

Photos Like Jazz

Twenty-First Century Street Photography

By Ellen Feldman

In her commentary on the 2015 exhibit *On the Scene: 20th Century Street Photography* at the Addison Gallery of American Art, curator Alison Kemmerer described street photography by masters of the form such as Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt, and Robert Frank:

Capturing the chaotic energy, chance juxtapositions, and fleeting encounters of everyday life in images that are by turns confrontational and tender, somber and witty, gritty and beautiful, each of these masters distills decisive moments into universal images of humanity.

As a longtime street photographer, I appreciate Kemmerer's analysis and find that it still holds true today. Street photography falls somewhere on the spectrum between photojournalism and fine art photography, and can share qualities with either. Street photography often has the feel of the spontaneity and improvisatory nature of jazz. Garry Winogrand's photos of people on the streets of New York, for instance, have a rhythm and grace that comes from capturing in an instant multiple subjects perfectly framed. And if you watch him at work in online videos, he seems to dance as his eyes dart, his head swivels, and his body whirls.

While street photographers today may grumble about the ubiquity of practitioners (everyone with a smart phone is a potential street photographer), it has made us long-timers hone our mind's eye to stand out from the fray. As for me, I now find myself drawn more and more to "found" diptychs and triptychs. At the same time I continue to search out strong blocks of color and remain deeply connected to my film studies background, which has instilled in me a predisposition to uncovering latent narrative in a scene.

For example, what is the fleeting relationship between the three figures in *CitizenFour*—two on the street and one in a poster? They neither face each other nor interact. Each occupies a separate space, reinforced by color blocks of black, white, or blue. One can see here a slice of alienation in a world of invaded privacy and an overload of communication.

While some predict the demise of street photography as a viable contemporary genre, I'm excited by the ability of current street photographers to push the genre's boundaries.

These photographs were taken in Paris, during one week in 2010 and two months in 2015. ©



Jazz Music II



Gallery Window



Citizen Four



Edwynn and Smoker



Tool-Wielding Creatures



Ellen Feldman is a fine arts photographer whose portfolios often take off from her interests in street photography and film history. In addition to exhibiting her photos in numerous solo and group shows, she has self-published a photo/comic book of a dancer incorporated into a *Fantastic Four* comic, *The Dancer as the Invisible Girl* (2011) and two books of street photographs: *Les Mystères de Paris/Paris Mysteries* (2010), and *A Week in Prague: Wall People/Street People* (2012). Feldman is photography editor of *Women's Review of Books*. She holds a PhD in Cinema Studies from New York University. Visit her website at www.ellenfeldman.net.

All photos © Ellen Feldman.

Woman in Yellow Skirt