

“Enfantillages”: photographing children (and their parents) in public space

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine



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Why are children photogenic? Political sociologist Fabien Desage reflects upon his practices as a a photographer and the reasons that make children in public spaces a particularly interesting and stimulating subject of visual investigation.

Series: Children in the City

ENFANTILLAGE, n.m.

Informal

A. The state of being (like) a child.

1. *Rare*. Physical aspect that is characteristic of a child.

2. [Gen., pertaining to an adult] Lack of maturity; a tendency to act without thinking. (Near-) syn. *puerility, childishness*.

B. *By metonymy*.

1. Outward manifestation (words, acts, etc.) of such a lack of maturity.

2. Act or creation of little use or interest that might be attributed to a child. Syn. *trifle, triviality*.

Translation of an extract from the French dictionary *Le Trésor de la langue française*, 2015.

Although I am a photographer, I am first and foremost a political sociologist. And yet, as a result of producing more and more photos and photographic projects in recent years, as well as avidly reading monographs devoted to a number of “great photographers”¹ or browsing the innumerable websites and blogs devoted to photography, I became convinced that photography was not just a “leisure activity” that I practised as a hobby, but an activity that formed part of my identity as a researcher in the social sciences and contributed to my interest in urban issues in particular – and, by extension, that the result of this work perhaps deserved to be shown and subjected to the gaze and judgement of others.

The lack of time, necessary for the transformation of an occasional practice into a more systematic approach, and above all the lack of self-confidence and the feeling of illegitimacy that can get under the skin of the autodidact are very often enough to dissuade any attempt to “publish” one’s work (in the primary sense of the word), or at least to postpone such an attempt.

A year’s sabbatical and the support and encouragement of friends – photographers and sociologists alike² – helped me to take the leap and organize my first ever public exhibition, in Montreal in May 2015, in which I presented a series of photos on the theme of children in public space. These photographs can be found in the portfolio published as part of this article in *Metropolitics*, as a complement to the series of papers titled “Children in the City”, published in October 2015.³ While the two were not planned together from the outset (rather, their timing was a happy coincidence), I should like to take the opportunity here to show the resonances that exist between them.

This exercise will lead me to pose questions regarding the use of photography in the social sciences, as well as the limitations of my approach – that is to say, the approach of a sociologist who fancies himself a photographer rather than a sociologist who uses photography as a medium for investigation. To conclude, I shall defend the idea of a certain parallelism between the investigative methods used respectively in photography and sociology, the choice of which conditions the scope of interpretation in similar ways.

¹ A certain number of whom shall be mentioned below.

² I would like to take this opportunity to thank them once again – they know who they are.

³ April 2015 for the French version.

The photogenicity accorded to children

The series of 30 photographs presented below is a final selection from some 100 pictures taken between 2012 and 2015, in Canada and the United States for the most part, featuring children in public spaces – that is, the street, public transport or open spaces – with or without their parent(s). More specifically, the subjects were children and parents whom I knew (in some cases) or whom I met by chance during my photographic wanderings (in most cases). These are therefore photographs taken “on the spur of the moment”, unposed.

The set of photos I was originally left with following preliminary sorting and post-processing work was, at over 100 images, too large, especially for someone like me who is not in general a “trigger-happy” photographer. My first reaction was to try to understand the prominence of the common theme of these pictures: why were children so present in the photographs I had initially selected? Or, to put it another way, what justifies their interest as photographic subjects?

This question seems at first glance to refer to the “photogenicity” that is generally accorded to children and makes them choice subjects for photographers, whether amateurs – taking “family photos”, for instance – or professionals. Indeed, the first series of photos presented in the portfolio focuses on this relationship between children and the camera, when the photographed subject poses unexpectedly, plays, or plays with his or her condition as a subject, or even openly defies or challenges the photographer.

However, I have sought to contextualize and denaturalize this photogenicity; that is, I have sought to associate it not with the physical or aesthetic properties of the children in question, but rather with the ways in which they act and behave – or misbehave – in the public space, which make them “atypical urban figures” who are all the more interesting for the photographer by dint of their forms of behaviour (both good and bad) that differ noticeably from those of adults, which are consequently highlighted “in negative”, if I might use such a metaphor.

Public space: between discipline and indiscipline

As the work of interactionist sociologists has shown, one’s presence in public space prescribes and proscribes a whole set of behaviours, attitudes, bodily postures and ways of “presenting oneself”, moving and interacting with (or avoiding) one another.

While public space is therefore above all a factor that contributes to maintaining order and ensuring regulated, predictable practices (forms of discipline, in short), my photos instead reflect children’s propensity to act “outside the frame” – both in photographic terms and with respect to their interactions – and disturb the order of a given situation more often than adults: they do this through play and indiscipline on the one hand, but also as a result of boredom or daydreaming.

