**Looking Askance**

Marc Nair

***Sometimes,
offence is a paper cut.
Sometimes a gaping wound.***

**Insult**

**Outrage**

**Disbelief**

Soft

acts

of

trespass

*I feel personally attacked.*

**Do you have a right to be angry?**

When do you call the cops?

Should we even bother to get offended anymore?

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*Side-Eyes* was made on the streets of the Bras Basah Precinct, a complex, dense mass of city blocks that contains hotels, shopping malls, public housing and ubiquitous coffee shops. In traversing these streets, I found that public space was largely confined to sidewalks while private space was often off-limits and only approached from distance, through the unwelcome mediation of fences. But that’s understandable. We all need private spaces to call our own. However, public space, the commons, is always undergoing a process of negotiation: between citizens, between the urban and natural landscape and between instruments of the state and its subjects. This negotiation, captured through the lens of the camera, reveals different kinds of behaviour; whether it is over issues of privacy, security or a sense of trespass.

The fragments that begin this essay reflect some of the divergent notions of offence that we hold in Singapore and translate, as implicit and explicit ideas, what has been captured through the eye of the camera. The title, *Side-Eyes*, is a reference to viewing something askance, to look at someone or something out of the corner of your eye. It is a look of disapproval, of criticism, that responds to perceived offence. One man’s offence is another man’s opportunity. The gaze from the street is always subjective, but when public space is ambiguous and faces encroachment from private entities or objects, this is where a degree of offence could be located.

The images in *Side-Eyes* are grouped into three broad categories of offence; ambient offence, indirect offence and explicit offence. Some images focus on text as carrying the nature of the offence while others are momentary scenes captured by chance. None of these images involved any intervention on my end. But week after week, as I pounded the streets, a question that I kept coming back to was: when is the photographer a documentarian and when is the photographer implicated within the scene?

The idea of implication versus intervention is perhaps relevant to the theme of this project. Certainly, the degree to which one is part of the scene could rest on something as simple as eye contact, but it is also often reflective of the politics of the photographer when it comes to defining offence.

Max Kozloff, in discussing street photography, defines it as a “portmanteau term that covers a range of idioms centred on the built environment and the experience of those who perceive the human traffic around it by means of the camera.” It is the camera that governs the ‘I’ of the eye, the camera that transforms the photographer into a kind of performance artist, the street is a zone where things are constantly happening. It is the photographer’s job, or responsibility, to decide whether the image is made on impulse, from various elements coming together serendipitously or is staged, like Fan Ho’s immaculately posed scenes of Hong Kong.

Ultimately, photography is the distillation of a fully sensorial moment into a two-dimensional, still image that is stripped of wider context, scent, sound and tactility. Its signifiers are not overt. In street photography, the subject is adaptive, constantly changing. The process of making then has to take into account the conditions of production. In capturing these images, I walked at all times of the day, in rain and in searing heat, on weekdays and on weekends, because the act of witnessing is ongoing, built on chance and a working knowledge of the camera.

It is difficult to translate more politicised notions of offence into something like defamation or the invoking of POFMA when it comes to the street. Offence on the street takes a different shape. It is often subtle, woven together with the fabric of the everyday.

Offence, unlike a sunset or young lovers necking on a bench, is not something obvious or expected. But the beauty of the street is also the uncertainty of not knowing what one might find:

*something private in public,*

*something private made public,*

*something private trespassing
 public space.*

Susan Sontag (1979) said, “the photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects.” Walking the street is a way of gazing to order or possess space, both in service of theme and in the search for metaphorical illumination.

The idea of the gaze is also the idea of looking specifically. Victor Burgin (1977) has noted that the camera “depicts a scene and the gaze of the spectator, an object and a viewing subject.” The gaze through the camera offers its own subjectivity, forming a three-way relationship between the object being photographed, camera and photographer. What is offensive to me might be entirely normal to someone else, all the more so in an age where lines between public and private have merged. The centrefold of *Side-Eyes* is testament to this, with its strange imbrication of the public and private in a self-service store filled with vending machines and nothing else. The store is an inherently private space, but a vending machine is, by default, located in public space, so there is a collapsing of borders at play here.

There is a mundane sort of beauty to many of the images in *Side-Eyes* that reflects the constant change and churn of the city. The photographs are hauntings, impressions of streets that will not be found the same way again. As photographer, I am a body that drifts between these streets, practicing what sociologist Erving Goffman calls “civil inattention,” becoming part of the landscape at all hours, over and over, walking through the mixed-use public housing blocks, the hotels, the malls, the back lanes of restaurants and clubs. The photographer as ghost, as absent presence, searching for objects and scenes stricken by the light of offence. It is made a little harder by the pandemic, which has cleaned up many potential sites of offence, like public toilets. Graffiti is non-existent, while street art exists only when it has been officially sanctioned, shaped into palatable fare by our censors.

The aesthetics of my creative practice has always sought to integrate text in some shape or form with the image. For *Side-Eyes*, in addition to the captions, I opted to write a haiku for each image. These become a frame placed over each image, like a warming or a neutral density filter, one that brings certain elements into focus or opens up the photograph through another way of looking and thinking about offence.

The heart of this project manifests at the intersection of public and private space, revealing offence in action, language and signs and capturing these liminal alleys of the quotidian.

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