

## “Something going on”

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*'The Animals'* (1968) was the first published book of the American photographer Gary Winogrand (1928-1984). While he went on to produce many other books dealing with American urban life in the distinctive 'street photographer' style of the time, this book stands out for its groundbreaking exploration of the multiple interactions, sometimes intimate, sometimes bizarre, between humans and variously 'captive' animals at New York's Central Park and Bronx zoos and the Coney Island Aquarium. The initial interest in taking the animal pictures was largely human (Winogrand's own children on a day out). However, as Winogrand himself explained in an interview in 1981, he soon began to see that between the humans and the animals something was clearly 'going on'. What emerges from the resulting images is, in John Szarkowski's words – describing the zoo pictures in the Afterword to the original book- “a grotesquery ... where unlikely human beings and jaded careerist animals stare at each other through bars, exhibiting bad manners and a mutual failure to recognise their own ludicrous predicaments”. In these various human/animal 'contact zones', Winogrand's seminal images stand somewhat apart from more recent photographic work in zoos such as Jaschinski's evocative, enigmatic and uncomfortable animal subjects (1966), printed hard and dark, Berry's through-glass primate portraits or Hofer (1993) and Noelker's (2004) colour images of zoo animals variously enclosed in strange, abstract and artificialized spaces. In this paper, I want to look afresh at Winogrand's zoo photographs from the perspective of an increasingly mature sub-discipline of 'animal studies', one that has consistently engaged with zoos, both as places of particular, yet revealing, human/animal interactions and as spaces of contention (Anderson 1995; Malamud 1998 Braverman 2012; Grazian 2015).

Winogrand's book *'The Animals'* was published by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1969, following a solo exhibition of the photographer's work. The book had an initial print run of 30,000 and sold at a price of \$2.50 (Szarkowski 1988, 22) . *The Animals* contains 43 black and white gravure printed images (in addition to the front and rear cover photographs). Most were taken in the Central Park Zoo of New York over a series of visits between 1962 and 1968. Though Winogrand was working largely as a commercial photographer at this time, many of the hallmarks of the Robert Frank inspired 'street' style with which he later became associated are present in the zoo pictures; the use of a hand-held 35mm Leica camera with wide angle lens, un-posed photographs taken close-in to his subjects, the tilting of either the vertical or the horizontal frame edge, the image capturing a particular moment of a look or coincidental placing.

Never a deliberate or coherent photographic 'project' from the outset, *'The Animals'* reveals Winogrand's emergent awareness and interest in the zoo as a place of juxtapositions,

gestures and interactions that are often subtly metaphoric - Szarkowski (1969) refers to the images as 'as complex and simple as ancient parables'- as well as being both humorous and ironic. In zoos, both human and non-human animals can be 'funny looking' (Figure 1).

Figure 1 (INSERT IMAGE 1 HERE) - note the image reproduced here is not high resolution



'New York, 1963'. Plate 9 of *'The Animals'* @ the Estate of Garry Winogrand

"I grew up within walking distance of the Bronx Zoo. And then when my first two children were young, I used to take them to the zoo. Zoos are always interesting. And I make pictures. Actually, the animal pictures came about in a funny way. I made a few shots. If you could see those contact sheets, they're mostly of the kids and maybe a few shots where I'm just playing. And at some point I realized something was going on in some of those pictures, so then I worked at it [ ... ] I kept going to the zoo because things were going on in certain pictures. It wasn't a project" (Winogrand, quoted in Diamonstein 1982, unpaginated).

Of the 43 images in the book, 12 include primates and 7 (counting the front cover too) include elephants. Most, but by no means all the photographs, also contain humans. Those that don't tend to capture the animals in moments or positions that we recognize through a sense of either shared corporeality, behaviour or sociability; an orangutan struggles on an uncomfortable concrete floor (plate 1), two monkeys 'wave' human-like hands, one held pointing up, the other down (plate 2), gorillas hug one another (plate 4), a young primate hanging from parallel bars urinates on a confrere below (plate 36), a beluga whale seemingly looks at the photographer and 'smiles' (plate 19), a hippopotamus opens his mouth wide to reveal an empty packet of potato chips lodged within (plate 31), two elephants seem to 'mock' a lone rhinoceros (plate 22, see Figure 2 below) while elsewhere other elephants (and, on the back cover, lions) try vaguely and inconsequentially to mount each other (plate 12).