All these forms of escape, whether introverted or extroverted, no doubt also contribute to the “photogenicity” of children, and by the same token reveal the norms of the adult world to which they are progressively subjected, to varying degrees. The interpretation of the photographic work undertaken here directly echoes the words of my colleagues at *Metropolitics* in their introduction to the series of articles on children in the city: “This offset view of ‘normality’, as embodied and implemented by and in the adult world, represents children as ‘Garfinkelian’ beings *par excellence*: by showing themselves to be ‘incompetent’, by producing effects that break with the most commonly accepted order, by adopting an oblique perspective on our practices, seen but unnoticed, they reveal to us the underlying normativity, calls it into question, and removes its apparent obviousness” (Gayet-Viaud, Rivière and Simay 2015).

The photos presented here also seek to show at least some fragments of the relationship between child(ren) and parent(s) – whether the latter is (are) present or “out of shot”. While the way in which parents play their role in public is also very much prescribed, with considerable value placed on qualities such as attention, closeness and complicity, some of the photographs suggest a certain

distance and the possibility, however fleeting, of a degree of “*quant-à-soi*” – aloofness, separateness, self-sufficiency – on the part of the children. It is these off-guard moments, where parental attention and control are relaxed, that I have sought to capture, and in an increasingly systematic way, moreover, as my project became clearer and more precise. Capturing what appear to be moments of freedom or transgression with regard to the established norms is, in a way, a jubilant act in itself, but it also inevitably raises the question of the scope of interpretation of these images.

What these photos tell us... and cannot tell us

The meteoric rise of photography is contemporary with that of the social sciences. And yet, with few exceptions,⁴ photography is absent from investigative work, or at any rate reduced to a secondary role. While visual sociology now constitutes a sub-field of sociology specifically dedicated to the analysis of images and analysis through images, sociology’s other sub-fields – and indeed the social sciences in general, with the notable exception of anthropology⁵ – have made little use of photography as a technique for collecting data or objectivizing reality; at best, it is used to illustrate certain points.

It seems to me that the interpretative scope of photographs (i.e. what we can infer from them) depends very much, and above all else, on the photographer’s investigative posture, regardless of whether it is formalized as such. In this regard, “*Enfantillages*” has not been designed to serve or accompany a piece of sociological research, which would to a certain extent have had the effect of predefining the objectives and contours of the project. Rather, this series of photos developed as an inductive (and, for me, initiatory) approach, where the desire to obtain the “right” composition and capture an evocative instant was my primary aim, and only later led me to reflect upon its meaning. The effect of this approach was to gradually guide my photographic vision, inciting me to capture more systematically the little forms of indiscipline and the off-guard moments that enable us to see and perceive the unwritten rules that structure behaviour in public space on the one hand, and the staging of this behaviour on the other. From its inductive beginnings, my approach thus gradually became more deductive. Accordingly, the most recent photos in the series (from 2015) were taken with a set of intentions in mind that, in the earliest pictures (from 2012), very much lay under the surface and were less formalized.

As a result, these photos say more about the public space itself, or about certain routinized forms of the parent–child relationship,⁶ than about the photographed subjects, who consequently appear to be relatively “interchangeable”.⁷

The investigative posture and scope of this photographic work

If photographs were to present some distinctive and personal traits of the individuals pictured (something that would also raise the question of the consent of the persons pictured much more acutely), it would be necessary for the photographer to be in a position to find out more about them beforehand, using methods that are not terribly different from those employed in interpretative sociology (interviews, longitudinal observation, immersion in a given milieu) but which differ considerably from those that characterize street photography, which is based to a certain extent on

⁴ See Maresca and Mayer (2013) for an interesting perspective on this relationship between photography and the social sciences, and a presentation of pioneering works in this regard.

⁵ See, for example, the issue of the journal *Ethnologie française* (2007) devoted to this question.

⁶ A number of parents visiting the exhibition told us that they often “recognized” the attitudes of their own children in the photos, reminding them in turn of the reprimands or calls to order that they themselves issued to their offspring.

⁷ Interchangeable in the sense that the “anonymous” photographs that are taken of them are not supposed to – and indeed do not – tell us anything about who they are socially, beyond those elements that can be partially determined

maintaining the anonymity of the “ordinary passer-by”, whose image is captured but of whom nothing is known.⁸

It is only through “investigative” work that the photographer can compose images that have a chance of truly “resembling” the photographed subject – or, more specifically, of resembling what the photographer perceives and remembers of the subject. The work of American photographer Walker Evans on the Great Depression of the 1930s and the documentary approaches of Raymond Depardon, with regard to changing rural life in France (2009), Alain Chagnon, concerning the working-class youth of Quebec,⁹ or, more recently, of the collective La France Vue d’Ici¹⁰ all fall into this category, where investigation and immersion in a milieu, sometimes over long periods, accompany and guide the photographer’s work. If we turn now to sociologists, the photographic work of Douglas Harper, conducted among vagrants in the United States, is often cited as an example of this immersive approach, in which the photograph represents the conclusion of a long process of observation and careful work to legitimize the photographer’s presence.

