Framing Politics

THE IMAGE-CONSCIOUS TURN IN PHOTOJOURNALISM

Straight from the wire. Stephen Crowley/NYT Pictures.

BY KIKU ADATTO

PUBLIC IMAGES

The annual portrait of the justices of the Supreme Court is not usually worthy of note, but last November's photograph in the *New York Times* is no ordinary picture. Instead of the traditional dignified pose, we see the trappings of a photo session laid bare: the justices are viewed from a distance, framed by a large curtained backdrop in a room that has been rearranged and lit for the camera. They are caught unaware in the act of posing.

Why was this picture in the paper? And why have similar photos begun to appear in the *Times* and other newspapers? The answer has less to do with any policy or explicit decision by photographers and editors than with a larger story about the rise of a new image consciousness in American life. The image-conscious sensibility that is shaping photojournalism today has its origins in the world of art photography some three or four decades ago.

PICTURES ABOUT PICTURES

CONSIDER GARRY WINOGRAND'S 1960 photograph of John Kennedy addressing the Democratic National Convention. The picture is composed of three elements. In the foreground is a small portable television framing Kennedy's head as he delivers his speech. In the middle ground stands the gesticulating candidate, his back to the camera. In the background, out of focus, is a bank of television cameras. With this equation, Winogrand directs our attention from politics to the pose, from the political event to the irony of political form. He was not interested in the meaning of the event as it is experienced by the participants, but in the meaning of the scene as a picture about pictures.

Winogrand's approach signaled a departure from the traditional ambitions both of documentary and art photography. Typically, documentary photography aimed to reveal and record reality, while art photography interpreted it. By the late-1950s, however, art photographers began to direct the viewer's attention to a reality beyond the subject of the photograph. They focused on the image as an image, as artifice, as an act of fabrication. They also self-consciously explored their own role in the image-making process, as did Lee Friedlander in *Self Portrait,* a book of urban scenes in which the photographer's shadow or reflection appear in every frame.

Perhaps the most famous example of this new image-consciousness is the pop art of Andy Warhol. With mind-numbing repetition, Warhol reproduced the most potent news images—race riots, a mourning Jacqueline Kennedy, car crashes—as if calling attention to the effects of the television instant replay. Moreover, his multiple images of Campbell's soup cans, Brillo pads, Marilyn Monroe and other icons of popular culture direct our attention away from the subject matter towards the instruments of image-making: the frame, the packaging, the pose.

IMAGE-CONSCIOUS NEWS

TELEVISION NEWS in the 1960s was immune to these developments in the art world. Television reporters, led by Walter Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley, still had more in common with Edward Murrow than MoMA. Steeped in the tradition of print journalism, television reporters concentrated on what public figures said and did, not on how their images were crafted for the media. It wasn't until 1988, in the wake of the Reagan presidency, that image-consciousness finally invaded television news. As political campaigns mastered the art of television image-making, reporters shifted from recording the words of the candidates to exposing their images and revealing their contrivances. The news began to read like Andy Warhol's pop art, repeatedly displaying the candidates' ads, media events and media gurus.

With the 1992 presidential campaign, the networks made an effort to stem the tide of image-conscious reporting. Inspired by the "ad watches" developed by print journalists and local television stations, the nightly news focused more attention on political issues and examined the veracity of candidates' ads instead of running them uncritically. Yet, even as television news struggled to overcome its preoccupation with image-making, the image-conscious sensibility found a new home in the very place that had long eschewed it: the pages of the *New York Times.* During the '90s, the *Times* has devoted many news reports to the way politicians craft images for television, and its news photographs increasingly resemble the image-conscious style of art photographers.

Photojournalists of the '90s are not consciously imitating art photographers any more than television reporters did during the '80s; photographers and their editors merely are looking for interesting pictures. Today, the image-conscious sensibility has seeped so deeply into our popular and political culture that showing "pictures of pictures" has become a familiar aesthetic.

