



QUEER IMAGES | Joey Orr

What do you think this is a picture of? How do you form your decision? Do you look for cultural signifiers that will mark it in time, such as dress codes or the fact that it is black and white? Do you try to place it geographically based on the observation that it appears to be in an urban environment, or what races, classes and sexes of people seem to be reflected? Do you submit to the reality that because of performance possibilities and software programs, this may have been taken yesterday?

In 2006 when the photograph was first placed in front of me, the sunglassesed figure in the suit to the right of center reminded me of the actor James Gandolfini who played mob boss Tony Soprano in the HBO series, *The Sopranos*, which was about to conclude at the time. I pictured them all as tough guys, maybe even wise guys. They could all take it on the chin. And had, most likely. They are steeled for something it seems. Being seen is a serious affair, and their gaze is filled with defiance.

At least five people are looking directly at the camera. We look into cameras differently depending on the circumstances. I would look differently into a camera for a mug shot than I would into one held by my sister over a birthday cake. Are these people looking serious and ready for business then because of the photographer, or have they conceded to being photographed because of her, and it is the nature of the event that has provoked the mood?

Dr. Margaret Olin took the picture. She is a photographer and a scholar. The picture was taken in 1970 at the first Gay Pride Parade in Chicago. She was young—early twenties at the outset would be my guess. Did she look like a hippy? Did the subjects of the photograph address the camera because there was

something about her physical appearance or attitude that communicated she was simpatico? I picture her young and wild and free, riding her bicycle around the city of Chicago, as she still does, but before her practice became so considered, when she could breeze into such circumstances with a camera and be recognized quickly and coolly as part of the effort.

In Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida*, he discusses the studium and punctum. The studium is the broad cultural meaning of the photograph that we could all mostly agree on. In this case, the studium might be a small public event in an urban space. The punctum, on the other hand, is the idiosyncratic detail that catches an individual's attention. For myself, I considered the woman with the sneer peering up through the center of the photograph. I have also considered the African American barely visible in the space between the blond woman and the man in sunglasses standing to the right.

The punctum, however, is not supposed to be such a studied affair, and I have to admit I keep returning to the facial expressions of Gandolfini and the man in the tan coat. I want to deny this punctum because these men seem to me to be part of the studium. But it is precisely their ambiguous relation to the event that is compelling. Are they lovers who are unhappy about being photographed because they could lose their jobs, or their wives and children? Are they there in opposition, or even to discover the identity of sexual outlaws and so their defiant poses are born of refusal toward the photographer who now exposes them as unsympathetic toward the event?

I like to think of my two figures as a space where the punctum is the studium. Impossible, of course. What is idiosyncratic and subjective cannot be the element that is available to us all. Perhaps that is the horizon of a queer project, though—to incite discourse without naturalizing it, confound social practices while cultivating politics and undo assumptions even as they accumulate into history.

This is a picture of men and women in a public space. Some of these people may be in jeopardy of losing their jobs and physical injury by virtue of their standing there. Some may be there to police and regulate. The photograph is a historical document in the sense that it is an image of an earlier time in different political and social circumstances. The productive thing about the photograph and the reason I am drawn to it is that the visual cues do not clearly communicate what is taking place to a contemporary audience. Is it a queer picture? How does it function now, in what ways, for whom? Is the meaning of the photograph dependent on the image or how it is proliferated and received?

What do you think this is a picture of?

PHOTO: MARGARET OLIN