Without this extensive preparatory work, and without the texts that typically accompany such images and enable them to “speak” to the viewer and guide their interpretations, the photographer cannot truly claim to make “portraits” in the strongest and most meaningful sense of the word, which presumes a photograph’s ability to convey a portion of the “truth” of an individual, whether this truth is somehow “snatched” or obtained with the subject’s cooperation in the posing and staging of the picture.¹¹

Should we therefore conclude that street photography is of but little interest to the social sciences, though? Probably not – as long as we more clearly establish the different scopes of different photographic practices, which are not unrelated to the often implicit investigative methods used: in the case of documentary photography, the possibility of showing the effects of social trajectories, socialization, the weight of the “incorporated” social structures and inequalities, which can also be perceived in the gestures or physical environments of the photographed subjects; and, in the case of street photography, the ability to uncover some of the rules of the public space and the invisible order that governs it (Edelman 2012), which manifest themselves through discipline and indiscipline, interaction and presentation rites, and the presence or absence of certain groups in these spaces. In this way, street photography, provided it is relatively systematic and reflexive, provides a valuable tool for identifying and documenting forms of socio-spatial segregation, certain effects of gentrification, and gendered inequalities with regard to the use of urban spaces, for example.

While “*Enfantillages*” clearly belongs to the second category of photography, my research interests have nevertheless led me to explore the first (documentary) approach, in order to try to create links even more explicitly, and less “fortuitously”, between my practice of photography and my questionings as a sociologist.

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by their bodies, clothing or public attitudes.

⁸ It is as if street photography has to a certain extent taken ownership of and illustrated the “Wirthian” hypothesis (itself borrowed from the German sociologist Georg Simmel) of the anonymizing effect of the big city, to the point where it has become a paradox of itself: the anonymous individuals photographed have faces, which can in turn achieve iconic status through the exposure of the street photography in which they feature.

⁹ See: <http://alainchagnon.com/portefolio/bande-a-part-1984-1986>.

¹⁰ Website: www.lafrancevuedici.fr.

¹¹ I owe a significant part of this reflection to Philippe Simay, to whom I am most grateful.

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Enfantillages

*Children (and parents)
in public space*



© Fabien Desage

Error (New York, October 2013).

Photogenicity



© Fabien Desage

SuperGoPro (San Francisco, spring 2015).



© Fabien Desage

Télé... objectif ? (Montreal, winter 2013).



Selfuite (San Francisco, spring 2015).



© Fabien Desage

S'éclater (Montreal, May 2013).



Face à face (Wimereux, summer 2014).

Parents/Children



Ascendant (Montreal, winter 2013).



© Fabien Desage

Sous le soleil, exactement (Montreal, spring 2013).



Tenir à l'œil (Montreal, spring 2015).



© Fabien Desage

Papillonner (Montreal, autumn 2012).



© Fabien Desoge

Fuzzy Batman (San Francisco, spring 2015).



Paquet fragile (Montreal, winter 2013).



© Fabien Desage

Assentiment ? (Montreal, summer 2014).



© Fabien Desage

What's gonna happen now? (San Francisco, spring 2015).



© Fabien Desage

Rose (Montreal, spring 2015).



© Fabien Desage

De l'autre côté de la buée (Montreal, winter 2014).



© Fabien Desage

Me and my lovely daughter (San Francisco, spring 2015).

Transport...



© Fabien Desoge

Apparition du bus (San Francisco, spring 2015).



© Fabien Desage

Atelier (Montreal, autumn 2013).



© Fabien Desage

De tout mon long (Montreal, automne2013).



Minute ! (Montreal, winter 2013).

“Quant-à-soi”



© Fabien Desage

Avec, mais ailleurs (Cap-Santé, winter 2014).



© Fabien Desage

Tresses (Montreal, spring 2013).



Clair de lune (Montreal, summer 2014).



Planche de salut (Montreal, summer 2014).

Great Escapes



Canopée des ruelles (Montreal, summer 2014).



© Fabien Desage

Fuir l'hiver (Cap-Santé, winter 2014).



© Fabien Desage

If I were... a lion! (San Francisco, spring 2015).



Assé ! (Montreal, autumn 2012).



En suspens (San Francisco, spring 2015).

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