look at them, the Winogrand photographs bridge and even explain the cultural gap: with their compulsion to broadcast a continuous visual diary, they fit perfectly into the age of selfies. In spite or because of the passing of fifty years, Winogrand’s artistry continues to rattle and seduce. “Each picture,” says one biographer, “is touched with the element of risk that Winogrand courts.” The tremendous energy and prescience, the genius of Winogrand’s photography, is there at the Brooklyn Museum—if you can find a way to filter out the extraneous clutter.

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