Decades earlier, it was a startling idea.

Lee Friedlander, *Washington, D.C.,* 1962. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

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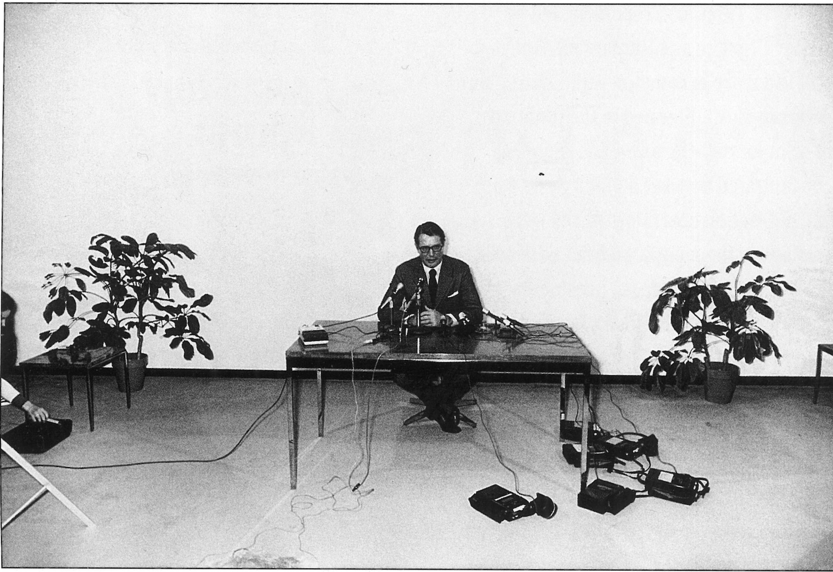
Garry Winogrand, *Democratic National Convention,* 1960. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. © Estate of Garry Winogrand.



Garry Winogrand, *Elliot Richardson Press Conference, Austin,* 1973. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. © Estate of Garry Winogrand.

REPORTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS AS PERFORMERS IN THE FRAME

IN 1977, WINOGRAND PUBLISHED a series of photographs of media events titled *Public Relations.* The book's cover features a picture of Elliot Richardson, who, impeccably dressed, would look the picture of poise in a standard news photograph. Winogrand's wide-angle shot, however, makes him look oddly isolated in the stage-like room. A white wall looms behind Richardson, and two incongruous house plants flank his makeshift conference desk. The symmetry of the odd scene is upset only by a reporter poking her head into the side of the frame to adjust her tape recorder. In *Public Relations,* Winogrand is not content merely to undermine the poses of politicians; he also implicates photographers and reporters in the artifice of the events they record. Far from being out of the frame, they are framed themselves—sometimes sedately poised in the foreground of the photograph, other times jostling for position in a chaos of pointing microphones and cameras.

Similarly, a photograph of Robert Dole that appeared last November in the *Times* exposes the self-conscious choreography of press and politicians. Like Elliot Richardson, Robert Dole has constructed a pose for the cameras. With hands purposefully clasped, he leans attentively towards a photographer crouched on the floor. Despite Dole's attempt to control his image, the *Times* photograph makes his office look like a set, framed by a photographer's curtain. Dole's constructed pose is deconstructed, as is the "pose" of the "official" photographer absorbed in his craft.

Today, we are aware as never before of the artifice that constitutes the pose. We are as fascinated by how images are made as we are by what they mean.

FAILED IMAGES: FRAMING THE FLAW

TO CALL ATTENTION to the picture as a picture is a way of puncturing its intended meaning. Since the '50s, art photographers increasingly used what would be considered mistakes in conventional photography—the misplacement of the central figure, people caught in odd poses or out-of-focus, heads jutting into the frame—to subvert the conventional picture.

