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Carefree Walk

In Memory of Wang Xiaojin (1968-2012)

Wang Xiaojin
Introduced by David Michalski

Abstract

A memorial to Wang Xiaojin including an exhibition of his photographs, taken on walks in the Bronx, Chinatown, and around New York City.

Introduction

Solitary carefree walking produces a special kind of knowledge. Long valued by philosophers and poets as a means to conjure the muses, it evokes a kind of meditation which can stimulate contemplative thought in a manner capable of bringing the city and the self into a new light.

For Wang Xiaojin, the streets of New York City presented the perfect course to perfect this art, to move and observe without judgment, to see the familiar with fresh eyes, and to feel the rhythms and flows of the city beneath the shock of events. And in photographs, taken on these walks, Wang has exposed the character of the human amidst the pressure of social forces.

Wang moved to the Bronx to study literature at Lehman College after graduating from Suzhou University in Jiangsu China in the early 1990s. He soon found himself an authentic New Yorker, having to quit graduate school for financial reasons, and take a job at a popular video game store in Herald Square, a place that whizzed and whirled with people at a break-neck pace. He worked long hours, and even longer once he was elevated to a manager at that national chain's busiest store.

I'd often meet him there at the end of his work day and watch him attend to the buzzing and clinging clientele before he was released. Then we'd walk, maybe to Lincoln Center, or maybe to the East Village. Wang walked everywhere. Most legendary were the trips he made from the Bronx to Coney Island.

On Sundays, friends and I would meet Wang at the Crystal Palace in Chinatown to learn he made his way by foot down from the Bronx. We'd have dim sum and chatter while he repeatedly filled our tea cups to the brim, so much so, we could not avoid spilling the tea on the white table cloth the moment we touched our cups.

Afterwards we'd all walk together, following Wang's lead, sometimes over a bridge to Brooklyn, or maybe up to a bookstore on the upper west side. In retrospect, I can say that it was on those meandering tours that I truly learned a new way of walking, and by way of those epic strolls, I also learned to see the city differently.

In the last few years, which were tragically his last, Wang walked with a digital camera, taking hundreds of pictures along his path, recording pedestrian moments, commonplace architecture, or people in the quiet repose of their

own way of ordinariness. He lost his job due to his immigration status, and made a living through online sales of CD's and books he gathered in the city. This gave him a lot of time to explore his Bronx and other places. He shared his photographs with his friends. And when I learned about them I asked him to share his work on *Streetnotes*. At the time of his death in February 2012, he was preparing this exhibit.

Wang was an inspiration to me, so I post his images here first as a memorial to him, but also because they record a compelling view, one that is both distant and compassionate. In these photographs his subjects are often faced away from his gaze. This is because his own eyes were diverted from their glare. One will also see a fascination with animals. Wang spend many hours at the Bronx Zoo. His images from there evidence a kind of existential curiosity, one endowed with the same sympathy one sees in his other work.

In each case, I think Wang found fascination in being an observer of nature first, a kind of witness to this world. While he enjoyed companionship without question, and as a friend acted with unmatched kindness, I believe he also enjoyed the ability to retreat into the noise of the city, into its colors, patterns and cadence.

Wang was a Taoist in the city. He chose to live an ascetic life, and enjoyed the independence New York gave him. It provided him a kind of deep structure and meaning. Wang loved the streets of New York because he understood that with the right ear one might hear them speak. He returned to the streets again and again, not because he believed they spoke the truth, but rather because he knew when the streets are engaged in a truly patient and selfless way, they could not tell a lie.









































































Wang Xiaojin (1968-2012)