Figure 2 (INSERT IMAGE 2 HERE) - note the image reproduced here is not high resolution

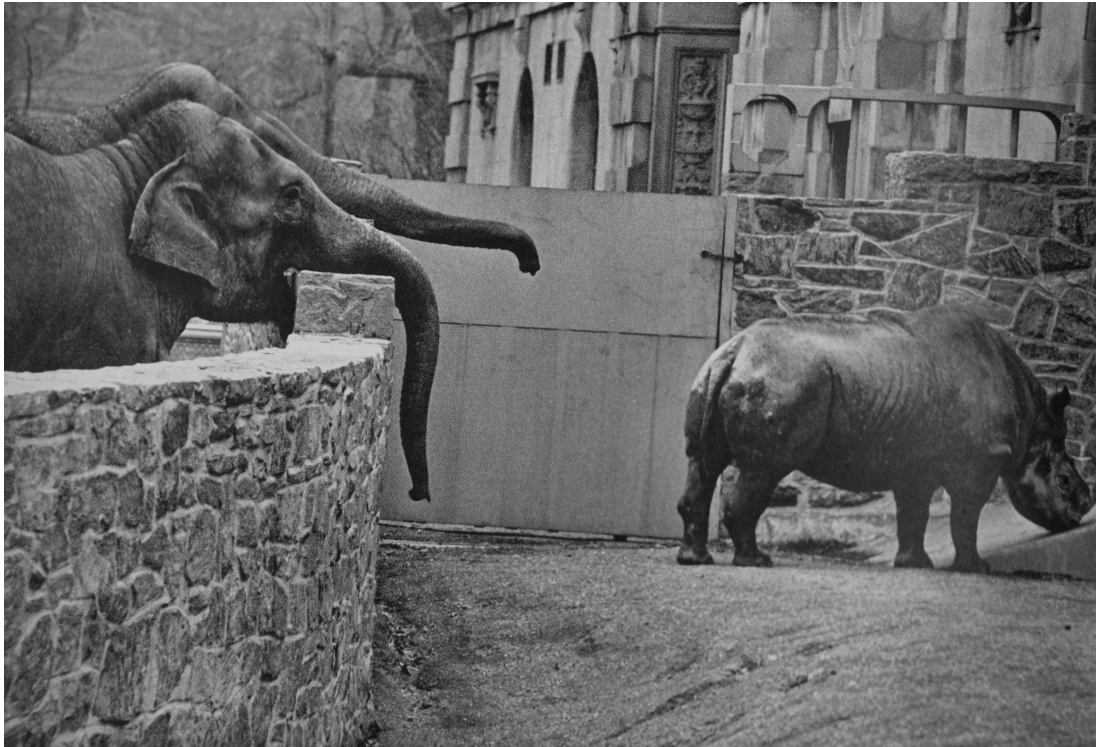


Plate 22 of *'The Animals'* @ the Estate of Garry Winogrand

In these images, the structures, materials and spaces of the animals' confinement are evident. This is, after all, an urban zoo, a 'dirty prison' with its 'atmosphere of nakedness and brown soap harshness' that the critic Janet Malcolm likened to the paintings of Francis Bacon (Malcolm 1976, 133, quoted in Als 2013). Here, for Karmel, is 'an animal world that is full of depression, frustration and rage not unlike the modern world around it' (Karmel 1981, 41). This, in part, was the New Yorker Winogrand's fascination with the zoo and its animals as a commentary on the human condition. Central Park zoo in particular, lying at the intersection between the East and West 'sides' of Manhattan, with Harlem to the north and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the south, a signifying focal point for the quotidian politics of the urban human 'jungle'. Zoos, as Winogrand himself pointed out, are always in cities and the animals within them neither 'wild' not 'tame'.

In her fascinating counter-narrative to conventional zoo history, Uddin (2015) links the design and re-design of American zoos and the shifting display of their animal residents to broader processes of post-War urban renewal and with it the emergence of racialised urban discourses. She draws particular attention to Winogrand's *Animals* series both for its portrayal of the poor state and antiquated design of the animal enclosures and for its evocation of the "pronounced disorder of relations between human and nonhuman, rehearsing the sense of perversity that had characterized American urbanism since Progressive Era muckraking" (Uddin 2015, 61). In her eyes, the photographer 'toyed with the vocabulary of a city's decline' (64). Winogrand himself would admit to neither as specific intentions of the *Animals* series, describing himself as merely a 'mechanic', interested in the aesthetic framing the world rather than drawing deeper meaning from it, an approach characteristic of the individualistic documentary style of the time that was very much supported by Szarkowski at MoMA. If prevailing societal concerns were at all addressed

through photographs, it was through ‘social satire’, rather than purposeful social commentary (Green, 1984). The end result, for Uddin (2015 62) ‘becomes a soft critique of zoo modernism, where the dutiful response of white liberal shame over depicted conditions was filtered through the pleasures of odd angles, disjunctive shadows, unexpected cropping and so forth’.

