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Photography View; ARBITRARINESS IS THE ENEMY

By Andy Grundberg
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If there is such a thing as a photographic establishment, then certainly Tod Papageorge, whose recent black-and-white photographs are on view at Daniel Wolf Gallery (30 West 57th Street, through May 30), is a member. His credentials are impeccable. He teaches at Yale, where he is Walker Evans professor of photography and director of studies of photography. He has lectured at M.I.T. and Harvard. He has a close association with the Museum of Modern Art; in 1977 he curated Garry Winogrand's "Public Relations" exhibition there. Most recently, he helped edit Winogrand's book "Stock Photographs" and created the exhibition "Walker Evans and Robert Frank: An Essay on Influence."

At the same time Papageorge has maintained a career as a photographer. To date he has received two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships (1973 and 1976) and two Guggenheim Fellowships (1970 and 1977) for his work. He figures in some of the most important surveys of the 70's, including "14 American Photographers" at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Seagram's "Court House" project, MOMA's "Mirrors and Windows" and A.T.&T.'s "American Images." Curiously, though, his pictures have not gained a substantial national following, nor have they attracted untempered respect from his contemporaries.

Coming from one so firmly planted in academia and the purported establishment, Papageorge's pictures are insistently non-academic and anti-establishment. They are documents hewn from the real world, not the ivory tower. He composes with a snapshot-like offhandedness that owes not a little to Winogrand, but because Papageorge now uses a larger format camera than his mentor the photographs are more finely detailed and smoothly textured. Given his affection for Evans, it sometimes seems that he is striving to conjoin the rough, unfinished manner of the master's 35mm candids with the delicacy and decisiveness of his 8-by-10 views.

In addition, Papageorge's pictures deal with aspects of social behavior and expressions of individuality that some might rather not confront. His subjects in the current exhibition include sunbathing women wearing but half of their bikinis, perspiring women in track shirts and shorts, interracial couples and homosexuals. None are ennobled by Papageorge's scrutiny; few are afforded much respect. His subjects also include persons who resemble statues. A particularly cruel example depicts a fair-haired white boy and a black woman who may be his governess at the Mad Hatter statue in Central Park. That the black woman's craggy face bears a passing resemblance to the Mad Hatter's is presumably the point of the picture.

The show's title is "At Ease," but obviously some irony is intended. The so-called "ease" the photographer describes is fragile and illusionary. In one image, a man sleeps in the

park next to a bed of tulips, seemingly remote from the city's hubbub; however, just over the rim of the tulips are dozens of feet passing on pavement. A picture of a New Year's Eve discotheque party, steamily decadent, resembles one showing the recovery grounds of the New York City Marathon. In both, exhaustion substitutes for relaxation.

Besides irony, Papageorge's photography is pervaded by sensuality. One finds it here not only on the beaches, where skin is displayed with seeming nonchalance, but also on the Acropolis, where young American tourists stand idly in tight cut-off jeans, or behind the refreshment table of a woman's road race. Unfortunately, Papageorge is too self-conscious to let his penchant for sexual suggestiveness run riot, so he often undercuts it with the inclusion of a foolish gesture or an incongruous detail.

This self-consciousness, ultimately, is Papageorge's biggest enemy, for it accounts for the principle shortcomings of these pictures. One is that the formal strategies he employs seem arbitrary. When he tilts the frame, we are inescapably reminded of Winogrand. This works when Papageorge's camera is looking up a woman's skirt, since it references us to Winogrand's consummately sexist book "Women Are Beautiful," but otherwise it looks willful, educated and arch.

The scale of the pictures seems equally unresolved. Papageorge likes to stand back, forcing his viewers to search for telling details. However, once an ironic juxtaposition is uncovered - a man seated on a park bench leans his head back at the same angle as the bronze figure on a pedestal beside him - these same details appear either too big or too small (as do the prints themselves), and either too obvious or too inconsequential.

As a result, the situational ironies Papageorge isolates within his frames seem too obvious and too inconsequential. Repeatedly, the photographer pits pastoral parkland against the urban intrusions of crowds and concrete. Not only is this "machine in the garden" ideal an old one but also Papageorge fails to give his visual facts any poignancy. His distanced, detached stance - as conveyed by his formal choices - mitigates against convincing us that as viewers we should care, or feel, anything in particular.

One picture breaks this mold. It is a close-up, direct, confrontational portrait of a woman in a bathrobe, and it lacks any references to Winogrand and any sense of detachment. Because it creates at least the illusion of coming directly from Papageorge's life rather than from foreign territory, and because it does not worry whether it is formally fashionable, this singular photograph stands as the most powerful in the exhibition. It suggests that Papageorge's career as a photographer does not ride entirely on the coattails of his credentials.