In his influential 1958 book, *The Americans,* Robert Frank used this technique to reveal truths that the idealized images of post-war America attempted to conceal. Watching a parade in Hoboken, New Jersey, Frank turned his camera away from the flags and festivities to photograph the onlookers. One of Frank's images depicts two women watching a parade from their perch in a dingy building. Rather than glorify the American flag that dominates the photograph, Frank shows it as a misshapen and mournful emblem that blocks the women's view of the parade and our view of them.

Similarly, a photographic mistake—the blurred figure of a woman in the foreground of the shot, surrounded by an attentive group of spectators—is used in a 1993 *Times* photograph to reframe the event and subvert its conventional meaning. Without reading the caption, it is impossible to tell what this photograph is about. Who is the woman in the foreground of the picture, her head cut off by the photographer's frame? The caption does not identify her. She serves as a foil for the photographer, a means of disrupting the political event and distracting our attention from the politicians featured in the story: Senator Harris Wofford and Representative Christopher Shays. As in the popular children's book *Where's Waldo?,* you have to search for the main character in the confusing scenery.

THE SELF DEFORMED

THE EYE FOR THE FLAW that deconstructs the pose is also the eye that deforms the self. Diane Arbus used deformity—both real and imposed by the camera—as a metaphor, a means of subverting normalcy. "You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice is the flaw," observed Arbus. "If you scrutinize reality closely enough, if in some way you really, really get to it, it becomes fantastic."

Arbus used her camera to transform her subjects into strange caricatures of themselves. In a photograph titled "Boy with a straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade, N.Y.C., 1967," a young man stares primly at the camera. In Arbus' hands, his pose is made to mock his ideals. She used

AP/Wide World Photos.

flash not to document but to cast an air of unreality on the scene, making symbols like the American flag and patriotic buttons look like props.

For her photograph "A Jewish giant with his parents in the Bronx, New York, 1970," Arbus took shot after shot before she achieved the absurd juxtaposition she sought. The labelling of the photograph underscores the depersonalization of her subjects, her insistence on directing our attention to the odd violations of social categories and expectations.

An eye for the absurd, for creating deformity to undermine convention, also characterizes a photograph of President Clinton that appeared in the *Times* in July 1993. The photograph's caption exposes the President's intent to use "the White House stage to promote the earned-income credit." Shot from an extreme low angle with a wide-angle lens, Clinton looms, like Diane Arbus' giant, over the families seated on stage. The accompanying news report reiterates the photograph's message: "The flowers were fake, the books borrowed and the stiff poses could have been borrowed from *Family Feud.* But the faux-homey set on a White House stage had a real political purpose." This "purpose," however, is not the point of the photograph. The picture instead is a pun on the artifice of the media event.

THE UNRAVELING OF RITUAL

TODAY, WE ARE AWARE as never before of the artifice that constitutes the pose. We are as fascinated by how images are made as we are by what they mean. This is evident not only in art photography, television news and photojournalism but also in the image-conscious sensibility that pervades advertising, MTV and the hip self-consciousness of *Seinfeld,* David Letterman's *The Late Show* and even best-selling children's books, which now call attention to the conventions of storytelling.

What should we make of this turn in our culture? The skepticism that underlies image consciousness is an important corrective to cant and puffery, and to myths that exempt established conventions from critical examination. But there also are limits to this form of critique, which are particularly relevant to news reporting and photojournalism. Does image-conscious journalism break through illusions and extricate the public from the manipulation of the media? Or is it merely a sophisticated trap, a hall of mirrors, in which photographers and reporters remain entangled in the artifice they mean to expose?

For all its virtues as a form of critique, the image-conscious perspective is limited in important ways. It distracts us from paying attention to the content of the primary event and to the meanings it conveys. Also, the technique often settles simply to expose the artifice in image-making. Still, the fact that an image is contrived for the cameras does not make it false. The distinction between real and pseudo-events must be judged not on the method of presentation, but on the content of the event itself. The pose is only part of the story. For reporters and photojournalists to fixate on the pose is to rest with revealing artifice instead of moving to the truth that lies beyond.