Others though, with hindsight have found greater critical depth in *The Animals* series. Balaschak (2013, 12) reinvests Winogrand’s work with the redemptive power of satire by placing it within the context of the ongoing Vietnam War: ‘Winogrand’s pictures remind us that as much as we go to the zoo to view animals, we also go there to view ourselves’. He goes on:

The persuasiveness of Winogrand’s satire lies in the photographer’s ability to use *The Animals* to alert us to the public’s passive participation in both the restriction and release of our all-too-accessible animalism. Evoked by Winogrand’s repeated framing of the zoo’s enclosures, a general state of conflict is alluded to in *The Animals*. The tameness of the “wild” creatures in *The Animals* forces us to realize the irrationality of confining nature. As viewers of the images, like viewers of animals in such parks, we participate in a peculiar, if not cruel, domestication process (Balaschak 2013, 18)

Similarly, re-examining Winogrand’s ‘*Animals*’ after the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on New York, the writer Hilton Als argues that Winogrand’s pictures ‘presage what is commonly held to be our shared disaster but what in fact reveals that this “brotherhood” is rotten at the core.

‘We are all in a zoo, fat with lethargy and discrimination: this is my cage, not yours. Central Park is the only central metaphor we have for difference in the city, since the brutality of difference is acted out in its environs, again and again. This divide began but did not end there’ (Als 2013, 109)

Back in 1969, Szarkowski himself, in his ‘afterward’ to the *Animals* saw something of this too:

For those of us on the other side of the bars the case is less clear. We are there because animals look funny, or conceivably because they look noble, but there may be a darker side to the satisfaction we find at the zoo. It may be that we are relieved to find that even the animals, with their much--publicized supposed virtues—sharp of tooth, swift of foot, courageous in protecting their young, good eyes, etc.—that even the animals can be reduced to a state of whimpering psychic paralysis if they are forced to live in circumstances similar to those of the typical modern urban dweller (1969, 3)

Moving away from the metaphoric power of the caged urban animal, the majority of the images in *The Animals* involve both humans and non-humans in juxtaposed multi-species, multi-ethnic co-vitality, each telling stories about the other. In three images (the cover, plate 15 and plate 18), a human hand and an elephant’s tusk reach out toward each other across the barriers and walls of the latter’s confinement. Though they never actually touch, there is mutuality here, a shared intent to feed and be fed (Figure 3).

Figure 2. (INSERT IMAGE 3 HERE) - *note the image reproduced here is not high resolution*



Bronx Zoo, 1963. Plate 18 of *'The Animals' @ the Estate of Garry Winogrand*

In one of the more striking images in the series, a boy/young man points a barely visible (toy) gun at a caged bear who, seemingly in response, sticks his tongue out between the wire mesh (plate 3). In another, children (perhaps bored by the lethargy and dullness of the animals on display) perform monkey-like acrobatics on the fence surrounding a pair of rhinoceros; a woman watches them, a man watches the rhinoceros (plate 6). In a third, a man (a *'jeune loup'*) with lupine eyes casually puts his arm around a girl as unseen, behind them both, a *'real'* wolf creeps forward across the concrete cage floor (Plate 13). Elsewhere (plate 43), a smiling woman proudly holds a hairless baby up before a caged Orangutan *'mother'* with infant; all four look incongruous and the bleached white human child, against the dark and half hidden orangutan baby, particularly so. By tipping the horizontal, Winogrand brings a lone male lion level with a line of winter-wrapped children presented like so many not-so-loyal subjects (Plate 34). In other images, hard-faced, largely joyless crowds watch animal displays (Plates 24 and 25). This is no Disneyland. Finally, in an image that is striking in its initial absurdity (Plate 27), two pairs of four people – one pair united by being inside a cardboard box, the other united through matching checkered shirts and jeans - observe a pair of elephants (see Figure 4). Again, the image is tipped horizontally – the vertical being drawn from the side of the cardboard box. There is something elephantine in this singular and inelegant box with four legs, its purpose presumably to observe unobserved, thereby confounding the very function of the zoo display. The two elephants, however, are unperturbed by this strange hybrid, a languid trunk is draped across the low wall. Is it going too far to read in the conscious coupling of this image, where humans, like Noah's animals, go two by two, an implicit reference to heteronormalcy, convention and its social reproduction in domesticated animal and human populations?

Figure 4 (INSERT IMAGE 4 HERE) - note the image reproduced here is not high resolution





'New York, 1962'. Plate 27 of *'The Animals'* @ the Estate of Garry Winogrand

The zoo, seen through Winogrand's pictures, is very much a place of encounter yet one where genuine human/animal interaction is limited to a series of relatively mundane acts. Human/animal relationality is implied and suggested in these images, first, through the reassurance and entertainment value (Hanson 2002) of a shared – and ironic - common animality ('they' are sometimes like 'us'/ 'we' are sometimes like 'them' – the animal as the 'originary metaphor', Lippit 1998), second, through the active performance of what Anderson (1995, 276) calls the 'cultural self-definition' of distance from (and dominance of) the natural world and, third, through symbolic subjugation:

After all that has been said in the past fifty years concerning man's deep--rooted inadequacies, it is bracing to go to the zoo and observe that the orangutang, magnificent though he may be in the jungle, is no better than the rest of us when forced to live in a modern city (Szarkowski 1969, 5)

But, as Berger (1980) warns, it is too easy and too evasive to use the zoo solely as a symbol. The zoo is, above all, 'a demonstration of the relations between man [sic] and animal' (1980, 24) and those relations, he argues, move inexorably in the direction of the latter's marginalisation. While Berger, in his seminal essay, draws a parallel between the marginalization of animals in zoos and that of the European peasantry, recent years have seen a shift towards a greater understanding of the animal side of those relations within the corpus of a distinctive 'animal studies' in which zoos, and images of zoo animals, play an important part. Hence the zoo becomes a site not only of human boundary-making, (Anderson 1995; Rothfels 2002), mediated multi-species interaction (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 2002; Mullan and Marvin 1998) and entertainment (Hanson 2002) but also of power (Malamud 1998), biopolitics (Braverman 2013), and non-human agency (Davies 2000; Whatmore and Thorne 2000).

In zoo photography, these recent shifts are mirrored in perhaps two ways. The first is an attention to the artificiality (and in some cases innovative design) of zoo enclosures and animal housing that reveal the fundamentally mediated and constructed nature of these very un-natural spaces and behind that, the ethical and ontological underpinnings of animal difference and human dominance. Two photographers in particular stand out. Candida Hofer's images (1993) from zoos around the world show often distant animals as 'spaced', as in Natural History museums, rather than caged behind bars or walls (Messer 2010). No people are visible but the enclosures, their architectural form and backdrop painted landscapes, speak to an entirely human narrative (and aesthetic) of animality. Frank Noelker's *'Captive Beauty'* (2004) similarly dwells on the sometimes almost surreal artifactuality of the zoo enclosures; a dolphin swimming around a sunken traffic cone, a hippopotamus in what looks like a roman bath, a lone penguin gazing out across a *trompe d'oeil* sea.

The second is an increasing attentiveness to individual zoo animals as subjects (and subjectivities) in themselves. Britta Jaschinski's animal images and, in particular, her book *'Zoo'* (published in 1996) provide the cover photographs for a number of well-known animal studies volumes. The differences between her approach and that of Winogrand are evident. In exploring 'the consequences of representational strategies for the human understanding of animals' (Baker 2001, 191), she excludes not only all humans but also the architecture and physicality of zoo enclosures, using dark and high contrast images to isolate the single individual animal, its existence and personality, its dignity and beauty (Jaschinski, quoted in Baker 2000, 147). Jaschinski suggests that her images might embody some of the 'strains of unease' felt by zoo visitors (quoted in Baker 2000, 145). And yet, although Winogrand consistently shied away from acknowledging the possible didactical power of his photographs, Szarkowski's (1969) afterword to *The Animals* refers to Winogrand's zoo as a 'grotesquery' of deprivation, impotence and psychic paralysis capable, it would appear, of moving even the hardened photographer to sympathy.

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